



**Population Policy and Governance at the Local Level - A  
Qualitative Research of the Implementation of the  
Universal Two-Child Policy in China**

Dissertation

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## Abstract

The universal two-child policy was introduced by the central government of China in 2016 to respond to the country's deteriorating population problems, but it was soon replaced by a three-child policy in 2021 given that it failed to continuously boost fertility in Chinese society. This dissertation empirically investigates the implementation of universal two-child policy in three Chinese major cities. Based on the data collected through semi-structured interviews with leaders of local family planning agencies, it finds that local officials are primarily devoted to coping with the discontent of the bereaved single-child parents (*shidu* families), which is an unexpected consequence of the historical one-child policy, rather than working on the tasks regarding birth encouragement. The dissertation suggests understanding the implementation of China's population policy within the framework of both historical and rational choice institutionalism. The target responsibility system as an effective tool of the central authority drives local agents to fix their attention at tasks that have larger impact on their career. The shifted focus in the implementation of the universal two-child policy is a result of local officials' emphasis on the task of maintaining social stability. *Shidu* families are deemed as a salient threat to social order because their discontent with the state support has incurred continuous petitions at both the national and local level, which would severely undermine local officials' career advancement. However, in the meantime, stability maintenance is found to have become alienated as reflected by the rising costs and that it replaced birth support to be the focus of local family planning agents in the universal two-child policy era. Since the conflict between the *shidu* group and the state is unlikely to be resolved, the future population policy design and enforcement will continue to be constrained by the *shidu* problem.

# Table of Contents

1. Introduction .....	1
1.1. Current Research on Universal Two-Child Policy .....	5
1.1.1. Fertility Desire and Its Shaping Factors .....	5
1.1.2. Suggestions to Encourage Fertility.....	7
1.1.3. Missing Role of Government .....	9
1.2. Research Questions and Objectives .....	9
1.3. Structure of Dissertation.....	11
2. Theory and Methodology .....	1
2.1. Theoretical Framework .....	13
2.1.1. Historical Institutionalism .....	15
2.1.2. Rational Choice Institutionalism and A Combined Approach .....	19
2.2. Methodology .....	23
2.2.1. Qualitative Research .....	23
2.2.2. Expert Interview in China .....	25
2.2.3. Interviewee Selection .....	27
2.2.4. Interview Method .....	29
3. Development of PRC's Population Policy .....	13
3.1. Background and Development of Family Planning Program .....	33
3.2. Emerging Challenges .....	36
3.3. The Introduction of Universal Two-Child Policy .....	40
3.4. Supplementary Policy Package .....	42
3.4.1. Construction of Maternity Facility .....	42
3.4.2. Tax Relief.....	43
3.4.3. Expansion of Preschool Education.....	43
3.4.4. Childcare Service for 0-3 Years Old Infants .....	44
3.5. Summary .....	48
4. Policy Enforcement at the Local Level .....	32
4.1. Introduction of Research Sites .....	49
4.1.1. Case Selection .....	50
4.1.2. General Information of Selected Cities .....	54
4.2. Policy Enforcement in Selected Cities .....	61
4.2.1. Policy Evaluation and Anticipation from Local Agents.....	62
4.2.2. Routineers at Local Level .....	65
4.2.3. Emphasis on <i>Shidu</i> Family.....	68
4.2.4. Refrained Policy Propaganda .....	75

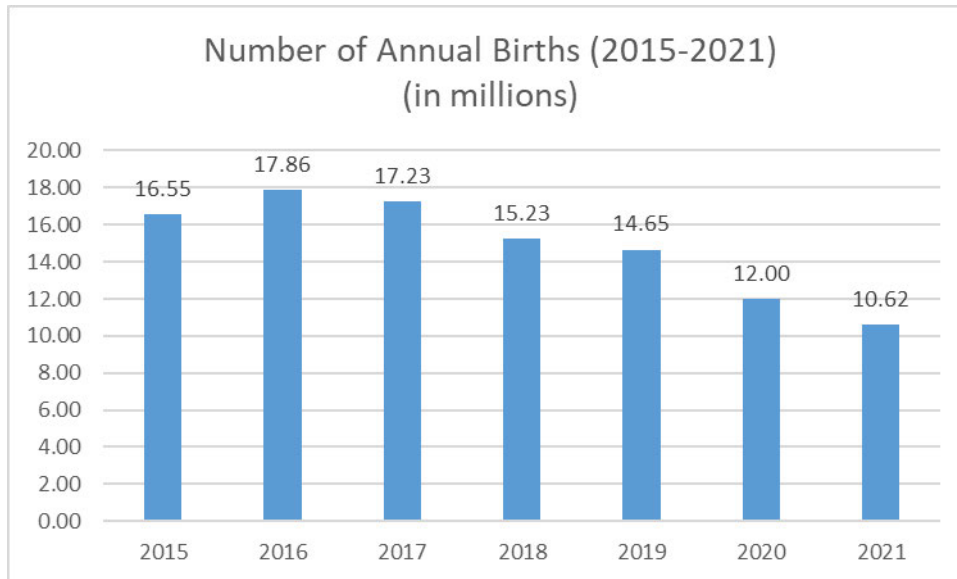
4.2.5. Differences between Cities.....	78
4.3. Summary .....	86
5. <i>Shidu</i> Family - An Unexpected Historical Consequence .....	49
5.1. The Conflict between Demand and Supply of State Support.....	90
5.1.1. <i>Shidu</i> Family’s Scale and Demand.....	90
5.1.2. The Evolvement of State’s Supply .....	96
5.2. Interaction between <i>Shidu</i> Activists and Central Government.....	102
5.2.1. Petition Contents .....	104
5.2.2. Trend and Features .....	108
5.3. Summary .....	113
6. Cadre Management System and the Focus on <i>Shidu</i> Family .....	88
6.1. Cadre Management System.....	117
6.1.1. Development of the Systematic Cadre Control .....	117
6.1.2. Target Responsibility System.....	120
6.2. Social Stability Maintenance as Key Target .....	126
6.2.1. Task with Special Significance .....	126
6.2.2. Alienation in Implementation.....	129
6.3. Explaining the Shifted Focus .....	134
6.3.1. Coping with <i>Shidu</i> as Critical Mission.....	135
6.3.2. Less Attention to the “Fertility-Friendly Society” .....	140
6.4. Summary .....	142
7. Conclusion.....	116
7.1. Summary of Findings .....	147
7.1.1. Implementation: Similarity with minor difference.....	147
7.1.2. <i>Shidu</i> as Unexpected Historical Consequence .....	150
7.1.3. Stability Maintenance as Strong Incentive .....	153
7.1.4. Outcomes.....	155
7.2. Population Policy’s Legitimacy and Development .....	157
7.2.1. One-Child Policy as Strategic Blunder and Legitimacy Crisis .....	158
7.2.2. Misimplementation of Universal Two-Child Policy .....	160
7.2.3. Possible Readjustment for Fertility-Friendly Society .....	163

## 1. Introduction

As one of the basic state policies of the People's Republic of China, family planning, which is prescribed as an obligation of Chinese people in the constitution, has been an important research focus of contemporary Chinese studies for decades. The country's birth control program and population policy based on it have not only affected the lives of millions of people, but also aroused long-term concern and heated discussion from both the public and academia. An important change of China's family planning program can be identified at the end of 2015 that the state replaced its decades-long one-child policy with a universal two-child policy, advocating all Chinese couples to have two children to combat the country's deteriorating demographics such as population aging. However, despite a short boost of births in the first two years after its introduction, the new policy is argued to have confronted a "cold response" (Jin, Gong, & Mao, 2018), evidenced by the quick drop of fertility and a low fertility desire prevailing among Chinese couples. At last, only 5 years after it became effective, universal two-child policy is replaced by a further loosened three-child policy in May 2021. After the 7th national census revealed that the country's total fertility rate reached a low level of 1.3 by 2020 (State Council, 2021), Chinese top leaders came to the decision to replace the universal two-child policy with a further loosened three-child policy (CCP Central Committee & State Council, 2021) which was later made formal by the amendment to the Population and Family Planning Law passed in September 2021.

Universal two-child policy's incentive on fertility appeared to be solid at its early stage, for China experienced a significant birth increase that 17.86 million of babies were born in the whole country in 2016, that is 1.31 million more compared with the year before. However, such good performance did not last long as the number of births soon started to decrease only one years after the new policy's introduction. The figure shrank fast to 17.23 million in 2017, and it kept falling in following years that only 15.23 million babies were born in 2018, which is even less than 2015. Eventually, the number of new births per year further declined to 12 million in 2020, which clearly signals the end of the fertility boost derived from the relaxation of birth policy.

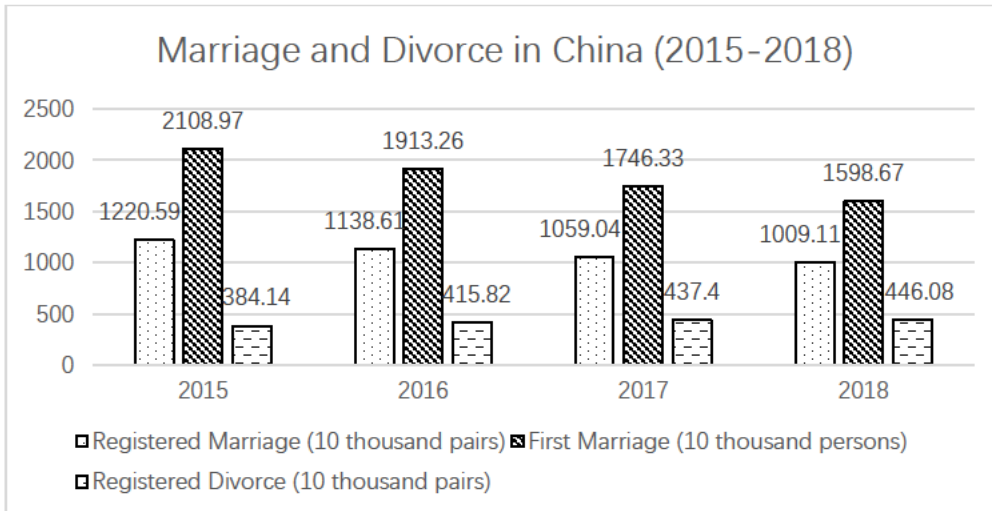
*Figure 1* Number of Annual Births in China (2015-2019)



Source: Statistical Bulletin of National Economic and Social Development of the PRC (2019-2021)

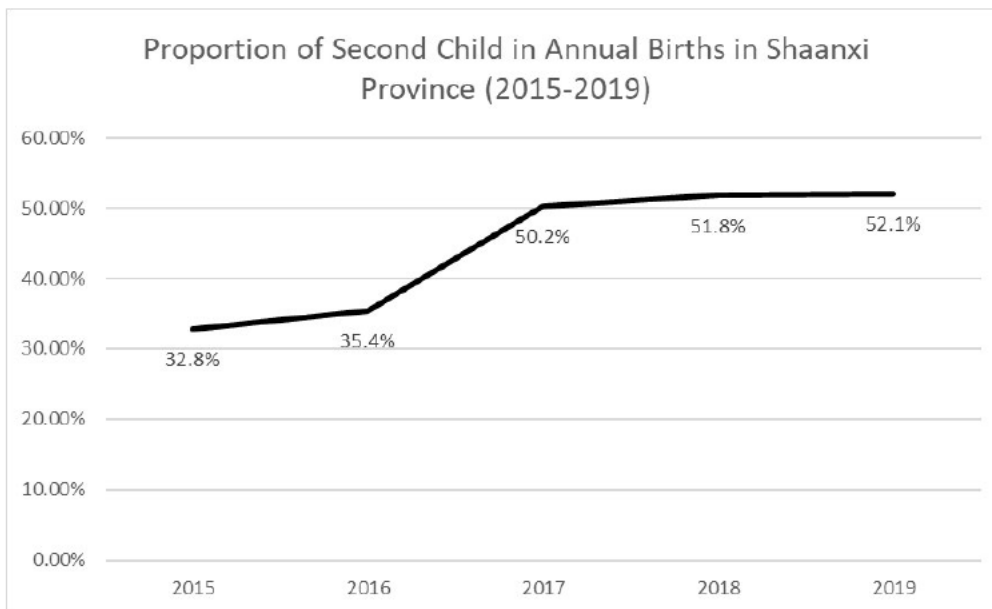
In the meantime, the backdrop of annual births is accompanied by a sharp reduce of first childbirths among Chinese women. In 2017, the number of firstborns in China was surpassed by secondborns, which accounts for 51% of the total new births in the whole country (NHC, 2018). Since then, the part of secondborns keeps increasing and even reached an astonishing proportion of 57% in 2019 (Zhao, 2020). The demographic change at regional level also shows the similar trend. For instance, secondborns make up 49.97% of the annual births in 2017 in Shaanxi Province, but such proportion rose to 52.1% in 2019 (The People’s Government of Shaanxi Province, 2020). To make the situation worse, it is found that 41% of the women who had second birth age between 30-34, while those belong to the 25-29 age group only take up 35%. Thus, the continuous decrease of first births implies that a considerable number of Chinese women, especially the young ones, do not even want a child at all. As a matter of fact, more and more Chinese people now choose not to get married, and the number of women who are at childbearing age has been shrinking for many years in current Chinese society (NBS, 2020). All these outcomes indicate a serious bottleneck in the implementation of universal two-child policy. Given this context, the implementation of China’s population policy and its development in the future deserve further observation and discussion.

*Figure 2 Marriage and Divorce in China (2015-2018)*



Source: NBS 2019

Figure 3 Proportion of Second Child in Annual Births in Shaanxi Province (2015-2019)



Source: People's Government of Shaanxi Province 2020

Despite the abundance of scholarships dedicated to universal two-child policy, the vast majority of existing literature only aim at the fertility desire of Chinese couples and its shaping factors. In general, there is a consensus among scholars that the current low fertility is a consequence of the country's socio-economic progress (Zhang, 2017; Greenhalgh, 2018; Zhao & Zhang, 2018), and more specifically, empirical evidences often confirm that concerns about women's career (Pan et al., 2016), the quality of medical resources (Wang & Liu, 2016), the lack of support in childcare (Jin et al., 2016; Ji et al., 2020), and the family's economic condition (Attané, 2016) are closely related to

Chinese couple's fertility decision. Based on these factors, some scholars also take a further step by offering suggestions to encourage more births in Chinese society, such as through the construction of more childcare institutes (Liu, 2017), the improvement of training system regarding teaching personnel and pediatrics (Pang et al., 2016; Song, 2016), and the introduction of flexible employment for women (Wang & Wang, 2018). However, most of these suggestions merely stay at the macro level, and they turn out to be rather vague and lack of details to facilitate relevant operationalization.

Moreover, it is notable that insufficient attention is paid to Chinese regional governments that the discussion about regional policies and the action logic of local officials remains under-developed in existing studies, although their important role in policy enforcement has been explicitly stressed by the State Council (2016) that "all provincial and other local governments should optimize their population regulations to ensure the smooth implementation of universal two-child policy". In fact, regional governments are assigned the responsibility to localize national population policy prior to its application to the public, so an observation of local regulations as well as their evolution becomes indispensable for a more accurate picture of how China's new population policy has been carried out. Besides, the behavior of local family planning agents should also be taken into consideration, as the daily work of these officials, especially those at grassroots level, could involve intensive interactions with ordinary people as policy audiences, which in turn shape local government's strategy regarding both decision-making and policy enforcement. Subsequently, the research on the implementation of universal two-child policy requires an enrichment by a combination with both an analysis of regional legal documents and an exploration of how local officials perceive the current demographic situation, what kind of policy innovation has been made, and how they interact with policy audience.

This dissertation draws upon empirical qualitative research with comparative case study, aiming to explore how universal two-child policy is exactly carried out and what countermeasures have been adopted by Chinese local governments in the context of cold response, and to account for the revealed facts from fieldwork experiences. With a focus on how local officials identify and tackle problems in the universal two-child policy era, the dynamics in policy implementation at local level can be better illustrated, and the research is going to shed light on the governance and official's action logic of Chinese



local state. In addition, it can also contribute to the general discussion on the legitimacy of Chinese government, because “how successful a policy can solve relevant social problems would essentially impact the legitimacy of political system” (Lauth, Pickel, & Pickel, 2013), and this is particularly important for the CCP today which faces the constant pressure to legitimize the party-state through various sources (Holbig & Gilley, 2010).

### ***1.1. Current Research on Universal Two-Child Policy***

Deeply concerned about the limited effect of the new population policy in incentivizing births, many scholars are devoted to the improvement of policy outcomes with an emphasis on people’s fertility desire. Through a large number of empirical investigations at both national and regional level, it is found that a relatively low fertility desire prevails among Chinese couples, so the suggested improving measures are accordantly oriented to those restricting factors that lead to their hesitation about birth.

#### ***1.1.1. Fertility Desire and Its Shaping Factors***

In general, empirical evidence proves that the majority of Chinese women are not interested in the state’s appeal for second birth. Zhang and Wang (2015) find in their quantitative research that only less than 30% of Chinese women who are at childbearing age expressed their willingness to have a second child, while more than 40% of them are determined not to do so. Such low fertility desire turns out to be rather stable among contemporary Chinese women. Similar result is also offered by a case study that 35.8% of the surveyed women from Xiangtan City refused to have a second child (Han & Tian, 2016). The situation could be worse once the respondents are confined to families that already have a child. As the survey report jointly released by All-China Women's Federation and Beijing Normal University shows, 53.3% of the parents with one child have no intention to have the second birth (Xinhuanet, 2017a).

Simultaneously, extensive studies have been dedicated to the shaping factors of Chinese couple’s low fertility desire. Most of researchers agree that fertility desire is closely related to women’s age and education level that women become less willing to give birth as their age and education level increase (Zhang & Wang, 2015; Jin, Song, & Chen, 2016; Pan, He, & Wang, 2016). Besides, work-life balance is also a major concern

behind Chinese women's hesitation about childbirth. As a report from official media platform confirms (Liu, Li, & Zhang, 2015), many female respondents worry that their career plan will be disrupted by the birth of second child, and such anxiety is especially prevalent among those who possess higher education degree and are insistent on self-realization.

Another constraining factor is found to be the limited public service resource in current Chinese society, such as medical and childcare service. On the one hand, the enactment of universal two-child policy has generated a rising demand for obstetrician and pediatricians from the public. As the work stress of medical personnel keeps on growing (Song et al., 2016), Chinese couples often feel anxious if their children would have the access to medical service with good quality, which holds them back from having the second child. On the other hand, their willingness to give birth is further undermined by a lack of childcare institutes and personnel in the society. Given the high labor participation rate of Chinese women,<sup>1</sup> childcare service is necessary for them to better balance career and family life, particularly for those who live in urban area and face higher work pressure. However, empirical studies often find Chinese families refrain from giving birth out of the shortage of support in childcare from either elder generation or the public (Peng, 2019; Zhou, 2019). Thus, the under-development of public service resource also forms an obstacle for a steady fertility increase in China.

Furthermore, family's economic condition is perceived by many Chinese couples as a key factor in their fertility plan (Attané, 2016; Peng, 2019). Especially in urban areas, the prospective financial burden for housing and child education holds lots of families back from having another child (Han & Tian, 2016), so only those in better financial condition are more willing to give birth (Pan, He, & Wang, 2016). Generally, residents from economically more developed regions tend to share a lower fertility desire in contemporary China (Xinhuanet, 2017a), which can be explained by both a more developed socio-economy and higher life expenditure there. Although the low fertility desire may be an inevitable consequence of the urbanization and population migration

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<sup>1</sup> Despite the declining trend, the labor participation rate of China remained at 69.8% in 2015. Available HTTP: <<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.ZS?locations=CN>> Accessed on 22 June 2020.

process (Zhang & Wang, 2015), it is less disputable that the cost for raising children has been playing a crucial role in preventing Chinese couples to give more births.

### *1.1.2. Suggestions to Encourage Fertility*

Based on the empirical evidence and lengthy discussions about the shaping factors of fertility desire, scholars have put forward plenty of suggestions with their emphasis placed on the limited public resources, expecting to encourage more births by alleviating people's concerns about raising children. First, it is often underlined that preschool education and childcare need to be formally institutionalized with more laws and regulations (Chen & Gao, 2017; Huang, 2017). This includes not only the incorporation of preschool education into the existing nine-year compulsory education program, but also a draft of specific development plan for infant care institutes (Peng, 2016).

Beyond that, secondly, the upgrade of public services constitutes another focus, which requires a comprehensive improvement of current childcare, education, and medical resources. The expansion of childcare institutes, especially those for infants under 3 years old, is deemed to be a top agenda given its prevalent supply-demand imbalance in Chinese society (Liu, 2017), and such mission involves not only the financial investment from government (Chen, 2016), but also the active participation of enterprises and community (Pang, Wang, & Lü, 2016; Wang, 2016). In particular, the engagement of non-official actors is even more relied on due to the limited government capacity. Besides, the upgrade of education and medical service is believed to be established on the recruitment of qualified personnel. For this purpose, well-designed training programs and attractive salary are also proposed to ensure there will be sufficient talents working in teaching and pediatrics (Qin & Wang, 2018; Lü et al., 2017).

The third emphasis targets at maternity service and protection. For example, scholars argue community clinics should make greater effort in offering psychological counseling and convenient examination services to make pregnancy less challenging for women (Zhuang & Tang, 2016; Zhang & Hou, 2016). In the meantime, the further reform of maternity leave system is also emphasized to boost fertility, which often involves a prolonged maternity leave or even specific childbirth allowance (Meng, Li, & Chen, 2016; Wang, Li, & Ju, 2017). Nevertheless, it remains disputable if longer leave or monetary subsidy will be feasible. Given that maternity insurance in China is solely paid by

employers, longer maternity leave also means an increased expenditure for enterprises. Thus, employers tend to hire more male candidates or only women who have ended their child-bearing plans to lower potential costs, resulting in greater employment barriers for Chinese women. As scholarship confirms (Zhou, 2019), although the new maternity leave intends to enhance the protection for women, its extension has surprisingly generated more gender discrimination in practice. For this reason, some other scholars contend that maternity protection must start with the guarantee of women's employment. While government and individuals are supposed to share maternity insurance costs (Ba et al., 2017), it is advocated to reduce the gap between maternity and paternity leaves to ensure gender equality in employment (Li, 2016; Wang & Wang, 2018; Zhou 2019). Moreover, flexible employment models are also considered as an ideal method to help women with their balance between career and childcare (Peng, 2016).

Fourthly, tax reform is also suggested to support family-raising by alleviating Chinese couple's financial burden. Since personal income tax in China does not vary in line with family size, it is advised that families with two children should enjoy a larger reduction of tax payment in the future (Peng, 2016; Wu & Wang, 2017). Similarly, Wang and Liu (2016) propose a tax relief for enterprises as well to incentivize the hiring of mothers of two children. The issue attracted more attention from the whole society when a representative of the National People's Congress spoke loud of the reduction or exemption of individual income tax for all two-child couples through formal political channel in 2018 (China.com, 2018). As a response, the central government indeed introduced a new policy by the end of 2018, which enables the tax cut for all families based on various expenditure items including children's education costs (State Council, 2018).

Notably, a number of experts even aim at family planning itself and assert that the birth limit should be lifted completely (People.cn, 2015). Though such claim conspicuously contradicts against the state policy, it surprisingly received some positive replies from Chinese regional authority. For instance, it is explicitly articulated in the *Population Development Report of Shaanxi Province 2017* that family planning should be totally relaxed, suggesting a complete phase out of the state's birth control. Nevertheless, as the low fertility in current Chinese society is mainly caused by socio-

economic progress but not the birth policy, it remains in doubt if the cancelation of birth limit would induce any significant fertility increase (Zhu, Ouyang, & Yang, 2017).

### *1.1.3. Missing Role of Government*

The existing literature provides lots of insights to the early stage of universal two-child policy and the response from its addressees. However, the research focus of these studies is confined to people's fertility desire and relevant shaping factors, while leaving government authority, especially regional ones, less concerned that they are only supposed to meet the demands from policy environment and provide whatever public resource is required. The discussion about China's population policy and its improvement thus becomes narrow-sighted, for the critical influence from government on policymaking and enforcement is overall omitted. As a matter of fact, Chinese regional authorities usually play a crucial role in policy implementation, because they are granted considerable administrative discretion in localizing guidelines initiated by the central leaders. By introducing regulations based on their regional conditions and adopting different behavior patterns, local governments can essentially impact the output and outcomes of regional population policy (O'Brien & Li, 1999; Göbel, 2011; Kostka & Mol, 2013). Therefore, a micro scrutiny on their policy implementation in practice and a comparison between regions are indispensable for a more comprehensive explanation for the "cold response" to universal two-child policy. In addition, most of the proposed countermeasures in academic works revolve around the upgrade of public services with an emphasis on government's responsibility. An optimization plan gains more feasibility if it is established on the examination of official's action logic. For these reasons, this research focuses on the efforts Chinese local governments made to localize and carry out universal two-child policy. More specifically, it investigates the work of local governments in urban areas, since the new population policy could have a larger effect on the fertility of urban residents who used to be more strictly constrained by the previous birth control program.

## ***1.2. Research Questions and Objectives***

To have a more precise knowledge of the current situation and future development of China's population policy, it firstly needs to be figured out how universal two-child policy

is actually implemented by local officials, and what are the corresponding reasons accounting for it. Notably, local governments in China include four administrative levels according to the PRC constitution, ranging from provincial to township governments. Since this research only examines the policy enforcement in urban areas, the term specifically refers to provincial, prefectural, and district-level governments in analysis. In general, this research will first investigate the localization and enforcement of universal two-child policy in specific cities. Then it delves into the explanation and discussion how the current policy situation has been respectively shaped by the country's historical family planning program and current institutional structures. Eventually, some implications for understanding China's population policy and the governance of local state will be presented.

For these purposes, both primary and secondary data will be applied to facilitate relevant analysis and discussion in this dissertation. The study starts with a review of the demographic statistics as well as newly introduced policies at both national and regional level, so that a general picture of Chinese government's effort to boost fertility and its influence on fertility can be captured. Beyond that, a comparison between cities will be offered as well to display the similarity and differences between local governments regarding their work in the new population policy era. In particular, the description of their policy localization and enforcement will be enriched by extensive empirical data collected by the researcher through academic interviews with local family planning agents, involving their narratives about regional policies and regulations, the problems they have encountered in daily work, and the countermeasures they took. With all these facts presented, the research will go further with the interpretation of the current population policy as well as local government's implementation in reality. On the one hand, the influence of decades-long one-child policy on the work strategies of local family planning agents will be explored based on both the review of policy history and fieldwork data. On the other hand, the action logic of local officials will be discussed in detail in light of China's cadre management system. Through this, a better understanding of the country's population policy can be achieved in terms of both its current situation and future development.

### ***1.3. Structure of Dissertation***

The structure of this dissertation is oriented toward the aforementioned research interests. After the introduction follows the theoretical framework that undergirds this research (2.1.). It begins with the academic discussions about two institutionalist approaches, namely historical institutionalism (2.1.1.) and rational choice institutionalism. Based on their strengths and limitations, a combined approach is suggested to guide the analysis (2.1.2.). In addition to theories, this chapter also includes the adopted research methodology (2.2.). First it answers why a qualitative design with case study suits this research well, and how the research quality can be ensured in response to criticism (2.2.1.). Then some factors that affect the quality of fieldwork in China will be mentioned, particularly involving strategies regarding expert interview (2.2.2.). After the elucidation of interviewee selection (2.2.3.), finally, the applied interview method will be presented in detail (2.2.4.).

The third chapter offers a review of the development of PRC's population policy, which serves as a crucial historical background for understanding the current implementation of universal two-child policy. It includes the population policy history both prior to and after the introduction of family planning program (3.1.). After that, an academic discussion about the emerging population problems in contemporary Chinese society will be offered to illustrate why the state loosened its birth control (3.2.). Subsequently, the amendment to the *Population and Family Planning Law* will be introduced, which also marks the enactment of universal two-child policy (3.3.). Moreover, some supplementary policies or programs initiated by the central government to encourage more births will also be incorporated (3.4.).

The fourth chapter deals with the empirical investigation in line with the theoretical framework and methodology. It starts with a description of research sites (4.1.), including the discussion of comparability (4.1.1.) as well as the changing demographics of selected cities (4.1.2.). More detailed information about policy enforcement in these selected research sites will be provided in the following part (4.2.), covering issues such as the policy evaluation and anticipation from local family planning agents (4.2.1.), their routineer work pattern (4.2.2.), special emphasis on *shidu* family (4.2.3.),<sup>2</sup> refrained

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<sup>2</sup> *Shidu* family (失独家庭) describes the family that lost their only child.

policy propaganda (4.2.4.), and some differences between cities (4.2.5.). The findings from fieldwork will be summarized at last (4.3.).

Subsequently, the explanation for the empirical findings will be presented in the fifth and sixth chapters. The fifth chapter centers on the *shidu* issue, which emerges as an unexpected consequence of China's decades-long family planning and replaces fertility encouragement to be the work focus of local agents. The seriousness of *shidu* problem will be illustrated by the conflict between demand and supply of state support (5.1.). On the one hand, the analysis provides a description of *shidu* family's group size and various difficulties they encounter in the life of old age (5.1.1.). On the other hand, the evolution of the state's supply at both national and regional level will be presented as a contrast (5.1.2.). Afterwards, the conflict will be further demonstrated with rounds of *shidu* petitions to the central government (5.2.). It first reviews the confrontation of *shidu* activists with the central government, including the timeline and dynamics between the two sides (5.2.1.). Then some of the petition trends and features will be pointed out (5.2.2.), so that the unsolvable conflict between the *shidu* group and government authority can be displayed, and the huge work stress of the latter becomes comprehensible (5.3.).

Following the analysis of *shidu* family as a major pressure source for local family planning agents, the sixth chapter further elucidates the deviated work focus of local agents from the perspective of institutional incentives and constraints, with its emphasis placed on China's cadre management system (6.1.). The development of the cadre responsibility system will first be introduced based on official documents to give a rough picture how the central state controls its local cadres (6.1.1.). Subsequently, it goes further to discuss the control mechanism of "promotion based on performance" (6.1.2.). Particularly, the impact of social stability maintenance as a veto target on official's career will be discussed (6.2.). Then the chapter delves into the explanation of the misimplementation of population policy in light of such institutional constraints derived from performance assessment (6.3.). Since *shidu* problem is often related to social stability, it becomes a critical mission for local officials and has attracted their major attention (6.3.1.). In contrast, the construction of "fertility-friendly society" or more generally the task of fertility encouragement turns out to be downplayed because of their attached low priority (6.3.2.).



The last chapter offers a conclusion of this dissertation. The major findings of the research and how to understand the implementation of population policy at local level. The reflection of the adopted research method and analysis will also be provided to discuss the possible bias and induced limits of the study. Through this, finally, this research is going to shed light on the general Chinese population policy, the action logic of officials, especially regarding their policymaking and enforcement.

## **2. Theory and Methodology**

### ***2.1. Theoretical Framework***

Institutionalism has a long tradition in political science, as political institution has been the major focus of political works from the classical era to contemporary times. A great number of political philosophers in history, such as Aristotle, Hobbs, Montesquieu, and Tocqueville, have made seminal contributions to the understanding of politics by offering lengthy discussions about political systems, with a special attention attached to formal settings, laws, and normative evaluation.

Yet along with the rise of the behavioral revolution since the 1940s, the focus of political research has experienced a sharp change. On the one hand, individual behavior replaces formal structure to be the primary analysis unit in political studies, since behavioral and rational choice research adopt a methodological individualism, which takes individuals as autonomous actors that can make their own choice in political process. For example, rational choice approach assumes all individuals are rational and always pursue the fulfillment of personal preference and utility maximization (Downs, 1957). Subsequently, individual behavior is viewed as the result of conscious interest calculation and trade-off, and the analysis of individual preference is supposed to be the starting point of understanding political life, including events, structures, functions, and processes of individual actors, organizations, as well as mass movements (Eulau, 1963).

On the other hand, the improvement of the discipline's scientific feature becomes the new trend in political science. Traditional institutionalist studies are criticized for their static description of formal structure, lack of rigorous methodology, and normative analysis (see Easton, 1969). In contrast, an unbiased and neutral view in political research is suggested to replace normative judgement in traditional institutionalism (Wahlke, 1979;

Easton, 1985), while rigorous design and the analysis based on a wide range of empirical research methods are firmly advocated, including surveys, interviews, regression analysis, factor analysis etc. (Dahl, 1961; Eulau, 1963). Most importantly, behavioralists expect to facilitate the theory development in political studies, so that concrete facts derived from applied research could “gain meaning to transcend any particular time and place” and guide future research (Easton, 1953: 89).

The behavioral revolution has essentially enriched political science, for it has not only broadened the discipline’s research scope, but also boosted a large quantity of empirical studies. Nevertheless, behavioralism and rational choice model are remote from being flawless. As proved by Arrow’s impossibility theorem and the discussion about free-riders (Arrow, 1963; Ostrom & Ostrom, 1971), individual utility does not necessarily generate the best result for group but could lead to collective irrationality. Meanwhile, it is not rare to find that political decisions in practice often diverge from a rational calculation of individual interests (March & Olsen, 1989: 34-37). As a result, March and Olsen note five major deficiencies of rational choice model, namely contextualism, reductionism, utilitarianism, functionalism, and instrumentalism (March & Olsen, 1984; 1989), and launched a counterattack with other institutionalists against the behavioral movement. To make up for these shortcomings, they proposed the term “new institutionalism” to call for more investigations on structural arrangement in political research.

In general, new institutionalism acknowledges the important role of individuals and society in understanding political life, but it more emphasizes the powerful influence from institutions. As Skocpol (1980) argues,<sup>3</sup> policy outcomes are not the mere result of exogenous factors but can also be traced to existing administrative arrangement. Hence, institution is more than passively making response to the environment but can also actively shape political process (March & Olsen, 1989:162; see also Katzenstein, 1978; Krasner, 1978). Meanwhile, since individuals may have commitment to institutional rules and values (March & Olsen, 1989: 160-162), or they are governed by certain interests developed along with the institutional persistence (Ikenberry, 1988; Thelen, 1999),

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<sup>3</sup> Skocpol, T. (1980). Political response to capitalist crisis: Neo-Marxist theories of the state and the case of the New Deal. *Politics and Society*, 10(2), 155-201.

institutions also have a structuring effect on individual behavior, which eventually turns out to be rule-bound rather than only oriented to utility-maximization in conformity with economic principles. Based on these two presumptions, scholars have developed a number of approaches with distinguished focuses to further explore the mechanism of how institution shapes individual behavior and politics.

As this dissertation first aims to figure out the historical impact of China's decades-long family planning program on the current birth policy's implementation, historical institutionalism serves as the best framework and will be primarily applied to guide the investigation and analysis. Meanwhile, the research also examines the action logic of local family planning agents, thus rational choice institutionalism will provide valuable insights into the specification of how cadre management structures local official's behavior. Therefore, this dissertation will mainly draw upon historical and rational choice institutionalism for the explanation and discussion of China's universal two-child policy.

### *2.1.1. Historical Institutionalism*

Similar to other institutionalist approaches, historical institutionalism also highlights the structuring effect of institutions on individual behavior and policy outcomes. But as the term suggests, history gains essential importance in the research of this approach. This is because political actors can learn from experiences with their expectations shaped by the past (see Olsen & Peters, 1996), and all political events take place within certain temporal context, which determines not only what kind of decision is made by political actors, but also when the decision is adopted (Steinmo, 2008). Thus, for a better understanding of why certain decision is made or particular outcome occurred, it is necessary to place variables such as individual preference, choice, and behavior into adequate situations, and pay attention to their sequential order in analysis (Thelen, 2002). By incorporating the observation of institutions into a broader historical context, historical institutionalists generally argue that policies formulated at the initial stage can exert a significant and long-lasting impact which determinates institution development in the future (Skocpol, 1995; Pierson & Skocpol, 2002).

### *Critics against Rational Choice Approach.*

As a critical response to rational choice model, historical institutionalism explicitly rejects the functionalist view of institution design and development, as well as the efficiency of history in the explanation of institutional change. Given that rational choice model assumes all political activities are underpinned by the rational calculation of individual interests, the design of institution becomes an intentional, far-sighted action which is conducted by instrumental actor to fulfill certain purpose. Meanwhile, institutional change is frequently taken as a prompt process that institutions would adjust to social demands within a short period. But in fact, as Pierson (2000b) points out, institution designers may be not instrumental at all, because they may care more about what is appropriate rather than what is effective. The lack of necessary incentives and capacities also prevent political actors from making far-sighted decisions, so they would merely aim at political purpose with short horizon, while leaving the long-term functioning of institution unconcerned. Moreover, since history is full of complexity and contingency (Steinmo, Thelen, & Longstreth, 1992), the change and development of institution is profoundly shaped by numerous causal links and random events. For these reasons, institutional change is not smooth and immediate, but usually stretches over a long period of time on the one hand (Pierson, 2002a); on the other hand, institution hardly moves in a straightforward way towards the pre-designed function, either to be certain equilibrium or a more advanced form. Instead, the actual long-term institutional consequence often turns out to be a byproduct of the initial decision, but not necessarily the original intention of institutional designers.

#### *Institutional Change and the Influence of the Past.*

Punctuated equilibrium model is widely applied in historical institutionalist studies to illustrate the persistence and change of institutions. Accordingly, institutions can generally be viewed as short bursts of rapid institutional change followed by long period of stasis. Institutional change derives from abrupt crises, which periodically divide the long stasis of institution. But once the new structure is set, policies or established routines again enter the stasis stage, during which they can “assume a life of their own, extracting societal resources, socializing individuals, and even altering the basic nature of civil society itself” (Krasner, 1984).

From Krasner’s (1984) point of view, crisis and the induced change originate from

exogenous shock. Yet many scholars have added that change can also be driven by the dysfunctional elements which inevitably contained by most of institutions (Pierson; 1997; Mahoney & Thelen, 2010), or by human behaviors (Steinmo, 2008), for example, the shift of ideas. In particular, as Reich argues (1990), powerful actors are willing to introduce changes after their internalization of new ideas, and such mechanism is further elaborated by Weir (1992) that new ideas can relocate members' interests, based on which they develop various strategies for the alliance-building and anchor the rearrangement of interests with new structures. One illustrative example of the causal link between idea and institutional change can be found in Steinmo's discussion how national economic policy in Western democracies was shaped by Keynesian and neoliberal ideas in turn in the twentieth century (2008: 131-132). Fukuyama (2014) also offers a heuristic interpretation of the establishment of strong bureaucratic system in both ancient China and Prussia that such institutional innovation originated from the elites' sense of crisis induced by the tense geopolitical situation. With the incorporation of ideas into analysis, institutional development more becomes a more dynamic process.

While acknowledging that institutions are able to change, the punctuated equilibrium model also stresses the long-lasting impact of the past. In general, historical institutionalist approach is more dedicated to explaining the resilience of policies or patterns rather than their change (Steinmo, Thelen, & Longstreth, 1992; Hall, 2010), as scholars identify a prevailing path dependency in institutions that there is a mechanism of self-reinforcing and increasing return either impeding institutions to change or making them more resilient against the changing environment.

Krasner (1984) explains such institutional persistence by referring to the branching tree pattern, emphasizing that institutional development can only happen within a framework set by the previously taken path, since sunk costs, including the invested capital and uncertainty about new program's outcomes, prescribe a limit to possible development strategies while hindering existing structures to take sharp shift. Meanwhile, since roles created at early stage may develop their own interests along with institution's history, they are prone to defend their privileges and existing structural settings too (Ikenberry, 1988). Besides, as Pierson asserts (2000a), the positive feedbacks generated by previous institutions also enhance the resilience of existing structures against environmental change. Particularly, the resistance to change even grows stronger

in a larger set of institutions, for the change of one institution can receive significant blocks from its embedded network (Steinmo, 2008: 129). All these mechanisms eventually reinforce the inertia of institutions, making their change rather difficult. Consequently, policy choice made at a previous point in time will perpetuate themselves into the future and exert extensive influence on subsequent decisions, making the newly introduced policy stuck to old routine or totally deviated from its designed function. Fukuyama's explanation of state-building in India may serve as an example to illustrate such power of the past. For example, despite the current stable democratic system, the capacity to offer public goods of modern Indian government is still severely constrained by corruption and clientelism induced by the persistence of familism and patriarchy, which can be ascribed to the uninterrupted absence of a strong state and impersonal bureaucratic system since the very birth of the civilization (see Fukuyama, 2011; 2014).

Nonetheless, it should be mentioned that path dependency does not necessarily indicate a completely static institution that political choice made at the initial stage will be forever locked in the self-reinforcing routine. Instead, it should better be understood as a counterargument targeting at the functionalist assumption that institution which fails to meet the demand from environment will be immediately replaced by another one which can effectively fulfill new requirements. Again, it is underlined that the persistence of institution is a consequence of various historical factors, which hamper the immediate change of institutions despite conspicuous environmental shift. The specification of self-reinforcing process facilitates a more comprehensive understanding of why and how institutional arrangements exist in practice. In addition, admittedly, it is oversimplifying to view institutional development in a dualistic way that institution either persists or breaks down. As empirical evidence demonstrates, institution may stay resilient to significant environmental change or undergo subtle changes despite an apparent stability (Thelen, 2002). Thus, the scrutiny on the dynamics between institution and environment is required for a more accurate depiction of institutional development.

#### *Application.*

The research focus of historical institutionalism is mainly placed on specific cases, especially those important and relatively rare events (Steinmo, 2008: 134), rather than those abstract and ideal models. While prediction is relatively downplayed due to the

contingency and complex causality in history, the approach is more oriented to the reasoning of earlier taken decisions and certain emerged outcomes. A great number of comparative studies have showed how historical institutionalist analysis can substantially enrich the research of cross-country policy variation (see Hall, 1986; Steinmo, 1989; Rothstein, 1992; Immergut, 1992; Steinmo, 1996). In the meantime, the development of national policies and relevant influence of their historical context constitute another research focus, as presented in many other insightful works (see Ikenberry, 1988; Thelen, 1991; Hall, 1992; Skocpol, 1995).

By incorporating historical perspective to institutionalist research, historical institutionalism provides valuable insights in the understanding of institution's development. It is particularly emphasized by the approach that institution tends to persist and remain stable after its introduction given factors such as sunk costs, or member's newly constructed interests within it. Meanwhile, despite the ability to change, institution is highly constrained by its past that the old structure can significantly impact its development, either by setting limits on the direction of future change or even deviating the new structure from its predesigned function. Eventually, as a consequence of the complex causality and contingency in history, institution does not move promptly or straightforwardly to certain function based on interest maximization.

This dissertation focuses on China's population policy. Instead of predicting the policy's future development, it primarily aims to offer understandings of what the current policy implementation at local level looks like and which factors have played an impacting role on current situation. Thus, historical institutionalism serves as an ideal framework to guide the exploration and explanation given its emphasis on the persistence of institutions and influence of the past. Accordingly, the study will place the policy development into a larger historical context to examine how the implementation of universal two-child policy has been shaped by the previous strict family planning.

### *2.1.2. Rational Choice Institutionalism and A Combined Approach*

Rational choice institutionalism generally followed the economics-based research but concurrently infused it with institutionalist perspective. In comparison to the classic rational choice model that purely applies economic principles into political analysis, the institutionalist variant combines preference analysis with a consideration of institutional

impact, laying a stress on the structuring effect of institutions on actor's interest and behavior to deal with the theoretical problem of collective irrationality and to better account for political choices in real political life.

#### *Institution and Individual Actor.*

The institutionalist version of rational choice analysis principally recognizes that politics do happen within institutions. The critical influence from institutions on personal preference and political outcome is particularly highlighted in research to understand why specific political behavior or institutional arrangement occurs, or how institutions should be designed to yield more favorable outcomes for collectivity. From the perspective of rational choice institutionalism, individual behavior is primarily incentivized by personal interests, but these rational actors are also fully aware of institution's crucial role in their utility maximization process at the same time. Thus, the eventual political decision turns out to be a synthesis of both individual preference and institutional impact.

In contrast to other institutionalist approaches, value and norm are downplayed in the rational choice variant. Institutions are more taken as a cluster of exogenously given rules that exert incentivizing or constraining influence (North, 1990: 3; Ostrom, 1986), based on which individuals redefine their preferences, form alternative strategies, and make decisions. Notably, such influence could also be indirect, since institution can determine who are eligible to participate in certain political process, and further endow the selected political actors with different positions in the structure (Shepsle, 1986b), or shape the structure of situation in which individuals take actions (Ostrom, 1986), or regulate the information actors receive and the sequence of political process (Shepsle, 1989; 2006). As a result, political actor's preferences and strategies can only develop within the given framework and become conditioned.

#### *Research Focus and Limitations.*

Studies of rational choice institutionalism not only provide microscopic explanations of political behavior, but also focus on the relationship between behavior and institutions. The literature of rational choice institutionalism covers a broad range of research fields including the problems of collective action faced by legislators (Weingast, Shepsle, & Johnsen, 1981; Ostrom, 1986; Weingast & Marshall, 1988), the dynamics between committee and congress (Ostrom, 1986; Shepsle & Weingast, 1987), the design and



possible outcomes of concrete policies (Tsebelis, 1990a; 1990b), particularly policies dealing with common-pool resources (Gardner, Ostrom, & Walker, 1990; Ostrom, Walker, & Gardner, 1992). More recently, the European Union also becomes another research focus (Pollack, 2007). In general, studies of rational choice institutionalism are highly theory-building oriented, aiming to make general explanations for the behavior patterns in various institutions.

In particular, extensive discussions are dedicated to the principal-agent problem (see for example Gaubatz, 1991; Downs & Rocke, 1994; Miller, 2005), where institution is viewed as a structure or contract that regulates the relationship between principals and agents in analyses (Eisenhardt, 1989). While the agent always pursues the maximization of his own profits with the given discretion, the principal's chief aim is to ensure that the agent acts in line with his expectation, for instance the agent shirks as little as possible. For this purpose, the principal introduces regulating structures, including specific rewards and punishment for agent's input and output (Shepsle, 1986a), to control the agent's behavior.

By placing preference analysis under institutional framework, rational choice institutionalist research has further refined the application of economic principles in political science study and greatly contributed to explaining the interaction between political actors within a given structure. Nevertheless, its observation is overall fixed at individual behavior and relevant consequences within given structures, but leaving institutional change less concerned. Since the approach inherits the functionalist explanation from the classic rational choice model to account for institutional development, dynamics in the process of change is largely ignored, resulting in the problem that institutional change appears to be immediate and prompt. As a result, the approach can hardly offer a systematic explanation why institution moves from one equilibrium to another, let alone a deeper exploration why changes take place in incremental or radical form, and how various driving factors lead to these changes. Once the investigation of individual preference is embedded into a larger historical background, it usually involves an analysis of institutional development, which in turn necessitates a specification of driving factors behind the change and the mechanism of how the change unfolds. In this sense, the explanation from rational choice institutionalism turns out to be insufficient and needs to be supplemented by perspectives from other approaches.

### *A Combined Approach.*

As Steinmo (2008) states, political analysis should not be established only on either institutions or actor's interests, because all significant political outcomes are shaped by both rules and interest maximization. While acknowledging the contribution of rational choice model to the understanding of general politics and more specifically, the functioning of institution and political actor's behavior, historical institutionalists also suggest incorporating the interest scrutiny in specific period into a larger historical analysis at macro level (see Pierson & Skocpol, 2002; Katznelson & Weingast, 2005; Hall, 2010).

A combined approach of both rational choice and historical institutionalism is promising, because both approaches agree that individual preference is molded by environment and institution, therefore institutional background is crucial for preference formation. While rational choice institutionalist often regard structural arrangements as set of incentives and constraints that shape individual behaviors, Hall (2005) also distinguishes political actors' basic preferences, which are defined by the overarching economic and political theory, from strategic ones, which are developed in political process based on the behavior of other actors and possible outcomes, arguing institution can first regulate actor's strategic preference and thereby molding the strategic interaction between actors as well as the following political outcomes. Given that, Katznelson and Weingast (2005: 6) contend that the two approaches are more complementary than contending against each other. Although rational choice research more focuses on the preference in specific and time-bound events, whereas historical institutionalism is devoted to tracking historical development at a macro level with an emphasis on chronology and temporality, both approaches can converge to a scrutiny of the institutionally induced preferences of political actors (Katznelson & Weingast, 2005: 11-12), since individuals are embedded in history and pursue goals based on their conditioned interests. By clarifying the sequence of previous events and choices, the combined approach can tease out actor's current preference and possible options in given temporal background, and then it enables historical analysis at macro level to provide a more reasonable and comprehensive interpretation of why certain political choice is made.

In general, the investigation of China's universal two-child policy in this research will be based on the discussion of local family planning agent's preference and behavior

in work, which are fundamentally shaped by policy's history and existing institutional structures. The analysis is not going to be built on the rigorous modeling of political actor's possible strategies and relevant consequences. Instead, the application of rational choice model more serves as an overarching framework to guide the analysis of local official's decision-making. By taking family planning agents as rational individuals who constantly pursue the maximization of utility, the study can better identify the driving factors behind their behavior, or more precisely how their policy enforcement, becomes a consequence of the country's population policy history and the cadre management system. On the one hand, the shaping influence of past family planning program will be explored through fieldwork research to illustrate that official's current strategy is constrained by the policy's history. On the other hand, a detailed discussion based on political policies and literature will be offered to explain how the cadre management system as set of constraints and incentives regulates local officials and eventually leads to their political decision in practice.

## ***2.2. Methodology***

This research will follow a qualitative design to collect data and then analyze the policy implementation based on a comparative case study with small sample size. As aforementioned, the analysis and discussion will be underpinned by both primary data collected through research interviews with local family planning agents and secondary data including policy documents, academic discussions, as well as media reports. More specifically, since semi-structured interview not only sticks to concerned topic, but also guarantees certain openness to interviewee's narrative, this interview form will be adopted for relevant data gathering.

### ***2.2.1. Qualitative Research***

The concrete situation of policy enforcement at local level largely remains under-explored and deserves more research attention. Yet given political sensitivity and practicality, it is exceedingly difficult to collect a large amount of reliable data for quantitative research (O'Brien, 2006), also regarding the localization and implementation of population policy in China. In this regard, qualitative research turns out to be the optimal choice for a breakthrough in such research field, for it is more oriented toward exploration rather than

verification (Ambert et al., 1995).

Representativeness and falsifiability, which are supposed to be two basic characteristics of “science”, are frequently mentioned in the criticism of qualitative research, questioning its research rigor and generalizability compared with quantitative studies (see Tellis, 1997; Crouch & McKenzie, 2006). As qualitative research aims to find what exists rather than how frequent the phenomenon emerges (Walker, 1985: 3), it is more in-depth oriented instead of covering a broad range of cases. Though the difference in validity and reliability between qualitative and quantitative research is well acknowledged, some qualitative researchers contend the difference is more an issue of degree than type (Maxwell, 1992; Mays & Pope, 1995), while some others simply reject the standards applied for the evaluation of quantitative studies. For example, it is argued that the issue of validity and reliability is less relevant to qualitative research (Ambert et al., 1995). Lincoln & Cannella (2004) further contend qualitative method could be more rigorous than the quantitative variant, as “it makes its premises, biases, predilections, and assumptions clear up front”.

Nevertheless, some alternative parameters, such as credibility, fittingness, and auditability, are proposed by qualitative researchers to guarantee the rigor of their studies as well (Guba, 1981; Beck, 1993). Instead of representativeness and falsifiability, the quality of received information data and research design is attached with greater concern, so as Beck (1993) suggests, the emphasis should be placed on if the description is faithful to fact, if the hypothesis fits a larger research background, and if other researchers can either follow the research decisions or audit the research path. In addition, the important role of reflexive account is also underlined (Keenan, Van Teijlingen, & Pitchforth, 2005), according to which researchers should always hold a critical view of data collection and analysis, especially about how the process is influenced by society, history, politics, and personal background.

Although quantitative research method is advantaged in generalization and falsifiability, it neglects the uniqueness and specific background of each single unit, therefore the in-depth enquiry of a qualitative research becomes indispensable to further prove the applicability of theories. Moreover, as empirical evidence demonstrates, quantitative research may sometimes generate superficial, unreal, or even distorted answers (Chen, 2010), resulting in limited research reliability. In contrast, with deep

exploration and scrutiny, this study can better reveal authentic details regarding the implementation of universal two-child policy to undergird further analysis.

This research selects three Chinese cities as research sites and studies their policy localization and enforcement as cases. Case study can well serve qualitative research design, as it is aligned with the purpose of describing, understanding, and explaining, and has been extensively applied to analyze government and evaluative situations (Tellis, 1997). Given the small sample size in this research, it needs to be reiterated that representativeness is not the main concern of this study. As Yin (2003: 10) argues, case study is more oriented to analytical rather than statistical generalization. Besides, given the huge regional difference in China, there exists the risk of invalid part-to-whole mappings, which inadequately apply the characteristics or process of a well-studied area to the national paradigm (Hurst, 2010). Nevertheless, this research will select research sites with distinguished backgrounds, so that it can go beyond a micro scrutiny and offer a broader horizon about the implementation of population policy at local level. (Hurst, 2010)

### *2.2.2. Expert Interview in China*

Since the reform and opening-up of China in the late 1970s, more research methods, especially empirical ones, have become available for contemporary Chinese studies. However, bureaucratic obstacles and political sensitivity are two major challenges that must be carefully dealt with for qualitative research in China (Alpermann, 2012), because they not only substantially impact where and how fieldwork is conducted, but also the quality of collected data. To deal with these two problems, it can start with a refined research design and the preparation of background information of research sites (Göbel, 2014). This research is going to collect primary data through semi-structured interview, which depends on interview guide and sets of questions covering concerned topic. Thus, a fine-tuned research design and the acquaintance to research context are not only conducive to the specification of interview questions and desired information, but also pave the way for the later triangulation of gathered data from fieldwork, so that falsified or deliberately hidden information can be avoided or reduced.

More specifically, informants in this research will be family planning agents from Chinese local governments. By virtue of their position within administrative structure,

they are the group of people who can provide the technical knowledge about the specific policy implementation in their region, the process knowledge about official activity, interactions, and institutional settings, as well as the interpretative knowledge such as subjective interpretation and opinion about universal two-child policy. According to the definition offered by Bogner and Menz (2009), they can be viewed as experts in the study of population policy implementation. Although expert interview is efficient in gathering desired information (Bogner, Littig, & Menz, 2009), there are some points worth mentioning. Garner and Scott (2013: 288-289) point out that those who have more power or higher social status can control the information flow within an organization and tend to protect their networks as well as institutions by offering routinized answers. In order to break such information barrier, researchers need to particularly prepare questions that lead to more initial and revealing answers (see also Solinger, 2006).

Meanwhile, the construction of mutual trust with informants is another crucial factor for successful field research, as such trust determines the authenticity of received information from interviews. Pairs of strategies are frequently adopted to cope with political sensitivity so as to cultivate the mutual trust with local officials, including repeated fieldwork at the same site (Read, 2010), sharing personal opinion or previous research with informants, keeping the confidentiality of informants, and having a small talk at the beginning of interview as warm-up etc. (Alpermann, 2012). In general, by emphasizing the cooperative nature of the interview and underlining the significance of the expert's knowledge for the evaluation (Wroblewski & Leitner, 2009), the researcher can reduce the risk of iceberg effects in interviews for more smooth fieldwork. This can be achieved for instance through demonstrating respect, politeness, and understanding toward informants, as well as proposing "how" rather than "why" questions (Garner & Scott, 2013: 290-295). Furthermore, the research of earlier policy implementation and appropriate use of internal vernacular during interview can demonstrate researcher's expertise so that the interview would not be constrained on mere routinized answers (Bogner & Menz, 2009; Garner & Scott, 2013: 221-223).

Nevertheless, words and opinions from expert should not be naturally treated as truth (Lauth, Pickel, & Pickel, 2008). As Wroblewski and Leitner (2009) point out, experts become stakeholders when they involve in the investigated project. This might lead to a distorted response or hidden information. Therefore, their narratives must be

examined with a critical view. In this regard, triangulation is frequently applied as a validation strategy to judge the authenticity of collected data by scrutinizing and comparing them with information from other sources (Yin, 2009; Flick, 2004).

### *2.2.3. Interviewee Selection*

The fieldwork of this research is mainly comprised of 10 rounds of interviews and supplemented by a number of informal talks with scholars from universities. All interviews are conducted by the researcher from 2018-2020 and 7 local officials from the selected three cities are interviewed. Fieldwork stopped when it was believed that data saturation was reached.

Officials working for local health agency, including district and city level, were chosen as interviewees. By “health agency”, it is referred to the regional government organs titled with “health commission” or “bureau” which derive from the “population and family planning commission” or “bureau” since the organizational reform in 2018. Among 7 interviewees, 4 of them are from city level government, while the rest are from district level government which is one tier lower and the direct subordinate to city level government. Since the field research aims to obtain the general picture of local policy implementation as well as relevant perception and evaluation from local officials through expert interviews, the ideal informant is supposed to possess a comprehensive knowledge about both local policies and the implementation in recent years. For this reason, local officials that hold a leading position of the (previous) family planning branch were selected to be interviewed. All of them were incumbent at the time when the interview was conducted, so it can be argued that these group of people are the most qualified experts than any other.

Third party’s introduction to interviewees has played a crucial role in facilitating the successful fieldwork of this research. The recommendations from people who are familiar to both the researcher and interviewees pave the way for the construction of mutual trust between the two sides, which is conducive to the collection of credible information later. Note that Chinese officials belong to a relatively closed group, as their contact information, including telephone number and email address, is usually not available online at all, let alone they could simply refuse to be interviewed out of the reason of political sensitivity. The difficulty in getting in touch with them therefore

necessitates an introduction from their acquaintance. Eventually, all of the interviewees in this research are approached with the help of several key informants in each city who have relevant connections. These informants include the researcher's acquaintances, local scholars, and some officials who participated in the first-round interview. In particular, the contact with most of interviewees are established step by step through multiple introductions. It is doubtless that the relationship network of the third party, which usually determines the selection of informants, can sometimes lead to selection bias of study cases. However, third party's introduction can also serve as endorsement, and simultaneously helps to find places that offer easier acquisition of desired information, while reducing the standard bias from both interviewer and interviewee (Göbel, 2014). Moreover, since this research specifically aims to acquire data from government officials who have comprehensive knowledge of the local demographics and policy enforcement, the best candidate can only be the office chief who is in charge of family planning issues in the region. Hence, it deserves more concern how to approach the interviewee rather than which person should be selected as interviewee. Third party's introduction plays no major negative role in this process.

At last, it is necessary to note that crew change of the visited family planning agency might undermine the quality of acquired information, especially if the newly appointed section chief had no previous work experience in family planning issues earlier. The researcher experienced twice the change of personnel during fieldwork that the section chief, with whom the first-round interview was conducted, was replaced by someone else when the second-round interview was going to start. Fortunately, the former heads of office introduced the researcher to their successors personally, thus on the one hand, the mutual trust between the researcher and the incumbent section chief is guaranteed. On the other hand, staffs who took over the leading position at these two research sites used to work at the same branch before, so it is assumed that they already possessed certain degree of expertise or at least they were capable to become fully acquainted within a short period. As a matter of fact, information about policy and implementation acquired from follow-up interviews at these two research sites are found to be consistent and coherent with earlier interview data after careful comparison.



#### *2.2.4. Interview Method*

Research interviews are conducted in semi-structured form. At first, all interviews begin with an open question about the region's demographic development in recent years and the informant's perception about the new population policy, including its influence on regional demographics and their experienced problems or challenges during policy implementation. After the free narration part, follow-up questions are raised to specify particularly concerned contents. Interview questions of this field research mainly cover topics such as the effect of universal two-child policy, official's experienced problems, regional policy innovation, organizational reform, the cooperation with other government branches, and their anticipation of policy development in the future. Each interview lasts from 30 to 100 minutes, depending on the informant's time slot. Usually the first-round interview takes longer time, as it entails the researcher's self-introduction, interviewee's free narration, and a lengthy Q&A session revolving around all questions represented in the interview outline as well as those follow-up ones. The following rounds mainly focus on specific issues, thus are relatively shorter.

Prior to the meeting, an interview outline is always sent to the interviewee through either email or instant messaging software. The outline contains topics of the researcher's interest and some corresponding starting questions, but it excludes issues that might be deemed as sensitive by officials. The reason for such deliberative arrangement is twofold: first, interviewee's acquaintance with interview question allows them to become prepared and therefore more informative during meeting; and second, the intentional rule-out of sensitive topics from outline can strengthen official's trust in the researcher, without generating any resistant or even antagonistic attitude from the side of local officials. As fieldwork experiences from this research prove, it is inappropriate to inquire any sensitive information straightforwardly with a starting question, for it only makes the informant feel embarrassed or even thoroughly unpleasant, resulting in a dead end of meaningful interview. As one local official bluntly puts it:

“You do not require any data? Good. Last time we had a student who asked for that (demographic data) right after he met us. A real headache for us. Data from government are sensitive. How could one simply ask for that?” (Interview B1, 03/2019)

Instead, sensitive issues, for instance people who lost their only child, should better be mentioned in the form of follow-up question within relevant context so as to reduce the risk of trust-damaging and to ensure the chance to receive more authentic answers from officials. In fact, although the researcher excluded all questions related to sensitive issues from the outline, abundant data have been acquired through rounds of follow-up questions, as informants generally become relaxed and talkative after sufficient conversation later, but not defensive about these topics. This strategy is particularly helpful for the first face-to-face contact, because trust-building at the very start can determine the quality of following rounds of interviews or even whether there will be a second interview at all. Yet two exceptional cases need to be noted that the interview appointment with two officials could only be made via telephone out of personal reasons from the informant side, so it was impossible for the researcher to provide interview outline through email. As a countermeasure, extra time was offered for the reading of questions presented in the outline before the formal narration started. It is found that there is no major difference in the quality between these two and other interviews, so data from these two interviews can be applied for research. Additionally, one complementary questionnaire was sent to an official from Xiamen, inquiring basically the same questions in the interview outline. The answer was later received in written form and serves the triangulation.

All interviews are conducted in the office of interviewees during their working time in the face-to-face and one-on-one form. Two of the interviewees had the conversation in Guizhou dialect, whereas the rest spoke Mandarin. As the researcher is capable to understand Guizhou dialect, this does not damage the quality of transcript. Before each interview begins, all interviewees are well informed with the confidentiality of this research project. With their permission, most of interviews were recorded and then transcribed in the written form. Only one interview was written down in notes, as the interviewee denied the audio-recording. Besides, in order to reassure that all interviewees understand questions in the way as they are designed, an interview outline was additionally provided to the interviewees as reference during meeting.

It has to be noted that the author's positionality also has an impact on the quality of field research and data collection. The critical scrutiny of researcher's social nature as well as its influence on fieldwork process (Chacko, 2004; Dowling, 2005) has been

particularly emphasized for the so-called “returning-home” researchers, who usually face the challenge of in-betweenness, namely the conflicting identities between “insider” and “outsider” (Rubin, 2012; Zhao, 2017). In this research, on the one hand, the author as a Chinese native has advantage in communicative language skill and cultural background, which have facilitated effective communication and interaction with interviewed officials. By virtue of this, the misunderstandings between the two interview parties could be substantially reduced and it further enables a more precise analysis of policy implementation based on the collected information. However, the successful establishment of connection with respondents should be largely ascribed to their trust in the intermediary rather than the researcher’s Chinese nationality. In fact, all respondents primarily regarded the researcher as “the one introduced by either their acquaintance or leaders”, with the connection to the intermediary particularly emphasized. For this reason, all interviewed officials kept frank and open during interview and have provided lengthy narratives about sensitive topics, as can be evidenced by their critical opinions about both national policies and superior level governments, which can hardly be obtained through other research methods. By contrast, the positive impact of Chinese nationality on building trust was only marginal in the process, therefore barely contributed to the access to authentic data.

On the other hand, as the author is enrolled at a German university, such background of a non-Chinese research institute also leads to increased vigilance of government officials against the author and interview. Before the conversation went deeper into the discussion about universal two-child policy, it was common that the respondent complained about the “sharp attack against China’s family planning program” in Western societies at the starting phase. Conceivably, the full trust from interviewees plays a bigger role in collecting authentic narratives in this case. The alertness of officials used to be conspicuous at the first meeting and can be reflected in the fact that some of them prefer to begin the interview by inquiring the relationship between the author and the intermediary. Moreover, although interviewed family planning agents offered large amount of revealing information about their policy enforcement and problems encountered in daily works, they carefully skipped detailed descriptions about certain sensitive topics in conversation, for instance how they exactly control local *shidu* parents who insist on huge state compensation and repetitively petition local governments. Some

respondents even straightforwardly reminded the researcher “not to write too much about the sensitive part” at the end of interview. Nonetheless, issues such as family planning and the *shidu* problem are politically sensitive enough due to their close link to the task of “social stability maintenance”, the performance of which is critical to the political career of Chinese officials. It is highly likely that government officials would remain defensive and silent as well, even when the same interview questions are proposed by scholars from Chinese research institute. Hence, author’s background of a non-Chinese research institute is not necessarily a serious obstacle to the data collection through interview with Chinese officials. It is the proper intermediate third party and its generated interviewee’s trust that ultimately determine the quality of acquired data, regardless of the researcher’s nationality.

The author read all transcripts and coded the data through open coding and thematic coding afterwards. Triangulation was adopted during the analysis that the information from each interviewee was always compared with official documents, journalist reports, academic discussion, as well as the answer from other respondents at the same research site.

### **3. Development of PRC’s Population Policy**

To understand China’s universal two-child policy more comprehensively, it is necessary to first review the historical development of the country’s population policy and especially the family planning program, since it not only displays the context for policy shifts, but also captures the factors that have conditioned the design as well as the implementation of universal two-child policy.

PRC’s population policy has a long history and extends back to its regime establishment. In the early 1950s, Chinese government largely followed a pronatalist policy which led to two waves of baby booms. The fast increased population and devastated national economy caused by rounds of political campaigns in the 1960s gradually raised top leaders’ concerns about the balance between population and resources. In this background, birth control became increasingly favored by leaders despite some hesitations and inconsistencies. Though roughly, the central government launched family planning program in the early 1970s and later turned it into the strict one-child policy in 1980, which was carried it out with full political attention thereafter. From

the official perspective, one-child policy has allegedly made an enormous contribution to the country's modernization in terms of both economic progress and population quality improvement. Yet it is undeniable that its long-term implementation also brought lots of serious population problems to Chinese society at the same time, finally forced the authority to loosen its restriction on birth number by the end of 2015. Nevertheless, the introduction of universal two-child policy does not indicate the termination of family planning but more a relaxation of the program. Even the most recent third-child policy which takes effect in 2021 also prescribes a birth limit, though only nominally.<sup>4</sup> Thus, it should be noted that family planning program has been being lasting for over five decades in a broader sense and therefore takes up a large part of the discussions on China's population policy.

### **3.1. Background and Development of Family Planning Program**

China's population policy was more featured with birth encouragement after the foundation of the People's Republic. The state followed a *de facto* pronatalist policy as consequences of both Mao Zedong's idea and the influence from Soviet Union (Feng, Ma, and Leng; 1999; Wang and Hu, 2012). A number of regulations were published by the Ministry of Health at that time and placed plenty of restricting conditions upon induced abortion.<sup>5</sup> Along with the improved medical conditions, China soon had a rapid population growth marked by its first post-war baby boom in the early 1950s.

The fast population expansion yet raised an increasing concern shared by both scholars and political leaders about the pronatalist policy. The premier minister Zhou Enlai (1993: 163) expressed in September 1953 that "it could be a burden to feed the large population based on such fertility rate". Subsequently, the Ministry of Health lifted

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<sup>4</sup> The "social supporting fees" become obsolete along with the introduction of third-child policy in 2021. This implies the *de facto* cancelation of the birth limit that allows Chinese people to have more babies despite the prescribed birth quota.

<sup>5</sup> For detailed discussion see Zhang, S. 张思 & Xu, Y. 徐蕴 (2021). 20 世纪五六十年代中国节育技术的起步与推广——基于地方实践与执行力视角的思考 [The Start and Promotion of Chinese Birth Control Technology in the 1950s and 1960s——From the Perspective of Local Practice and Enforcement]. *南开学报(哲学社会科学版)* *NankaiXuebao(ZhexueShehuikexueBan)* (05),135-147.

previous restrictions on contraception and induced abortion at the end of 1954, and then the CCP Central Committee (1955) for the first time articulated that the party advocates birth control in an official document. In 1957, while a number of top leaders repeatedly stressed the importance of family planning (Tang, 2010), a well-known expert in demography Ma Yinchu also published his work *New Population Theory*, calling for the tightening of population control. Nonetheless, their suggestions about birth control were shortly put aside, as the regime was overwhelmed by the communist campaign started in 1958.

Struck by the severe economic downturn in the early 1960s, the central government once again noticed the detrimental effects of rapid population growth on Chinese society. The CCP Central Committee and State Council (1962) proposed to encourage late marriage nationwide as a control method, which particularly aims to limit the fertility increase in urban and those densely populated rural areas. However, such intention was not put into practice because of the rising political campaigns. As a result, China's total fertility rate (TFR), which measures the average number of children that would be born per woman over her lifetime, remained at around 6, and the total population exceeded 800 million in 1969 (NBS, 2016).

Despite being trapped in political turmoil, the State Council readdressed in 1971 that “population should increase as planned” in an official instruction to resolve the country's ever-alerting demographic situation (State Council, 1971). Two years later, a special “family planning leading group” was set up by the central government. Correspondingly, regional governments also introduced their local agencies as required. A new guideline “later, longer, fewer (晚, 稀, 少)” was officially put forward, appealing for late marriage, longer birth interval of at least three years, and maximum two children per couple. Since then, the state's insistence on birth control had not experienced major shift, even after the political upheaval when Deng Xiaoping took over the leadership of the Party. In fact, China's huge population was increasingly considered to be a negative factor or even obstacle to the country's development,<sup>6</sup> for the new leadership group set

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<sup>6</sup> This can be reflected in a number of Deng Xiaoping's literature. See for example, Deng, X. (1994). *Deng Xiaoping wen xuan* (Vol. 1). RenminChubanshe, Beijing, p 334; Deng, X. (1994). *Deng Xiaoping wen xuan* (Vol. 2). RenminChubanshe, Beijing, p 163-164.

modernization as the regime's core agenda. Subsequently, top leaders of the post-Mao era attached greater importance to the restriction of population growth. In October 1978, the Party's Central Committee further tightened the limitation on the number of children that the guideline became "one is better, two at most". For the first time, a stipulation on the specific number of children that each couple are allowed to have was made by Chinese central authority.

In September 1980, China formally entered the one-child policy era, as the CCP Central Committee and State Council published the *Open Letter to All Communist Party Members and Members of the Communist Youth League*, appealing each couple to have only one child. Family planning program was further entrenched by being defined as a "state policy" and written into the constitution in 1982. But in practice, the implementation of one-child policy was far from smooth as policy-makers anticipated. Given that the strict birth control seriously contradicted the fertility desire of peasants for reasons such as concerns about labor force shortage and traditional concepts, massive and fierce resistances against the policy were found in rural areas (Greenhalgh, 2003). To alleviate the predicament during policy enforcement, the central government had to apply a relatively more relaxed program in rural areas in 1984, allowing all rural families to have a second child if their first one is a girl. However, in comparison, the strict birth control in urban areas remained barely changed. Instead, the central leadership kept on underlining how significant the project is for the realization of the national modernization (CCP Central Committee & State Council, 1991).

One-child policy turns out to be effective in terms of restricting population growth that after a decade since its introduction, China's TFR turned below the replacement level of 2.1 in 1992 and kept falling in the following decade, eventually reached at around 1.60 by the early 2000s. Satisfied by the sharply decreased figure, the CCP Central Committee and the State Council decided to change the key task of family planning project from reducing fertility rate to enhancing population quality while maintaining the low fertility level (CCP Central Committee & State Council, 2000). As demonstrated in the *Population and Family Planning Law* passed at the end of 2001, the improvement of women's access to education and employment, as well as their general health and social status has been explicitly articulated in this constitutional document of China's population policy.

Yet unfortunately, some population problems derived from the long-term implementation of one-child policy also started to emerge and exacerbate at the same time, which firstly attracted special attention from scholars. A cluster of studies were dedicated to issues such as China's gender imbalance (Ding & Hesketh, 2006; Li, 2007) and population aging (Zhang and Goza, 2006; Flaherty et al., 2007), warning these problems are going to seriously threaten the country's population development, and more generally, its social stability (Hesketh, Lu, and Xing, 2005; Feng, 2005). In December 2006, the central leadership formally acknowledged these new challenges and expressed concerns the first time (CCP Central Committee & State Council, 2006). Nevertheless, though the newly identified population problems are mostly caused by the previous strict birth control or the sharp decline of fertility rate, family planning has not lost its priority on the agenda of Chinese government, while the maintenance of a low fertility level remained as a primary focus (State Council, 2006).

A major change did not happen until 2011, when the central government incorporated the combat against population aging and sex ratio imbalance into the aims of its population policy (State Council, 2011). A further step was taken two years later that a conditional two-child policy was proposed in November 2013, allowing each couple to have two children if either partner of the spouse is an only child. Still, the country's fertility rate failed to be significantly improved despite the relaxation. As reported in an official document (Xi, 2015), merely 15.4% of eligible couples have applied for the birth of their second child by August 2015. It is less disputable that the conditional two-child policy only had a minor impact on Chinese couple's low fertility desire. Consequently, the state soon replaced it with universal two-child policy at the end of 2015, which also marks the formal end of one-child policy thirty-five years after its introduction.

### ***3.2. Emerging Challenges***

The decades-long family planning program has shaped both China's demographic structure and socio-economic development, with its influence being enormous, long-lasting, and complex. Conceivably, Chinese government only speaks loud of the positive impacts of its birth control program. Though it is challenged by some scholars (see for example, Feng, Cai, & Gu, 2013), the authority firmly claims that family planning has

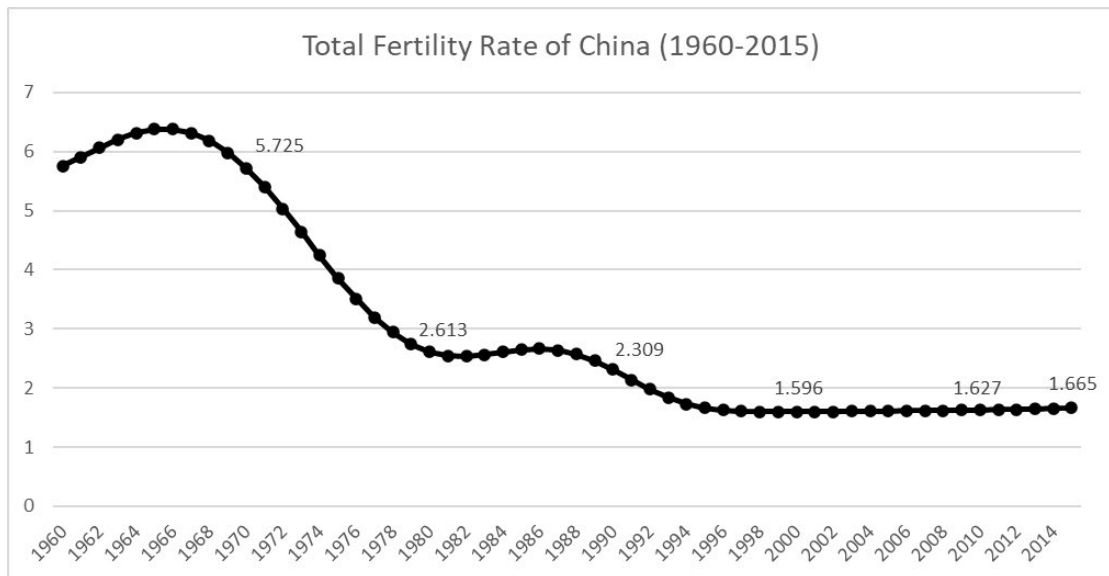


prevented around 400 million births in China (People.cn, 2013), thus essentially contributed to the country's rapid economic expansion and improvement of population quality. Economic achievement usually refers to the fast growth of GDP per capita, which skyrocketed from 468 Chinese *yuan* in 1980 to 50,237 *yuan* in 2015 (NBS, 2015). In the meantime, multiple indicators are applied by the central government to evidence the advancement of population quality. For example, China's illiteracy rate has been reduced from 23.5% in 1982 to 4.08% in 2010, which outperformed the world's average level of 15.9% (World Bank, 2010). Meanwhile, the average life expectancy of Chinese people has risen from 66.8 years in 1980 to 75.9 years in 2015. The emancipation of women is another legacy frequently mentioned by Chinese government that it is believed one-child policy has freed Chinese women from excessive childbirth and nursing work (Greenhalgh, 2001), so that they could invest more time in education and career (Fong, 2002). Even more, the state also draws upon academic research (Bryant et al., 2009), asserting that China's family planning program has essentially mitigated the environmental pressure derived from population size and growth, which is even conducive to the combat against climate change (The Central People's Government, 2010).

However, despite these self-proclaimed positive outcomes, it is the ever-growing population problems induced by the previous strict birth control that have forced the government to revise its policy. The primary but most salient challenge is marked by a sharp decline in fertility. The TFR of Chinese women used to be 5.73 in 1970, but it sunk drastically to 2.61 until 1980, and further fell below 2.1 in the early 1990s. Since then, China's TFR has never reached the replacement level again but remained around 1.6. It is noteworthy that there is a noticeable difference between estimated TFRs from different sources. For instance, original data from the sixth national census indicate that China's TFR of 2010 already shrank to 1.18, but it is later revised by the National Health and Family Planning Commission to 1.63 (NBS, 2011). In comparison, Cai (2013) argues that a TFR of 1.5 can better describe the reality, whereas Jiang et al. (2014) adopt a TFR of 1.4 in their research. A considerably higher figure is offered by Chen and Yang (2014) that they estimate China's TFR of 2010 should be 1.66. Nonetheless, despite such divergence, all researchers share the same concern over the country's dangerously low fertility level and its worsening demographic structure. Especially it seems improbable that China's TFR will rebound significantly in a short period, because its decrease since

1980 is fundamentally determined by the country's betterment of socio-economic condition rather than one-child policy (Zhang, 2017; Greenhalgh, 2018; Zhao & Zhang, 2018). This research does not target at any precise calculation of demographic statistics but rather a depiction of the developing trend of China's TFR. For this reason, the data from World Bank are adopted given their availability and consistency.

Figure 4 Total Fertility Rate of China (1960-2015)



Source: World Bank. Available [HTTP:<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.TFRT.IN?locations=CN>](https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.TFRT.IN?locations=CN) (accessed 12 March 2021).

Along with the stagnation of TFR below the replacement level since the 1990s, the demographic structure in China keeps deteriorating that various population problems, such as population aging and imbalanced sex ratio, have become increasingly serious in recent years. One the one hand, 16.14% of China's total population is at age 60 and above by the end of 2014. The proportion of people over the age of 65 reached 10.47% in the same year (NBS, 2014), and is predicted to soar to 34.9% by 2050 (Xinhuanet, 2018). As population aging proceeds, the number of labor force in China has been reducing since 2012 (NBS, 2016), which is believed to severely impede the country's socio-economic development in the future (Feng, 2011; Feng, Cai, & Gu, 2013; Wang et al.,2017). Meanwhile, the demand for pension and eldercare has been growing fast along with the aging process, imposing a heavy burden on both Chinese society and ordinary families to support old people (Hesketh, Lu, & Xing, 2005; Zhang & Goza, 2006; Zhan, 2013; Nie,

2016). In particular, such challenge is going to be greater for families that have lost their only child (Song, 2014).

On the other hand, the long history of strict birth limit has led to an uneven sex ratio that Chinese women are now substantially outnumbered by their male counterparts. In the one-child policy era, excessive cases of selective abortion, abandonment, and infanticide based on the baby sex occurred because of the son-preference of many Chinese parents who stick to traditional values (Greenhalgh, 2003; Zhu, Lu, & Hesketh, 2009; Li, Yi, & Zhang, 2011; Zhou et al., 2012). Consequently, the sex ratio at birth in China has stayed at around 120:100 for many years since 2005 with a peak of 123.59:100,<sup>7</sup> indicating that there are more than 120 boys to 100 girls at birth. Although the actual ratio should be somewhat lower than official statistics on paper due to a large number of unregistered girl babies (Shi & Kennedy, 2016),<sup>8</sup> the imbalance can still be striking and is going to complicate the marriage and childbirth of future generations. As a matter of fact, despite its decline to 116.23:100 in 2015, the figure was still far beyond the global average of 105. The sex ratio problem remains serious in Chinese society.

When family planning was introduced by Chinese government, it was intended to slow the rapid population growth so as to achieve a balance between population and natural resources for sustainable development and economic boost. The decrease of fertility has been realized under the influence of both socio-economic progress and strict birth control, but the distorted demographic structure as well as plenty of social problems have also emerged as unanticipated consequences of the long-term enforcement of one-child policy. Chinese top leaders now have to deal with new challenges such as population aging, skewed sex ratio, and families who lost their only child. Yet given the sustained low fertility, it can be expected that these challenges are going to plague Chinese society for a longer time. In this context, the central government started to take measures contrary to the previous strict control by loosening birth limitation with a conditional two-child policy. However, as the first attempt failed to achieve the expected outcomes regarding

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<sup>7</sup> See NBS. "Sex Ratio by Age (Sample Survey of Population)." *National Data*. Available HTTP: <<http://data.stats.gov.cn/easyquery.htm?cn=C01>> (accessed 6 June 2020).

<sup>8</sup> It is common that rural residents intentionally delay the birth registration of girls in order to save their birth quota for a boy. Thus, there are in fact more girls in Chinese society than the official data indicate.

significant birth increase, only two years later, central authority readjusted its strategy and further relaxed the family planning program by introducing universal two-child policy at the end of 2015, which formally marks the abolishment of one-child policy. The new population policy is attached with great hope from the state, aiming to mitigate, if not to reverse, the deterioration of demographic situation and the looming social instability behind that.

### ***3.3. The Introduction of Universal Two-Child Policy***

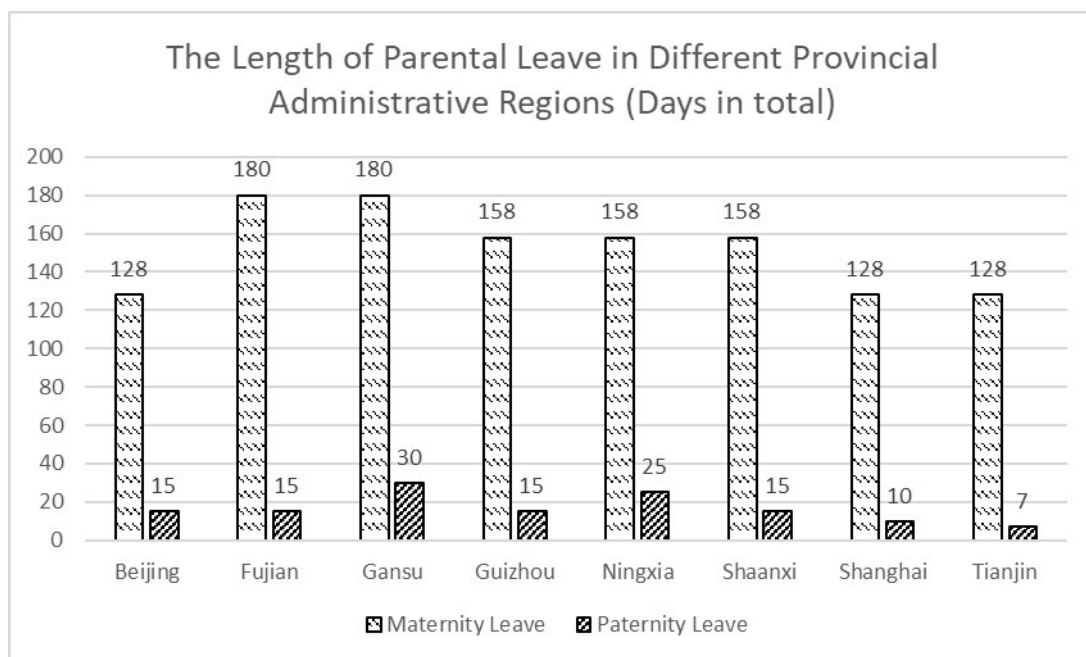
In October 2015, universal two-child policy was officially proposed at the 5th Plenary Session of the 18th CCP Central Committee, allowing all Chinese couples to have two children so as to “improve population development and tackle population aging”. This change of national population policy was later formalized by the amendment to the *Population and Family Planning Law* at the end of 2015, which subsequently came into effect on 1st January 2016. Notably, several major revisions are made to incentivize Chinese couples to have more birth. For instance, while rewards for late marriage and late childbirth have been completely removed, the state also canceled its subsidy for people who voluntarily choose to have only one child in the new policy era. Instead, a considerable extension of parental leave is incorporated into this legal document as a direct encouragement of more births.

In addition to the newly revised *Population and Family Planning Law*, the plan of building a “fertility-friendly society” is also initiated by the central government. As stated by the State Council (2016), the implementation of universal two-child policy is going to be supplemented by “a general optimization of public resources and improvement of maternity service”. It is stressed that the allocation of childcare and education institutions “should be in line with local fertility as well as population needs”. Especially, the expansion of preschool education and care service for infants under 3 years old have been set as the program’s backbone, with a strong reliance on non-governmental entities as the service provider. Meanwhile, the state also integrates the upgrade of maternity service into its fertility encouragement package, including the training of obstetricians and pediatricians, as well as the promotion of preconception checkup service. Compared with the relentless enforcement of birth control three decades ago, Chinese government has undoubtedly taken a big step to the redirection of its population policy.

It is yet necessary to note that the introduction of universal two-child policy does not imply family planning has come to its end in China, but more indicates that current Chinese couples have some other choices in terms of fertility (Feng & Wang, 2016; Alpermann & Zhan, 2019). In fact, “family planning as a basic state policy” is still prescribed in relevant laws and official documents, most importantly also in the constitution. Nevertheless, its principle has been reformulated in the new policy era to maintain a “moderate fertility” in the country for a “long-term and balanced population development” (CCP Central Committee & State Council, 2016). This shift in principle along with concrete policy changes reflect the determination of central government to support more fertility to deal with the growing population problems.

Following the amendment to *Population and Family Planning Law*, Chinese provinces have revised their corresponding regulations on population and family planning since early 2016. Paternity leave, which lasts from 7 up to 30 days depending on the region, is introduced to raise the responsibility of Chinese men to take care of family. In the meantime, all provincial governments have substantially extended maternity leave based on the national standard of 98 days. Similarly, the length of maternity leave can vary significantly between provinces from 128 to 180 days in total as demonstrated in *Figure 5*.

*Figure 5* The Length of Parental Leave in Different Provincial Administrative Regions



Source: Population and Family Planning Regulation (PFPR) of Beijing City; PFPR of Fujian

Province; PFPR of Gansu Province; PFPR of Guizhou Province; PFPR of Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region; PFPR of Shaanxi Province; PFPR of Shanghai City; PFPR of Tianjin City  
\* In Beijing, Maternity leave can be increased by one to three months with the consent from employer.

\*\* The maternity leave in Fujian lasts from 158 up to 180 days.

\*\*\* In Shaanxi, paternity leave is extended to 20 days if the couple live in different places. Maternity leave can be increased by 10 days, if the mother takes preconception checkup.

### ***3.4. Supplementary Policy Package***

As the implementation of universal two-child policy stuck in a bottleneck, an abundance of research has been dedicated to Chinese couple's low fertility desire and relevant improvement measures. In addition to loosening family planning and extending parental leaves, the central government also adopts some other measures and wraps them up in a policy package, aiming to encourage birth-giving and deal with population problems through the construction of fertility-friendly society. In particular, given that the number of annual births in China keeps decreasing and has become even lower than that of the late one-child policy era, the package has been enriched by more and more programs in recent years.

#### ***3.4.1. Construction of Maternity Facility***

The first supplementary policy in the package pertains to the massive construction of maternity facilities. In November 2016, the NHFPC along with other 9 central government departments and public institutions initiated the program of building baby-care rooms in large public places, including transport hubs, shopping malls, hospitals, and scenic areas (NHFPC et al., 2016). The program is expected to serve as the cornerstone of the fertility-friendly society by providing mothers with more convenience and secrecy for breastfeeding and diaper changing. Aside from relevant standards for the construction of nursing room, the central government also set ambitious goals in the published document that at the end of 2016, nursing rooms should be firstly available in all airports and train stations of provincial capitals, while covering least 50% of public places in all regions. The second step follows to improve the coverage of nursing room in public places to 80% by the end of 2018. Eventually, all public and workplaces are supposed to be equipped with nursing rooms until 2020. In the later introduced *National Population*

*Development Plan (2016-2030)*, the program of maternity facility construction is reaffirmed by the State Council as part of the optimization of public service resources (State Council, 2016).

#### *3.4.2. Tax Relief*

In June 2018, Chinese government introduced a major reform of its individual income tax (IIT) system by passing an amendment to its IIT Law (NPC, 2018), which later came into effect on 1st January 2019. Regarding the issue of fertility encouragement, the newly revised IIT system is upgraded with several “special additional deductions for specific expenditures” to support family raising, including children’s education expenses, housing mortgage interest, expense for supporting the elderly, and housing rent. Given that the cost of child education is deemed by Chinese couples as a crucial obstacle that prevents them from having another birth, the deduction for children’s education expenses serves as an explicit signal of the state’s determination to further increase fertility. The central government fixed the standard at 1,000 Chinese *yuan* for each child per month, regardless of the actual expense. Meanwhile, the deduction covers multiple education levels which range from preschool to doctoral study, and it is applicable no matter the child receives education at public or private institutes, in China or abroad. Since education costs can account for over 20% of a Chinese family’s annual household income (Sina.com, 2017a), the new IIT system may play an important role in supporting birth by partly lightening their financial burden. Nevertheless, it needs to be pointed out that expenses for infant care service, which could make up another big part of family expenditure, are not included in the list of deduction items.

#### *3.4.3. Expansion of Preschool Education*

As officially acknowledged (CCP Central Committee & State Council, 2018), the access to kindergarten could be difficult and expensive in Chinese society due to the small quantity of preschool education institutes, especially those inclusive ones. Although the student-teacher ratio of preschool education in China has reduced from 24.9:1 in 2012 to 19.8:1 in 2016, it is still much higher than the national standard of 15:1 (Ministry of Education, 2013; 2017), implying there is a considerable gap between the number of existing teachers and actual needs. Even worse, because there lacks specific policy

regulation and a well-designed personnel training system, scandals such as child maltreatment in kindergartens are not rare to witness (see for example, Sina.com, 2017b).

Given these deficits, the central government launched a new project at the end of 2018 to improve preschool education with an emphasis on the expansion of inclusive kindergartens, which are oriented to public benefits and expected to take up 80% of all preschool education facilities by 2020. For this purpose, the new project incorporates inclusive kindergartens into the plan of urban and rural public service at regional level. In the meantime, both public and private investments in kindergarten construction are welcomed. The financial support from government is pledged to be reinforced, whereas private-owned institutes are going to receive stronger official assistance in various forms such as service purchase, rent concession, and personnel training. Still, public institutes are assigned the major role in service provision, as they are planned to account for more than the half of all facilities.

Meanwhile, to deal with personnel shortage and the problem of their qualification, the same project also suggests the establishment of a training system based on college degree programs by 2020. To prevent child abuse incidents, the state plans to recruit more well-trained personnel with attractive income. Moreover, an institutionalized supervision system comprised of both parents and various government departments is also proposed in the project to strictly regulate the behaviors of teaching and nursing personnel. A milestone is reached when the draft of the preschool education law was completed by the Ministry of Education in 2019. However, the document released by the State Council more turns out to be a guideline with rough principles, yet without mentioning any concrete measure how the proposed goals should be achieved in practice, which is left to be observed at regional level.

#### *3.4.4. Childcare Service for 0-3 Years Old Infants*

The promotion of infant care service counts as the most important component in the policy package, as it has attracted the most policies from the central government. Though the number of annual births in China has been declining since 2016, there are still 14.65 million newborn babies in 2019 which need to be taken good care of, and more than 10 million mothers that want to return to work. However, the serious shortage of both public and private infant care institutes leaves the social demand for care service overall



unsatisfied. Such deficiency not only undermines the work-life balance of Chinese women, but also constrains China’s fertility increase in general.

*Table 1* Policies Regarding the Promotion of Infant Care Service

<b>Policy Document</b>	<b>Date of Issue</b>	<b>Issued By</b>
Action Plan for Promoting Public Services and Forming a Strong Domestic Market 加大力度推动社会领域公共服务补短板强弱项提质量 促进形成强大国内市场的行动方案	January. 2019	NDRC et al.
Guiding Opinions of the State Council General Office on Promoting Care Services for Children under 3 Years Old 国务院办公厅关于促进 3 岁以下婴幼儿照护服务发展的指导意见	May. 2019	State Council
Announcement on Preferential Tax Policies for Community and Family Services Such as Elderly Care, Childcare, and Housekeeping 关于养老、托育、家政等社区家庭服务业税费优惠政策的公告	June. 2019	MoF
Trial Plan for the Special Action to Support Social Sectors to Develop Inclusive Infant Care Services 支持社会力量发展普惠托育服务专项行动实施方案（试行）	October. 2019	NDRC and NHC

Source: Author’s compilation.

In January 2019, the NDRC along with other 17 official branches put forward the first official plan to offset the deficit in care service regarding children under 3 years old (NDRC et al., 2019). As infant care is defined as a non-essential public service in the plan, a great emphasis is attached to the investment from private sectors to enhance service provision. Besides, the state made it clear to set relevant standards by introducing new regulations, so that the development of institutes and their service can be better regulated. In particular, policy experimentation is also proposed in the first document that several model childcare institutes will be established to encourage and guide the expansion at the early stage.

A more detailed guiding policy was later released by the State Council in May 2019, providing a preliminary plan for the development of infant care service until 2025

(State Council, 2019). However, the service provision fundamentally follows a neoliberal model, as families are assigned the main responsibility to take care of their babies, while service from third-parties is primarily oriented to offering parenting guidance and supporting “couples who are in dire need”. In this process, the new parental leave system is referred to as the main state help to backup families during childcare.

Similar to the promotion of preschool education, the state also emphasizes inclusive institutes in childcare service provision. But in stark contrast to the plan of kindergarten expansion, where public institutes are supposed to constitute the main body, market and non-public capitals are more relied on in the expansion of infant care institutes, and such pattern is rather similar compared with the eldercare development (Alpermann & Zhan, 2019). An active involvement of various entities, such as communities, employers, and existing kindergartens, is advocated to deliver differentiated infant care for parents ranging from full day to hour service. To encourage their participation, sponsorship from government is promised in the form of prioritized construction, and low-rent or even rent-free venues. Again, the improvement of personnel training system is underlined by the state to supply childcare service with sufficient and qualified workforces.

Although a supervision system is also mentioned in the State Council’s plan, it remains largely vague except for addressing local government’s responsibility in this process. Nevertheless, the central government has made effort in labor division by assigning tasks and responsibilities among 17 involved government departments and public institutions in the promotion of childcare service. For example, the registration of non-profitable care institutes is put under the charge of Civil Affairs branch, whereas Administration for Market Regulation is responsible for profitable ones. At last, the role of Health branch is going to put the registration on record before the institute formally opens to the public.

The third supplementary project to encourage more births is launched by the Ministry of Finance in June 2019 that a preferential tax policy is introduced to specifically support the development of childcare and catering services in communities. Accordingly, a tax reduction will be applied for care institutes regarding their land and construction. Meanwhile, their service income will be completely exempt from value-added tax, and the income tax will be levied only at 90%.

Four months later, the NDRC and NHC jointly launched a program to enlarge inclusion-oriented care service in the society. The state explicitly calls for the establishment of two types of infant care institutes, namely “flagship” institutes on the one hand, which offers not only care service and parenting advice, but also instructions on personnel training and management for other institutes, and on the other hand, community institutes which provide various kinds of care services for local residents (NDRC & NHC, 2019). Both public and private enterprises are expected to take part in the program. But since their participation is defined as voluntary, the state deliberately introduced a financial aid to incentivize and subsidize their investment with a standard of 10,000 *yuan* for each enrolled kid.

Meanwhile, the program also entails a long list of mandatory and optional duties as modules for a better quality control of service provision, covering land-use planning, personnel training and recruitment, hygiene and fire protection, pricing etc.. Before applying for state support, participating enterprise must firstly reach a bilateral agreement with local government on the selection of desired modules and then pledge to fulfill all relevant requirements, which is going to be anchored in a commitment contract between the two parts. For example, since this program aims to boost the development of inclusive institutions, the pricing of childcare service is unequivocally set as a mandatory part in the contract that local governments are required to adjust service price to local economic conditions through either public bidding or negotiation. In comparison, it is only optional for local officials to provide care institute with rent-free venue. Similarly, one of care institution’s mandatory duties is to ensure infant’s physical and food security, while lectures about nutrition and parenting knowledge is defined as an optional service. Extra optional duties in a contract will bring the candidate enterprise a larger chance to receive state subsidy. Once the application is approved by the NDRC, the funding from central government will be provided to local care institution.

The program, though still at its trial phase, can be seen as another big step forward taken by the central government, as it goes beyond hazy guidelines and has specified more concrete means such as financial support and commitment contract to incentivize and regulate the development of local childcare service. However, as also stipulated in the program document, local officials are assigned the task to work out detailed favorable policies regarding the building land, personnel, tax, and administrative supervision of

infant care institutes. Since the program is based on voluntary participation, it is likely only a limited number of cities with both larger eagerness and resources are going to heed the call from center.

### **3.5. Summary**

To resolve the population problems emerged after decades of family planning, Chinese government introduced universal two-child policy to encourage more childbirths, which is primarily featured by the relaxation of birth limit and an essential extension of parental leaves. Yet it is determined by China's socio-economic progress that the country's fertility is unlikely to experience any significant improvement in the near future. As a matter of fact, the number of annual births in China has been declining since 2017, and it soon dropped below the level prior to the new policy's enactment. Eventually, universal two-child policy came to its end on 31<sup>st</sup> May 2021, when the CCP Central Committee formally acknowledged its limited effect on fertility boost and initiated three-child policy as replacement.

An abundance of research has pointed out that factors, such as the lack of public resources and family's economic condition, have severely disrupted women's work-life balance and therefore constraint Chinese family's fertility desire. Given that, it is proposed to further upgrade preschool education and childcare institutes both in quality and quantity in Chinese society. Meanwhile, more convenient maternity service, stronger protection for women, and a tax reduction for two-child families are also frequently mentioned. In cases, even the complete removal of birth limit has been suggested and echoed by regional authority, directly challenging the legitimacy of historical family planning programs.

Despite the absence of a straightforward monetary bonus for second births, some of the suggested countermeasures have been adopted by Chinese government to improve the birth-encouraging effect of universal two-child policy that the central authority has introduced series of supplementary policies, revolving around the project of constructing a fertility-friendly society. A tax relief is introduced to financially support Chinese families. Besides, the massive construction of baby-care rooms, kindergartens, as well as childcare facilities also aim to alleviate Chinese couple's serious concerns about having another child. However, since policies initiated by the central authority largely remain as

rough guidelines, their implementation deserves an observation at local level, and it could take a long time to prove if these programs from the supplementary policy package really have a significant effect on boosting China's fertility.

Paradoxically, although Chinese government has recognized the seriousness of the country's population problem and set its determination to boost fertility, there is still certain birth-restricting policy well preserved in the new era, albeit the restriction conspicuously contradicts with the country's current demographics and therefore ought to be completely abrogated. For example, in stark contrast to the newly introduced birth-supporting programs, "social supporting fees", which was designed as a financial punishment for parents who broke family planning rules by having "birth out of quota" in the one-child policy era, was not phased out along with the enactment of universal two-child policy but persisted throughout the new population policy era. The state kept levying "social supporting fees" from those who give birth to a third child, and in some provinces, for instance Anhui, even birth without wedlock was also categorized as illegal according to the regional family planning regulation. Unsurprisingly, such institutional arrangement has generated huge controversies as well as massive social critics (see for example, Netease.com, 2019).

#### **4. Policy Enforcement at the Local Level**

##### ***4.1. Introduction of Research Sites***

After the review of China's family planning history and the newly introduced universal two-child policy at the national level, this section turns to a micro-observation of how the new population policy is implemented at local level, and it explores the similarities and differences between regions with a comparative case-study approach. Rounds of semi-structured interviews are performed to collect first-hand data about the local implementation of universal two-child policy in recent years, covering issues such as the basic demographic change, the localization of programs launched by the central government, and concrete challenges perceived by local officials during their daily work in each region. The fieldwork of this research is conducted in three Chinese cities from different provinces, namely Xi'an, Guiyang, and Xiamen.

#### *4.1.1. Case Selection*

Chinese local governments are granted substantial discretion to adapt national policies in their own administrative regions (see for example, Teets & Hurst, 2014; Yu, 2019). Policy principles introduced by the central government can first diverge at the provincial level, where more specific rules that match local conditions will be worked out, either to be carried out in the whole province, or to be refined by governments of lower tiers. With regard to China's population policy, provincial governments enjoy considerable leeway to decide their own clauses based on the central government's plan, mostly embodied in their own "population and family planning regulation" as well as the related supplementary policies. Given this, research sites from different provinces are chosen to make cases more comparable.

Secondly, limited access to data and informants is another factor that must be taken into consideration during case selection. Scholarships have already discussed the challenges of non-Chinese researchers conducting field research in China, covering topics such as the selection of research sites, interviewees, and data acquisition etc. (see Solinger, 2006; Alpermann, 2012). However, it must be acknowledged that even researchers of Chinese nationals have to cope with such problems as well, especially when their research project is not initiated or authorized by the government but involves a lot of interactions with officials. This study ultimately chooses Xi'an, Guiyang, and Xiamen as research sites first because of the issue of data accessibility. All these three cities annually publish their demographic statistics in the form of detailed yearbook rather than in a brief bulletin, so the acquired data are overall more concrete and transparent. In the meantime, it has to be noted that these statistics all follow the same standards, for example, the birth rate is calculated based on the number of permanent residents rather than the household registration. This makes the following comparison applicable and meaningful. Furthermore, as another distinctive advantage, these three cities possess richer education resource in each province, which is conducive to researcher's establishment of reliable connections with interviewees, since local universities or research institutes usually maintain a long-term cooperative relationship with local government. As a matter of fact, the meeting with scholars from local university not only provided the researcher with necessary background information and valuable advice for general field study, but also paved the way for several interviews, as the researcher was personally introduced to local

authority.

Albeit the fieldwork of this research primarily focuses on the policy implementation at city level, it must be mentioned that officials from district agency, which is the subordinate of city level government, also constitute an important information source in the fieldwork. Compared with their colleagues from city level government, officials that work for district agency are closer to the grassroots, therefore might have a more realistic picture how the new population policy is carried out in the region. For this reason, it is also constructive to have several district agents as informant. However, in stark contrast to the comprehensive yearbook data released by city level government, statistics of districts usually remain unavailable. In addition, both the researcher's first-round fieldwork in each city and local scholar's experiences indicate that there is little difference in policies between district and city level governments. Given these two factors, officials from district government only serve as a supplementary source of information in this research, while the city level agency remains to be the focus of the fieldwork. Through this, it can be ensured that the data obtained from interviews would reflect the overall implementation of universal two-child policy in these three cities without merely narrowing it to a subordinate region.

The selected three cities are largely comparable, because they are assigned with similar political importance by the central government. Xi'an and Xiamen are categorized by the State Council as two of the fifteen sub-provincial cities in the whole country, which enjoy a higher administrative ranking than other prefectural cities. Guiyang, though only defined as a prefectural city, is the provincial capital of Guizhou and in the meantime its political, economic, as well as education center. By virtue of their special status in China's administrative system, the three cities have a relatively larger number of populations than other cities in province, so it is easier to observe the effects of birth policies due to the population size. Moreover, a vanguard role is also attached to these cities given their special administrative status that they are supposed to function as political models regarding policymaking and implementation for other governments in each province, implying it is more likely to witness policy innovation related to universal two-child policy and the supplementary programs in these cities.

Apart from the similarities mentioned above, however, significant differences can be found in the fertility level of these cities in the new policy era. Firstly, because of its

unique regional culture, for example the strong sense of blood kinship and familism (Ma, 2012; Chen, 2014), Xiamen has maintained a much higher birth rate than the other two cities in recent decade. Hence, the policy implementation in Xiamen can represent the action logic of local governments from areas with a higher fertility level in China. Secondly, albeit the birth rates of Xi'an and Guiyang seem to be relatively close since 2014, universal two-child policy has affected their residents to quite different degrees. The new policy could have incentivized less couples in Guiyang than in Xi'an, for Guiyang has a much higher proportion of ethnic minority residents,<sup>9</sup> who used to be less strictly constrained by the previous one-child policy therefore are only slightly impacted by the loosening of birth limit. Particularly, given that the current birth rate of Guiyang is partly contributed by ethnic minority people, who have a higher fertility, it is conceivable that the birth rate of universal two-child policy's main addressees can only be lower than the city's average figure.<sup>10</sup> Hence, among the selected three research sites, Xi'an and Guiyang can provide a comparison as regions with medium and low fertility at the early stage of policy implementation. Consequently, because of their varied demographic backgrounds, it can be presumed that these cities might adopt different strategies during the localization of national plans to further encourage births.

*Table 2* Demographic Statistics of Xi'an, Guiyang, and Xiamen

	Xi'an	Guiyang	Xiamen
Permanent Resident (10,000 Persons)			
2010	847	432	356

<sup>9</sup> For example, the proportion of ethnic minority in Xi'an was 1.13% in 2010, whereas that of Guiyang turned out to be 16.68%. Available HTTP: <[http://www.xa.gov.cn/ptl/def/def/index\\_1121\\_6774\\_ci\\_trid\\_1227416.html](http://www.xa.gov.cn/ptl/def/def/index_1121_6774_ci_trid_1227416.html)>; <<http://tjj.gygov.gov.cn/c8024/20110526/i128467.html>> (accessed 4 March 2020).

<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately, the recent demographic data of ethnic minorities in Guiyang City are not publicly available. But the high fertility of the group can be roughly reflected in the provincial data. Compared with the data of the sixth nation census, the Han permanent residents in Guizhou Province increased from 22,198,485 in 2010 to 24,511,882 in 2020, with their proportion in the total population shrank from 63.89% to 63.56%. In contrast, the population of ethnic minorities increased from 12,547,983 to 14,050,266 in the same period, and the proportion rose from 36.11% to 36.44%.



~	~	~	~
2013	936	500	418
2014	960	520	441
2015	988	533	454
2016	1030	555	465
2017	1134	575	478
2018	1191	583	496
2019	1235	595	512
2020	1296	599	518
<hr/>			
Birth Rate (‰)			
2013	9.57	10.69	11.9
2014	10.11	10.47	13.8
2015	10.15	10.21	14.0
2016	11.54	11.05	15.1
2017	12.62	11.76	16.6
2018	12.47	13.07	14.5
2019	12.32	13.44	14.3
2020	——	——	——

Source: Xi'an Municipal Bureau of Statistics 2022, Guiyang Municipal Bureau of Statistics 2022, Xiamen Municipal Bureau of Statistics 2022

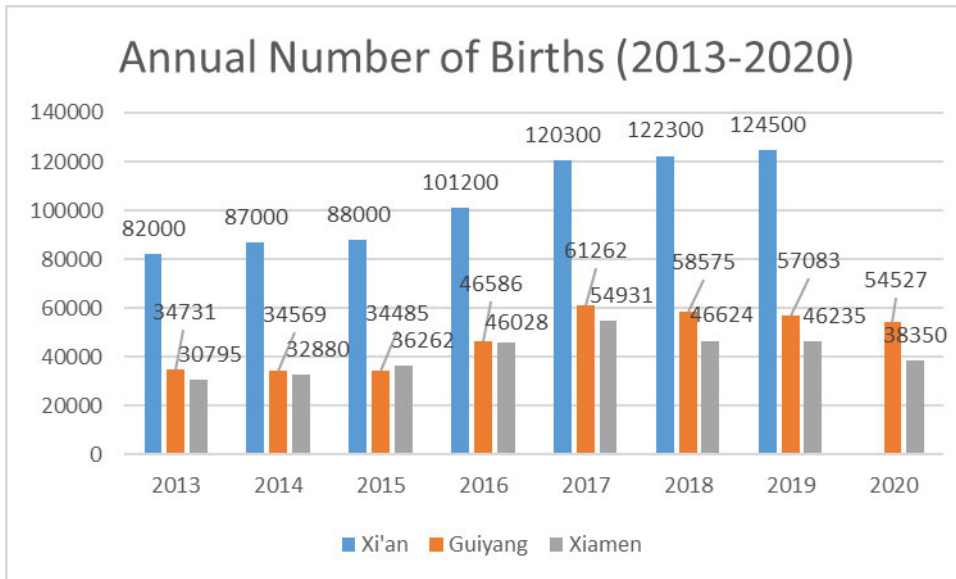
It is indispensable to note that total fertility rate, which indicates the average births a woman would have throughout her childbearing years, is more frequently applied in demographic studies to measure fertility, as it can better reflect the fertility level and trend of certain region (Bongaarts & Feeney, 1998). However, this research is not oriented toward rigorous population projection, but more aims at an examination and discussion of local policy implementation based on the differentiation of fertility level in cities. Since the TFR of all Chinese cities is neither directly available, nor calculable given published data, birth rate becomes an adequate alternative indicator for the differentiation work. Meanwhile, admittedly, the output of birth policy is not exclusively determined by the regional fertility level alone. Instead, for example, the capacity of each local government can also influence its political decision-making and implementation. Needless to say that fertility level itself is a dependent variable which is shaped by various factors such as socio-economic condition, individual education experience, and fertility desire etc.. Unequivocally, it is optimal to choose a larger quantity of research sites that vary with all these factors as independent variables. But such plan goes far beyond the capacity of a

small sample research due to time and resource limitations, so it has to be abandoned unfortunately. For these reasons, this research draws upon birth rates to depict comparable research sites. Moreover, first-round interviews also prove that the population policy output in all places looks highly similar despite their distinguished backgrounds. From the perspective of postdiction, the selection of fieldwork sites in this research can also be argued to be appropriate.

#### *4.1.2. General Information of Selected Cities*

Following the amendment to the *Population and Family Planning Law* at national level, Chinese provinces revised their population and family planning regulations in 2016 as the first step to localize universal two-child policy. On the one hand, these regulations by and large diverge between provinces as in the past. The biggest difference can be found in their birth-encouraging measures, or more precisely the length of maternity leave. All provincial governments now provide an extended leave for women after birth based on the national standard of 98 days, yet the extra amount is autonomously determined by each province and can range from 30 days to three months in practice. On the other hand, once becoming effective, provincial regulation becomes the constitutional document of their regional population policy, and only some minor differences might emerge during its implementation at lower levels, usually in terms of the reward and support for couples that abide by family planning program. Most stipulations, for example the parental leave, are equally adopted and carried out by all subordinate governments in the province.

*Figure 6 Annual Number of Births in Xi'an, Guiyang, and Xiamen (2013-2018)*



Source: Xi'an Municipal Bureau of Statistics 2022, Guiyang Municipal Bureau of Statistics 2022, Xiamen Municipal Bureau of Statistics 2022

\*Data of Xi'an 2020 are unavailable

### *Xi'an.*

Xi'an is the capital city of Shaanxi Province and located in China's geographic center. While being a sub-provincial city as well as the political and economic center of Shaanxi, Xi'an is also defined by the State Council as one of the six regional central cities of the whole country,<sup>11</sup> exerting enormous influence on the entire northwestern China. Prior to the introduction of universal two-child policy, the number of permanent residents of Xi'an reached 7.83 million in 2010 and further increased to 8.71 million in 2015. A slow growth can be witnessed in the birth rate between 2013 and 2015 which rose from 9.57‰ to 10.15‰ in three years.

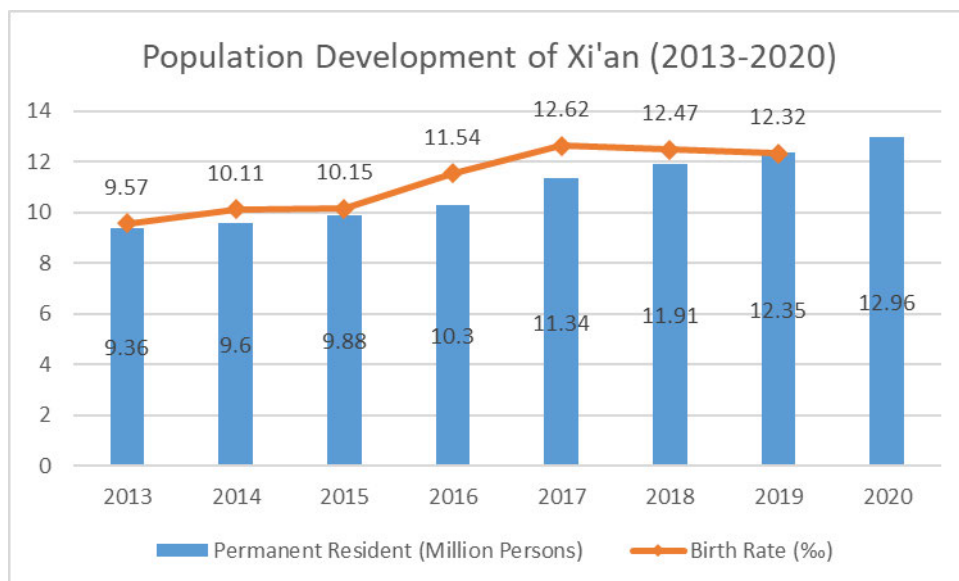
On the 26th of May 2016, the revised Population and Family Planning Regulation of Shaanxi Province officially came into effect in the era of universal two-child policy. Despite the unchanged principle of insisting on family planning, the new regulation explicitly articulates the encouragement of two births per couple and provides an improved parental leave system as incentive measure. More specifically, maternity leave

<sup>11</sup> Later upgraded to one of the nine "national central cities" in 2018. Available HTTP: <[https://www.ndrc.gov.cn/xxgk/zcfb/ghwb/201802/t20180207\\_962246.html](https://www.ndrc.gov.cn/xxgk/zcfb/ghwb/201802/t20180207_962246.html)> (accessed 11 March 2020).

is extended to 158 days on top of the national standard, and could be further enriched by extra 10 days, in case the woman takes prenatal test. Besides, paternal leave is introduced for the first time in history that allows husbands to have 15 or conditionally 20 days off to take care of their families. The new regulation also retains the bonus for couples which have followed family planning policy in the past. The standard of monetary rewards is slightly increased, and the support for “families with special difficulty”, which suffer either the loss or disability of their only child, was also included.

In the first three years since the introduction of universal two-child policy, the demographic development of Xi’an appeared to be impressive. Compared with 2015, the number of permanent residents increased by around 420,000 in 2016. In addition, while the number of annual births merely grew from 82,000 to 88,000 between 2013 and 2015, the figure boosted to 101,200 in the first year of the universal two-child policy era with an escalated birth rate of 11.54‰, which used to remain at around 10‰. An even greater boost of births followed in 2017 that the figure eventually rose to 120,300. Given the change of these indicators, it can be argued that the two-child policy has achieved some positive outcomes at its early stage. However, in spite of the growing trend, the increase of annual births started to slow down since 2017. Subsequently, Xi’an had 122,300 new births in 2018, but that is only 2,000 more than last year. The birth rate also dropped from 12.62‰ to 12.47‰ accordingly.

Figure 7 Population Development of Xi’an (2013-2020)



Source: Xi’an Municipal Bureau of Statistics 2022

\* The Birth rate of 2020 is not published

### *Guiyang.*

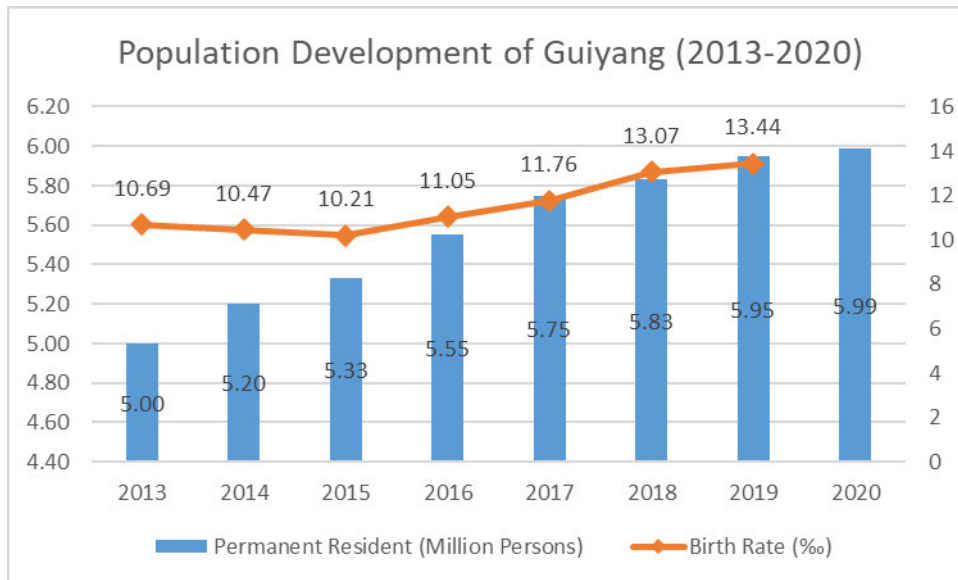
As the provincial capital of Guizhou, Guiyang City is located in southwestern China and more densely populated by ethnic minorities than Xi'an and Xiamen. According to the national census in 2010, ethnic minority takes up 16.68% of the whole Guiyang population, but only accounts for 1.13% and 2.34% in Xi'an and Xiamen respectively. This point is particularly noteworthy because higher proportion of ethnic minority in population means there were less residents constrained by the previous strict family planning program, hence the "birth liberation" effect in Guiyang brought by universal two-child policy is likely to be weaker than in the other two cities. In the last 3 years prior to the abrogation of one-child policy, Guiyang experienced a similarly slow population growth as Xi'an did that its permanent residents increased by 330,000 to 5,330,000 by the end of 2015. However, its birth rate kept declining in this period that the figure dropped by 0.48% in two years.

Guizhou Province introduced its revised population and family planning regulation on the 31<sup>st</sup> of March 2016. Like its equivalent in other provinces, Guizhou's new regulation is more oriented towards birth encouragement rather than control as it used to be. A 158-day maternity leave, which is 60 days more than the national standard, is provided for women after birth, while men are granted with a paternity leave of 15 days as well. The rewards for couples followed family planning policy in the past have also been reaffirmed and maintained. However, the support for families with special difficulties are not mentioned, contrasting to the regulations of Shaanxi and Fujian.

One year after the implementation of universal two-child policy, the permanent residents of Guiyang increased by 220,000, exceeding the growth of any previous year. The declining tendency of annual births as well as birth rate since 2013 was also changed that the number of new births boosted drastically from 34,485 to 46,586 in 2016, while the birth rate also rose from 10.21% to 11.05%. Similar to Xi'an, Guiyang's annual births kept growing in 2017, and the figure surpassed that of 2016. However, the difference between the two cases is that the overall demographic development of Guiyang shows a steady growth trend, as its continuously rising birth rate and permanent residents depict. These facts all indicate that the new population policy has somewhat incentivized the birth growth in Guiyang, though the increased quantity is less impressive due to a smaller

population compared with Xi'an. Nonetheless, in 2018 the annual births slightly declined for the first time since the introduction of universal two-child policy, signaling that the end of the baby boom induced by the new population policy.<sup>12</sup>

Figure 8 Population Development of Guiyang (2013-2020)



Source: Guiyang Municipal Bureau of Statistics 2022

\* The Birth rate of 2020 is not published

### *Xiamen.*

Xiamen is a coastal city in southeastern China, and one of the national special economic zones. Albeit Xiamen is not the capital of Fujian Province, it is actually the provincial education center, since most of colleges in the province are located in this city. In addition, similar to Xi'an, Xiamen also enjoys the special political status as a sub-provincial city that its finance is linked to the central government, in contrast to other prefectural cities which are fundamentally bonded to province. Thus, Xiamen has a higher ranking in China's administrative tiers. In comparison with Xi'an and Guiyang, Xiamen has a smaller population. However, its birth rate is significantly higher and also growing faster. After the conditional two-child policy came into effect in early 2014, Xiamen experienced

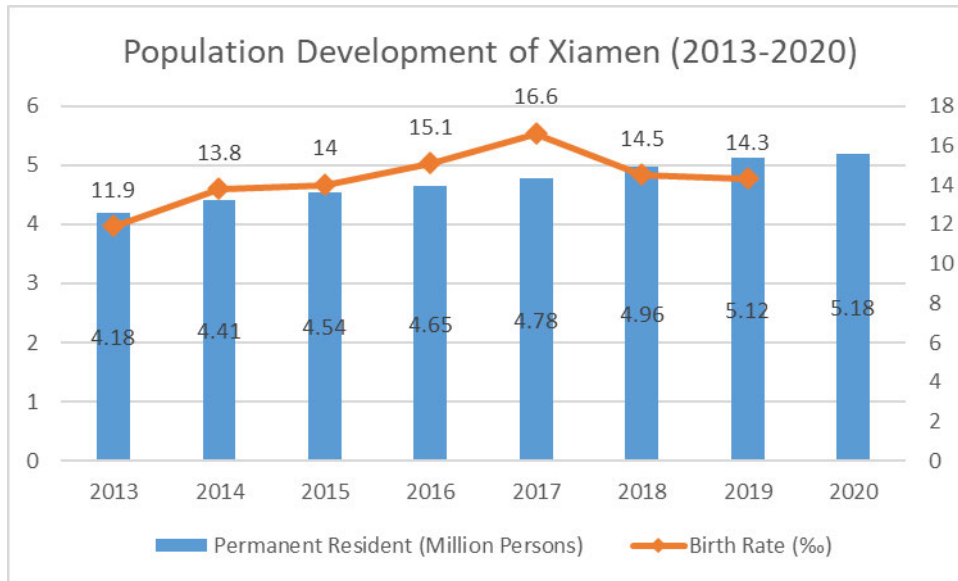
<sup>12</sup> However, it is controversial why the number of births decreased in 2018 despite both the permanent residents and birth rate of the city kept growing. Given the unusual inflation of birth rate in 2018, the possible explanation is that the birth rate of that year is incorrect.

a remarkable birth increase that the number of permanent residents rose from 3.73 million to 3.81 million, whereas the birth rate escalated from 11.9‰ to 13.8‰. Until the abolishment of one-child policy, the population of Xiamen and its annual births have generally maintained an increasing tendency.

Fujian's new regulation of population and family planning is one of the most promptly introduced provincial policy in the whole China, as it becomes effective on the 19th February 2016. With regard to birth encouragement, Fujian also offers a 15-day paternity leave like most of other provinces. But its maternity leave is more highlighting as it lasts between 158 to 180 days in total, outperforming that of both Shaanxi and Guizhou. The reward for the old family planning program is also readdressed in the new regulation of Fujian, and the support for families with special difficulties is particularly ascertained as well.

Since the introduction of universal two-child policy, Xiamen has had an essential population increase and rise of birth rate in in the first two years. While the birth rate grew by 1.1‰ in 2016, the number of births boosted drastically to 46,028, contributing to a steady increase of permanent residents from 4.54 million to 4.65 million. It can be seen that despite its smaller population compared with Xi'an and Guiyang, the high birth rate of Xiamen has significantly driven the growth of local births and the total population. Such rising birth rate even went higher and reached 16.6‰ in 2017, but only one year after, the number of births as well as the birth rate of Xiamen dropped significantly. It appears to be conspicuous that the new policy's incentivizing effect for more births is also fading away in Xiamen.

*Figure 9* Population Development of Xiamen (2013-2020)



Source: Xiamen Municipal Bureau of Statistics 2022

\* The Birth rate of 2020 is not published

The selected three cities as research sites share a lot of similarities which make them largely comparable. Firstly, these three cities can be differentiated from other prefectural cities as they are assigned with a special status in China’s administrative system, which in turn endows them with a pioneering role in formulating and implementing the new population policy. Secondly, the provincial population and family planning regulations followed by these cities all explicitly articulate the appeal for two births per couple. Similar measures such as the prolonged parental leave are concurrently adopted at the provincial level to encourage more births. Thirdly, as their demographic statistics demonstrate, these three cities have experienced a drastic rise of birth rate and annual births in the first two years since the introduction of universal two-child policy, implying a positive incentive for birth increase brought by the new population policy at its initiative stage. However, such boost decelerated only after two years that the number of births as well as birth rate of some cities even started to decline since 2018. This reversal of policy outcome also conforms with the academic discussion of “cold response” at the national level.

Apart from the above-mentioned similarities, the selected three cities have some noticeable differences in specific demographic statistics, such as the number of permanent residents and birth rates. Xi’an has considerably more annual births than the other two cities by virtue of its larger population. In comparison, the birth rate of Xiamen is



substantially higher due to its unique regional culture.<sup>13</sup> This also explains why the annual births of Xiamen surpasses that of Guiyang, albeit the latter has a slightly bigger population. At last, the higher proportion of ethnic minority in its population has resulted in a relatively limited influence of universal two-child policy in Guiyang, which is proved by the modest population increase of the city in the first two years of the new policy. Given this context, it is reasonable to presume that the three cities might introduce different supplementary policies based on local conditions to further encourage births in following years.

#### ***4.2. Policy Enforcement in Selected Cities***

As the case of parental leave system demonstrates, policy from Chinese central government is supposed to be carried out through regional governments' improvement of national standard. Regarding the task of birth encouragement in the universal two-child policy era, more attractive but diverged policies in accordance with local conditions are expected from the governments of selected research sites.

However, fieldwork experience from this research unveils that the implementation of new population policy in local China is substantially similar despite each city's unique demographic background. Officials working for local family planning agency are largely adherent to the existing policy framework set by central government, remaining unmotivated to introduce other methods. Meanwhile, it is also staggering that fertility boost is not their major task in most places, as they are currently swamped by daily works dealing with "families with special difficulties due to birth planning" (*Jihua Shengyu Teshu Kunan Jiating* 计划生育特殊困难家庭), particularly those who lost their single child (*Shidu Jiating* 失独家庭, literally for "families lost only child"). The only three remarkable divergences during their implementation are the differed effective time of regional policy, relevant standards, and officials' attitude toward people of the *shidu* family.

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<sup>13</sup> Notably, Xiamen also has a larger share of young people than Guiyang, which could contribute to its higher birth rate. As the data of the 7th national census indicate, the proportion of people between 14 and 59 in Xiamen turns out to be 73.28% in 2020. In contrast, only 68.14% of the permanent residents in Guiyang belong to the same age cohort.

#### 4.2.1. Policy Evaluation and Anticipation from Local Agents

First of all, officials from local family planning agency tend to hold an overall positive evaluation of the current universal two-child policy. When asked about the experienced problem or challenge during their policy implementation at the interview start, informants unequivocally responded with an immediate but negative answer, although their following narratives often disclose facts which contradict with such denial at the beginning, such as the low fertility desire of younger cohorts and the pressure from *shidu* families. Besides, how they interpretate the shrinking number of first births in recent years can also reflect their positive view of the new policy. Since 2017, firstborns in China have been outnumbered by secondborns, implying that albeit a considerable number of people remain motivated to have their second child, it becomes more and more popular among younger generations not to have a baby at all. Instead of treating the declined number of firstborns as a bottleneck of the “pronatalist” universal two-child policy, which failed to incentivize couples from younger cohorts, local officials prefer to underline that the new policy could still generate a large quantity of second births annually, therefore being overall effective. Their subconscious and favorable opinion of the national policy is crystal clear. It is conceivable that a high degree of political sensitivity is hiding behind their answers, so local agents are aware of the preservation of policy legitimacy and the authority of Chinese government in a broader sense.

But in the meantime, local official’s positive evaluation of universal two-child policy is accompanied by a genuine regret for its delayed introduction. As stated by informants, the addressees of universal two-child policy are mainly urban couples who work at government sector or public institution, and the most motivated group of people in particular belong to the cohort between 1978 and 1983. Given this, officials from all selected cities agree that the new population policy should have been introduced earlier, for instance by about 2012. If so, considerably more women who are born in the 1970s could also grasp their last chance to have another child. Unfortunately, at the time when universal two-child policy eventually came into effect, most women of this cohort have already past their childbearing age, despite they generally have a higher fertility desire compared with those from 1980s and 1990s.

Secondly, while expressing their firm support for the new population policy, informants from the three cities also share the same anticipation of its future development.

Even from the perspective of these family planning agents, it now becomes necessary for the country to thoroughly lift birth control and invest more in fertility encouragement to tackle the serious challenge of population aging. More specifically, local officials suggest that the next stage of national population policy should jump over a third-child policy but directly grant Chinese couples the right to free birth. However, the huge constraining impact from socioeconomic development, the high pressure in life and career, and lack of childcare service is well acknowledged to have prevented contemporary Chinese couples from having more children. Thus, all interviewees still hold a moderate expectation about the next phase of China's population policy by arguing it will not be changed until 2025, and even despite its further relaxation in the near future, only a "stable population development" rather than "blowout growth" will be witnessed given the current low fertility desire prevailing among young couples.<sup>14</sup> Disappointed very much by China's current demographic situation, local agents finally converge on a reasonably critical view of the previous one-child policy, contending such a strict family planning program should never happen again, as it is perceived as overly harsh and cultivated the current fertility concept among young couples:

"(We) shall not plan births as in the past. The previous family planning program was ... was overhasty. Of course, our country has developed so fast because of it. But if the birth limit was set to two children per family, there could have been less problems such as population aging and others." (Interview A1, 10/2018)

"Actually, some of policies in our country are just oversimplified, a little bit extreme ... I believe it is a bad thing, not a good thing, to downsize the population too much ... Population is the most important resource, right?" (Interview B1, 11/2019)

Nevertheless, it needs to be mentioned that certain optimism about the country's future demographic development remains among informants under the influence of traditional fertility concepts persisting in Chinese society. As stated by an official from Xi'an:

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<sup>14</sup> Interview A1, 10/2018; Interview B1, 02/2019.

“(by virtue of the traditional fertility concept) voluntarily childless families will never increase to a remarkable scale in the following one or two decades. Our population will keep on growing slowly anyway.” (Interview A1, 10/2018)

Regarding the development of local demographics, interviewees’ view turns out to be even more confident, since the selected three cities all enjoy a special status in China’s administration system as regional political or economic center, enabling them to continuously attract domestic immigrants. For the same reason, birth encouragement could be relatively downplayed in the combat against various population problems in these cities.

“(if the birth rate keeps shrinking) there will be population aging, but not likely in Xiamen, not really. In case of Xiamen, there are abundant immigrants from other regions, immigrants of the young people. So, it is not that likely we are going to have the population aging problem.” (Interview C1, 09/2019)

Similar statements are also offered by agents from Xi’an and Guiyang that they particularly referred to recent regional immigration programs and believe the future of local demographics can largely rely on these programs and the newly absorbed residents.<sup>15</sup>

In brief, the new population policy and its implementation are overall positively viewed by Chinese local officials. Their straightforward denial of any perceived problem as well as the optimistic estimation of future population development at both national and regional level can demonstrate their strict adherence to the central authority. Thus, despite some disapproving arguments toward the rigidity of one-child policy and its delayed

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<sup>15</sup> Xi’an, for example, has launched an ambitious project in 2017 to attract immigrants to the city by simplifying the administrative processing of household registration for people with education degrees. Eventually, local government has announced an increase of 645,000 newly registered residents of the city within one year (see [http://www.xinhuanet.com/2018-05/24/c\\_1122878313.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/2018-05/24/c_1122878313.htm) in Chinese). Similarly, as Guiyang is defined as China’s hub of big data industry, local government is expecting such policy focus is going to absorb more talents into their city. For these reasons, all informants of this research are convinced their local demographics will not look frustrating in the future.

abolishment, which, from their perspective, have resulted in series of population and social problems in contemporary Chinese society, local family planning agents tend to stick to the official rhetoric by attributing China's economic boost to the previous birth planning program and preserve its legitimacy in history. Even so, it is pointed out that the urgency to encourage fertility persists, and the country's population policy needs to be further loosened.

#### *4.2.2. Routineers at Local Level*

The general similarity of policy enforcement at local level firstly lies in the fact that regional family planning agencies have “faithfully” followed all national policies. This means, on the one hand, each program launched by central government is well refined to a regional version, which often offers no worse standards than national ones. Yet on the other hand, policy innovation can be scarcely found at city level that officials usually are not motivated to take a further step by adopting measures which are not initiated by the central government, for example to boost fertility with monetary subsidy for newborns. Instead, they merely focus on parental leave system as well as programs which belong to the supplementary policy package.

It should be principally acknowledged that local agents have paid careful attention to all initiatives from the central government. When asked about the applied strategies to boost fertility, most officials from research sites responded with a long narration about the localization of national policies, such as the prolongation of maternal leave, construction of maternity facility in public areas, and programs of promoting infant care services in their region. All programs introduced by central government were mentioned without a blind angle.

However, once the question extends to new policies designed by local government themselves, the answer from officials becomes unequivocally negative. None of the selected cities is working on a self-initiated project to encourage fertility at the time of field research. On the contrary, officials, especially those work for district level agencies, are quite satisfied with the current policy package, and believe it is beyond their responsibility to take further steps proactively. Following their logic, their task is confined exclusively to carrying out orders from higher level governments. In addition, it is also commonly perceived by informants that the demographic situation of their region has

barely experienced any severe deterioration. For these reasons, local official's attitude toward policy innovation is unambiguous that they would stick to principles from upper level rather than investing more time and money, but also risks, in policy innovation which is full of uncertainty. As frankly expressed by informants:

“At the moment no subsidy for birth. We do not have it, because the situation in Shaanxi is not that serious. It is still stable.... What we carry out is Shaanxi provincial policy ... The provincial government formulates policies regarding population and family planning, and then Xi'an city will implement them.” (Interview A1, 10/2018)

“When talking about birth policy, Guiyang City has not made (its own) birth policy. It is completely planned by provincial or central government. We are just responsible for implementation.” (Interview B1, 11/2019)

“Currently we are merely carrying out the provincial policy of Fujian. There is no additional birth-encouraging policy.” (Interview C2, 10/2019)

It can be found that the reluctance to policy innovation at local level is additionally accompanied by a heavy reliance on the design and guidance from superior authorities. In fact, if a policy appears to be dysfunctional or problematic in practice, local agents usually expect such dysfunction will be fixed by provincial or central government. For example, although the State Council has already sketched a task division among various government branches with regard to the expansion of childcare service, fieldwork of this research finds that officials from all three cities remain largely confused about their function in this campaign and would wait for a clarification from above before taking any prompt action. On the one hand, as family planning agents complained, their role of putting the record of licensed institutes on file (备案) is “somewhat pointless” in the joint program, because they lack the necessary enforcement power to correct any illicit activity of infant care institute.<sup>16</sup>

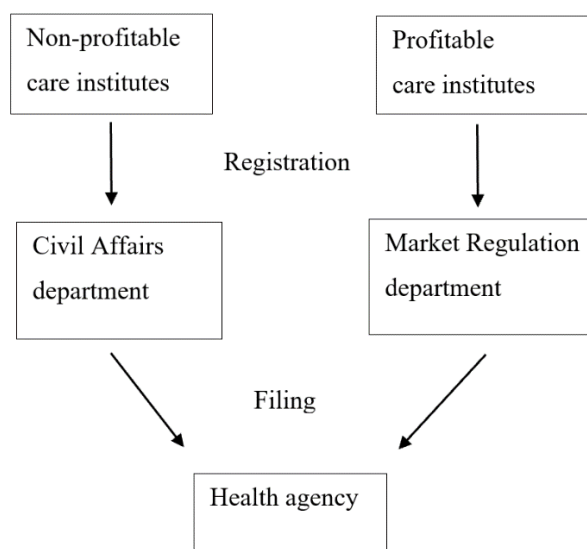
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<sup>16</sup> Childcare institutes, hereafter exclusively referring to crèche for children between 0-3 years old, must first apply for a license at either the Civil Affairs or the Market Regulation branch, also known as the step of registration. After that, they need to have their record on file with the health agency.

“Maybe what we can do in future is only to regulate at most, for example, what kind of qualifications and venues an (childcare) institute needs. [...] In future we will regulate institutes step by step and close those unqualified ones. But now we cannot speak for that, because (superior) government did not grant us such power. As there is no official document (from superior level) yet, we cannot say we have the power.”  
 (Interview C1, 09/2019)

“We need the enforcement power regarding this project. I reported it to our superiors several times but received only negative responses. It depends on them, you know?”  
 (Interview A4, 10/2019)

*Figure 10* Registration and Filing Process of Childcare Institutes



Source: NHC et al. 2019

On the other hand, it is believed by local officials that the responsibility specification in the expansion of childcare service still blurs in the mist, which forces them to abstain from pushing the campaign actively. Note that government branches such as Civil Affairs and Market Regulation are also involved in the project, and both take charge of the institute registration. Given this context, once incidents, for example food safety scandals, occur in childcare institutes, it will be grueling to define the responsible party from the official side. From the perspective of interviewed family planning agents, it will be highly unfair if they have to take responsibility for something that they could barely influence.

“It stands to reason that the department which issues certificate also takes responsibility for the supervision (of the institute). We, as the Health branch, are only in charge of putting registration on record. If some enterprises cooperate with us, it would be good. But if not, we cannot do anything to them. We are mainly responsible for offering hygiene and health instructions. If something goes wrong, it is difficult for us to enforce anything. Besides, who should be responsible for that?”  
(Interview A5, 01/2020)

Eventually, as an agent from Guiyang expressed in his sharp words, the best solution to these structural problems is a correction from above, either provincial or central government:

“We are waiting for (another) national policy (regarding childcare institutes). [...] What we are currently working on is just nonsense. [...] What are the project specifications? How should we arrange venues? How should communities cooperate with us? What are the standards for care institutes? We have nothing! [...] The provincial government of Guizhou does not even have it, neither is the policy document from the State Council specific enough. Only when the provincial document is available, we can further work on the details. You can leave the details to us prefectures, but there must be an instructive from provincial government.”  
(Interview B2, 10/2019)

It is common that informants attribute the reliance on superior level government to their lack of capacity. Limited power, poorly coordinated cooperation between government departments, and unmotivated staff are the most frequently mentioned factors that lead to the passiveness and dependence of local government. As a consequence, local officials are prone to confine their attention to the policy framework set by the center as well as commands from provincial government, thereby demonstrating a routinized trait during policy enforcement.

#### *4.2.3. Emphasis on Shidu Family*

Another and perhaps the most important finding from the field research is that instead of fully devoted to encouraging more fertility in the new policy era, local officials are mainly bustling about various issues revolving around “families with special difficulties due to



birth planning”, which emerged as an unexpected but tragic outcome of the previous one-child policy. This so-called “leftover problem” has been consuming the vast majority of their energy during daily work and becomes growingly challenging for local authorities.

The official term “families with special difficulties due to birth planning” actually consists of two different groups of people, namely both families that have lost their only child and those whose only child became disabled. Noteworthy is the fact that in the very first official document which was published in 2007 to offer them state support (NPFPC & MoF, 2007), these two groups of people were plainly referred as “families whose only child is disabled or dead” (*Dusheng Ziniu Shangcan Siwang Jiating* 独生子女伤残死亡家庭). Chinese government later realized its negative impression and replaced it with the current description (MoF & NPFPC, 2010), which is much more euphemistic and has been kept as part of the formal official wording since 2010. Though the label “families with special difficulties” is comprised of two different kinds of unfortunate parents who receive varied standard of state support, both media and academic discussion have majorly focused on those whose only child passed away, since their permanent loss is perceived to be more miserable. As a consequence, bereaved parents as a narrowed subgroup are frequently referred to as the substitute of “families with special difficulties” in public discourse. The term “*shidu* family” (literally for “families lost only child”) is commonly applied by media and scholarly literature, but conceivably, it is never used in official documents for its negative indication. For the reason of convenience and convention, this research also adopts “*shidu* family” in the general discussion of “families with special difficulties”, unless a clear distinction is needed.

#### *A Special Focus.*

Field research finds that officials from local family planning agency have spent an overwhelming proportion of their working hours in coping with *shidu* families in the universal two-child policy era. Although this does not imply that fertility encouragement is completely neglected, it is still surprising that local agents have been caught up in unanticipated problems derived from the previous birth control program, rather than working hard on boosting more births in their region. In fact, *shidu* family in general is attached particular significance by local officials, as informants from Xi’an and Guiyang respectively acknowledged:

“We are currently encouraging people to have their second child and have well handled the leftover problem of previous family planning program. For example, we still have the ‘family planning section’. Most of the work, 80% to 90% of its work, is dealing with those problems, which derived from previous birth planning.” (Interview A1, 10/2018)

“Perhaps only 10% of time on this (encouraging births). [...] Most of our time is dealing with *shidu* family.” (Interview B1, 02/2019)

Yet in comparison, the situation in Xiamen seems to be a relief. One interviewee was firstly astonished about the tremendous challenge perceived by her colleagues from Xi’an and Guiyang, arguing the *shidu* issue in Xiamen is less severe. Then she attributed the relatively relieving situation to their pronatalist regional tradition, implying there are more families with at least two children in the region, which have eventually alleviated its *shidu* problem:

“Here, most people have the same fertility concept. They want a son, the more children, the better.... Their (people from Northeast China) concept is really different from ours. They do not have such a strong sense of familism and clan. [...] If you look at people here, usually they would like to have two children. That’s regional culture. [...] Of course, we also work on this part (*shidu* family), but we cannot invest 80% or 90% of our energy in it.” (Interview C1, 09/2019)

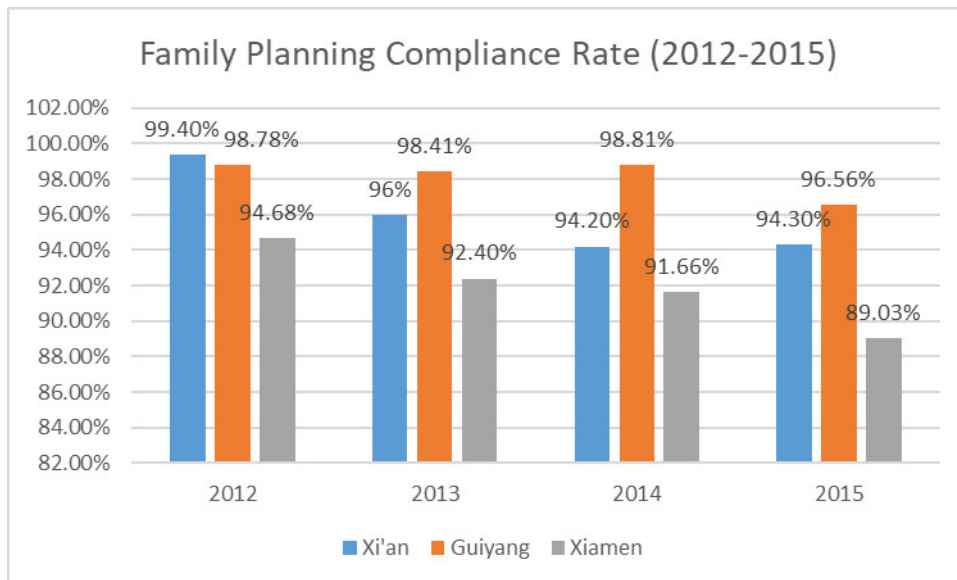
Again, regional difference is readdressed by another informant from Xiamen:

“There are big differences in geographic, economic, and cultural conditions between Shaanxi, Guizhou and our region. The leftover problem of family planning is not the major focus of our work.” (Interview C2, 09/2019)

Ironically, while it is connoted by the informant there have been a larger number of families with more than one child in the region, which clearly went against the previous one-child policy, Xiamen government used to have a decent record for its one-child policy implementation, although such performance is slightly unsatisfactory compared with that of Xi’an and Guiyang. Data from Xiamen’s statistic yearbooks show that more than 90% of the local births abided by family planning program prior to 2016. Hence, given local government’s “earnest implementation” of the strict family planning program, it is

dubious whether there could be a considerable number of “couples having multiple children” in the region. The question remains open, whether the record of one-child policy implementation from yearbooks or the informant’s narratives about *shidu* situation contradicts the truth.

Figure 11 Family Planning Compliance Rate in the Three Cities (2012-2015)



Source: Xi’an Municipal Bureau of Statistics 2016, Guiyang Municipal Bureau of Statistics 2016, Xiamen Municipal Bureau of Statistics 2016

#### *Pressure in Daily Work.*

The handling of *shidu* families covers a broad range of tasks for local officials during their daily work, including registration, management of monetary support, annual verification, regular visit, and some casual but non-scheduled interactions with *shidu* couples as well. Chinese central government introduced a state support system in 2010, which provides *shidu* couples with monetary aid and later complemented with old-age and medical care etc. (MoF & NPFPC, 2010; NHFPC et al., 2013). Similar to the case of parental leave system, regional standards of *shidu* support are much higher than the benchmark set by central government, as evidenced by the substantially increased financial subsidy at provincial level. Even so, informants still complain that the problem of *shidu* family remains to be a considerable headache for local governments, not only due to the continuously growing size of this special group of people, but also because some *shidu* couples insist on a larger amount of compensation from the state, which is

often deemed to be unreasonable. For this reason, the interaction with *shidu* parents in practice appears to be rather stressful for local officials.

“There are some unreasonable ones (referring to claims to state compensation). Their child has passed away for four or five years, at the age of thirty or forty, but left them a grandson. Now they demand a support for their grandson, a full range of support. I think this is a little bit unreasonable. [...] We are parents of single child too, and we believe both issues (birth encouragement and *shidu* support) should be addressed for a stable society. Now the factor of instability is *shidu* family. As its number increases, the pressure derived from stability maintenance has become rather big for us.” (Interview A2, 01/2019)

“(The work stress is) surely high! ‘Special families’ make trouble every day. This is quite a special situation.” (Interview B2, 10/2019)

As mentioned by the informant from Xi’an, the concern of social stability runs through local official’s work on *shidu* issue and constitutes the very origin of their work pressure. It is one of the top priority tasks for contemporary Chinese local government to eliminate all latent threats to social stability, such as terrorist activities, gangs and mafias, and various types of social conflicts in a more general sense. Regarding *shidu* issue, this special task is primarily oriented to the prevention and resolution of disputes between *shidu* parents and government authority caused by the former’s unmet demands for state compensation. Since the maintenance of social stability is set as a hard target for cadre’s promotion, local family planning agents, especially those who work at the grassroots level and have more direct confrontation with *shidu* people, must fully devote themselves to such target for a better political career. Accordingly, a complete vigilance is required in all interactions to prevent any conflict escalation between the two parts.

“Some of their demands cannot be settled or they contain unreasonable parts. If they ask for unreasonable things, we mainly hold them tight, not let them make irrational troubles here or go to Beijing to complain to the center.” (Interview A2, 01/2019)

Nevertheless, as some demands of *shidu* people are believed to be unprocurable at all, it remains highly probable that local officials will be trapped in the frustration in their daily work.

*Organizational Reform 2018.*

However, the work stress has become even larger for local officials since 2018, as Chinese central government launched a reform of family planning agency in that year, which is featured by the fusion of offices and a drastic staff downsizing. In March 2018, the State Council changed the previous title of *National Health and Family Planning Commission* to *National Health Commission* and compressed all subordinate family planning branches to the new *Division of Population Monitoring and Family Development*. Regional agencies followed the same reform by merging all previous family planning branches to only one office in charge of all relevant tasks. Similarly, the number of staffs has shrunk dramatically along with this reform at prefectural level.

“We now have the department of *Population Monitoring and Family Development* here. It is in line with the institutional arrangement of national government. [...] Less offices, less staffs, and of course more work stress. [...] For example, I could only focus on one task in previous time, but now have to take charge in more. All should be the same, all prefectures in the whole country should confront such problem after the organizational reform, namely more tasks with less personnel. [...] We had more than fifty staffs in the past, but now have only 4 in this department office.” (Interview C1, 09/2019)

“The reform is complete at our city level. The work used to be for about fifty colleagues prior to the reform is now taken over by this single office, only 4 people!” (Interview B2, 10/2019)

Meanwhile, the current situation for district level agency is not better off as the organizational reform of downsizing also keeps district agents seriously shorthanded.

“There are a lot of things to do, and it has become more difficult, because tasks have not been reduced. [...] When I was assigned to this section office in 2017, there were 7 colleagues working here. Now it becomes 3. Our leader redeployed them to other places, so our daily work is really busy. The current work amount for one person equals that for two or three in earlier time.” (Interview A2, 01/2019)

As informants explicitly stated, their current tasks have not been lessened despite the drastic reduction of personnel, thus the work has become much tougher for everyone in practice. Given the continuously growing size of *shidu* group, local agents are fully

aware that their work can only be increasingly stressful in the future.

Intriguingly, it needs to be noted that there is one informant who stands out as an outlier regarding the same topic, for she rejects the common perspective shared by other interviewees about the growing work stress in following years. Instead, an optimistic statement with full confidence is provided, demonstrating her firm belief in the state organ and her colleagues' excellent competence that they are able to overcome any challenge.

“I do not think our pressure is going to be bigger. Everyone who works here is an elite, it is not a problem for us to combat pressure. Besides, the state is downplaying family planning and our work now, that is why we have less staffs. If the work becomes a special emphasis later, the state will assign more people here.” (Interview A3, 03/2019)

By contrast, all other informants, including the two from the same city, are convinced that their office will not receive reinforcement in the future, or at least it is with a very low chance, therefore the work pressure for them is destined to be grimmer.<sup>17</sup> For this reason, it is reasonable to suspect that such over-optimistic argument is merely a coping strategy for the interview question, and the informant apparently intended to preserve government authority in front of the researcher.

The scale of *shidu* group in their administrative region, as acknowledged by some local agents,<sup>18</sup> counts as a major driving factor of their work pressure. However, the concrete figure of *shidu* family remains largely obscure at both national and regional level. While the central government has not updated the size of this group for more than half decade, most regional governments remain silent on this topic. Unfortunately, neither did the informants of this research offer any regional data because of their perceived political sensitiveness. Nevertheless, this research does not aim to capture the precise size of *shidu* people. The narratives of local officials conspicuously reflect their serious attitude toward this special group, so it can be argued even without an exact figure at hand that *shidu* issue has formed an extraordinarily trouble for local family planning agents in many regions.

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<sup>17</sup> Interview A2, 01/2019; Interview C1, 09/2019.

<sup>18</sup> Interview A1, 10/2018; Interview B2, 10/2019.

The focus of local family planning agency on *shidu* issues is astounding because it blatantly contradicts with the theme of universal two-child policy, namely birth encouragement. The amendment to *Population and Family Planning Law* and introduction of supplementary policy package already set the tone for the new population policy era that the central government is determined to mitigate China's deteriorating population problems such as aging society and distorted sex ratio by boosting fertility. However, the practice of Chinese local governments is running on a deviated track, though not necessarily against the original plan from the center. While pushing new birth-friendly projects solemnly, local agents are majorly dedicated to the leftover problem with more attentiveness. Informant's narratives of this research also indicate this deviated focus could be the prevailing fact in most Chinese urban regions.

#### *4.2.4. Refrained Policy Propaganda*

The propaganda of population policy in the one-child policy era used to have a high density and involves various information carriers such as posters, bus advertisements, specific publicity column and windows, as well as slogans on banners and walls. In the first two decades, family planning slogans, especially in rural areas, are usually found to be harsh, cold, and brutal that administrative coercion is often conveyed by some threatening words in practice (Xiang, 2010; Wang, 2018). Slogans such as "house will collapse for those who should sterilize but did not (该扎不扎, 房倒屋塌)", "if one has birth out of quota, the whole village will be sterilized (一人超生, 全村结扎)" can best represent such violent propaganda style. Yet, despite the brutality of these harsh slogans, the state did not realize the inappropriateness of their application until 2007, when the National Population and Family Planning Commission at the time eventually decided to rectify those abusive propaganda contents (The Central People's Government, 2007). Later in 2011, another campaign was launched to further enhance the removal of improper slogans, aiming specifically to integrate the publicity of family planning policy with "more emotional communication and humanistic care" (NPFPC, 2011). By replacing all harsh imperatives with milder suggestions, propaganda slogans are softened to match the general transformation of family planning work, which is supposed to be more service-oriented rather than pure administrative management. Since then, all carriers have become occupied by new phrases such as "insist family planning as a basic state policy,

create a harmonious and happy life (坚持计划生育基本国策，共创和谐幸福美满家园)”，“a girl is equally good as a boy, population quality is the most important thing (生男生女一样好 人口素质最重要)”。

Yet, in the universal two-child policy era, conventional publicity methods have been mostly abandoned by family planning agency. Posters, bus advertisements, publicity column and windows are rarely used as information carriers for the new birth policy, while family planning slogans have almost disappeared from, at least urban, public sight.<sup>19</sup> Given the country’s serious and ever-growing population problems, it is rational for Chinese government to spare no effort in publicizing the new policy for fertility boost, which could also be favored by most Chinese people as it grants them more birth freedom. However, the publicity of universal two-child policy in practice, surprisingly, appears to be rather low-key. Fieldwork of this research finds that local officials in all three cities did not follow the traditional strategies but have maintained relatively restraint in terms of publicizing the newly loosened birth policy and encouraging fertility. Notably, *shidu* family is one of the crucial reasons why they intentionally abandoned the previous propaganda style.

In all selected three cities, the local government did not launch any large-scale propaganda campaign regarding universal two-child policy with overwhelming information bombing. Except the agent from Xiamen once mentioned their short-term bus advertising, officials from Xi’an and Guiyang plainly acknowledged they had not applied any traditional information carrier at all. Hence, there are neither banners in communities and streets nor slogans on walls spreading messages about birth encouragement. Conversely, interviewed officials all emphasized their previous action to remove old propaganda contents about one-child policy.

Instead, local agents only hand out flyers occasionally in the universal two-child policy era, either to call for couples to follow eugenic plan, or to provide information

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<sup>19</sup> However, as the aging problem deteriorates in Chinese society, Chinese government attaches increasing value to the traditional virtue of filial piety, emphasizing the children’s role in providing care service for their elderly parents, so as to alleviate the shortage of public service. Posters and slogans are still widely applied in urban communities, as well as rural areas, to extol filial piety.



about their administrative services, such as birth registration and the application for one-child family's certificate and subsidy. Aside from flyers, TV program has been frequently adopted by local family planning agents as well for similar propaganda contents. Cooperating with local TV stations, the health commissions at the regional level broadcast relevant information regarding the new birth policy through regular program. According to one informant, part of their broadcasting also encourages childbirth in an indirect way, for example by mentioning that families with two kids are more advantaged in the cultivation of children's character as well as general family harmony, and they can further contribute to the stable development of Chinese society. Nevertheless, local officials' fertility encouragement turns out to be overall euphemistic and prudent. As one informant from Xi'an describes their policy publicity:

“(we) have no propaganda about fertility encouragement actually. We work in strict accordance with national policies, thus only publicize what the state has introduced so far.” (Interview A2, 01/2019)

It is conceivable that the current policy publicity only has limited influence on the public, especially given the fact that birth policy only takes a small part of local health commission's TV program. Some other major tasks of the health branch, such as child safety and disease prevention, constitute another important section of their regular broadcasting. Moreover, it is questionable if these programs are attractive enough to catch more people as audience, let alone TV program, which is broadcasted in a fixed time slot, is less accessible compared with public advertisement, banners, and slogans on walls. Consequently, it can be argued that the policy publicity of universal two-child policy has much shrunk compared with previous campaigns, and local agents' propaganda on television is largely in vain, as it only has a small audience group.

Notably, all interviewees agree that it is inappropriate to apply the traditional propaganda strategy, especially a straightforward encouragement of the second birth with slogans, to their contemporary work in the new policy era. Instead of simply praising the happiness of having two children, local family planning agents place the emphasis of their TV program on the explanation why the state has introduced the new birth policy, expecting to persuade couples through reason to “give births as policy requires”, namely, to have a second child.

Their propaganda logic can mainly be explained by two factors. On the one hand, Chinese couples have been accustomed to government's restrictions on births given the long history of family planning campaign. Hence, a sudden turn of official propaganda to birth encouragement could hardly be accepted by the public within a short term but might result in their cynic critics against both previous and current population policies, eventually undermining government's authority. On the other hand, as some interviewees specifically point out, the massive propaganda of a pronatalist birth policy will provoke *shidu* families and cause undesired conflicts. If the government bluntly encourage more births, bereaved parents will consider such campaign as an offense or provocation to them, since many from the group insist that their current miserable life is the direct consequence of one-child policy which deprived them of another birth.

“We cannot even say two-child families are happier in our propaganda work (to encourage births). Otherwise, those *shidu* parents are sensitive, they will think they are the unhappy ones, and they will trouble us.” (Interview B1, 02/2019)

Subsequently, taking the potential criticism from the masses and *shidu* people's resentment into consideration, local officials have to keep a low profile at the publicity work of universal two-child policy. They not only have completely abandoned the traditional propaganda strategy which covers the society's every corner, but also remain restraint in the birth encouragement, despite China has an urgent need for fertility growth under the challenge of population aging. It is conspicuous that local governments' policy publicity has been seriously restricted by the decades-long family planning campaign and *shidu* problem in Chinese society.

#### 4.2.5. Differences between Cities

Although the implementation of population policy in selected cities has shown great similarities in terms of their evaluation and anticipation, adherence to central government, and emphasis on *shidu* family, certain differences can still be identified between regions. As the localization of national policy first happens at provincial level, varied effective date and regional refinement determined by each provincial government often lead to a significant divergence of policy enforcement among cities from different provinces, which can be reflected in their project progress and policy standard. Besides, fieldwork

of this research also finds that the attitudes of local family planning agents toward *shidu* family could be rather distinct. While some informants are more sympathetic to these unfortunate parents with “special difficulties”, there is also another type of unfriendly agent who defines *shidu* people as troublemakers with plainly negative attitude.

*Effective Date of Provincial Policy.*

Firstly, the divergence of the local implementation of universal two-child policy appears at the effective date of provincial regulation. Usually, it takes months for provincial government to convert the national population policy into a regional one, and the length of such processing period can be substantially different among regions. To take provincial population and family planning regulations as an example, the document of Guizhou Province is introduced 1 month later than Fujian, but still 2 months earlier than Shaanxi. This lagged effective time between provinces is also common with regard to other supplementary policies, for instance the provincial document calling for the expansion of infant care institutes.

*Table 3* Effective Date of Regional Population Policies in the Selected Research Sites

	Population and Family Planning Regulation	Accelerating the Construction of Maternity Facilities	Promoting the Development of Care Services for Infants under 3 Years Old
Shaanxi Province	05.2016	06.2017	12.2019
Xi'an City		11.2017	12.2020
Guizhou Province	03.2016	09.2017	05.2020
Guiyang City		N/A	N/A
Fujian Province	02.2016	07.2017	12.2019
Xiamen City		10.2017	08.2020

Source: PFPR of Shaanxi Province, PFPR of Guizhou Province, PFPR of Fujian Province, Health and Family Planning Commission of Shaanxi Province et al. 2017, Health and Family Planning Commission of Guizhou Province et al. 2017, Health and Family Planning Commission of Fujian Province et al. 2017, Health and Family Planning Commission of Xi'an 2017, Health and Family Planning Commission of Xiamen 2017, People's Government of Shaanxi Province 2019, People's Government of Guizhou Province 2020, People's Government of Fujian Province 2019, People's

Government of Xi'an 2020, People's Government of Xiamen 2020.

In September 2019, at the time when Xi'an officials were still stagnating at the phase of opinion polling and discussion, striving for a policy draft about their local project of expanding infant care facilities, Xiamen's family planning agency already possessed a preliminary plan on the service development despite the absence of a local policy. On the one hand, a cooperation with local university was launched by Xiamen government which authorized social scientists to survey residents' demands and expectation about care service. All the collected data are supposed to underpin the next step of official policymaking. On the other hand, Xiamen agents also made decision to start the program first with the involvement of local state-owned enterprises. From the perspective of informants, SOEs serve as perfect entry point because these entities are not necessarily profit-oriented in contrast to private capitals, and the cooperation and regulation could be easier given their affiliation with government authority. Moreover, since there had already been one SOE running childcare institute in the city and could offer some management experiences, Xiamen officials became more determined to follow this SOE-centered mode. As a roughly sketched plan for the next step, local SOEs are expected to run a number of childcare institutes as models, while government organs and public hospitals will be responsible for the provision of necessary venues.

In contrast to Xiamen, the progress in Guiyang was much more lagged behind, and even turned out to be lackluster compared with Xi'an, as Xi'an government was already struggling for a policy draft. Similar to the other two cities, Guiyang did not have a policy document of its own regarding the promotion of childcare service in September 2019. But Guiyang officials made it clear during interview that there must be a formal policy from provincial government as guidance or template, before they could take any action in drafting local plan. Meanwhile, albeit local officials admitted that they had some preliminary knowledge of the policy experiment in other regions, it was emphasized they would firstly wait and do nothing until there are enough experiences to learn from for a "reasonable and feasible" plan. Intriguingly, while expressing a reliance on the pioneer action from other governments, one Guiyang informant still held a somewhat negative assessment of the existing pilot programs in other regions, considering their tests as obscure and not instructive at all. Through this, the task complexity of promoting childcare service was underlined and therefore their insistence on the strategy of passive

waiting became rationalized.

“We are learning from Shanghai, but institutes in Shanghai only teach mothers how to take care of babies, not really keep babies there. Do not think it is simple. [...] Now in the whole China, including advanced regions such as Shanghai and Shenzhen, the whole country stays at the stage of exploration. There is no specific measure at all. [...] We are all at the starting stage. It takes at least 2 years. After provincial government brings us a policy, we can further refine the details. (The task of improving) Details can be handed over to us, but there must be an instructive document first of all. [...] You should give us an example. Even when you are going to build a car, you need a prototype, right? What you ask here, (the behavior of all governments) is the same. It remains at paperwork, just stays there.” (Interview B2, 10/2019)

#### *Policy Contents and Standard.*

The second difference at local level can be found in the contents of regional policies and relevant standards. As the varied length of maternity leave between provinces demonstrates, Chinese provincial governments usually enjoy a considerable degree of discretion in determining their regional rules as a localization of national guidelines. Fieldwork of this research also confirms that there is a remarkable difference in the monetary subsidy offered by local governments for *shidu* families.

In 2010, Chinese government formally introduced special funds to assist the life of *shidu* parents nationwide (MoF & NPFPC, 2010), and a relatively more comprehensive support system was established in 2013 (NHFPC et al., 2013), which provides a broad range of state aid covering *shidu* people’s pension insurance, old-age and medical care etc.. Despite a dispute over its definition,<sup>20</sup> monetary subsidy could be counted as the most important component of the system, and the state also pledged a dynamic growth of it. Generally, the subsidy comprises of a one-off solatium of 30,000 *yuan* and a monthly

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<sup>20</sup> Chinese government defines such monetary aid as a supportive measure for *shidu* families, as they are deemed to have encountered “special difficulties” in life. However, a substantial number of *shidu* parents prefer the term “state compensation”, since they believe their current miserable situation is caused by the previous one-child policy. The controversy remains unsettled, as the definition affects the legitimacy of family planning program and even of the state.

allowance of no less than 450 *yuan* according to the latest policy from central government (MoF & NHC, 2018). Provinces then add extra amount of money on top of the national standard in their regional policy, which subsequently leads to the gap between the selected three cities. For instance, the provincial document of Fujian prescribes that each of the *shidu* parents aged 60 and over can receive a monthly subsidy of 710 *yuan* from local government. Yet Shaanxi Province’s economic aid for the same age group is much more generous and turns out to be 1000 *yuan* per month. In comparison, the amount of Guizhou stands in between with a standard of 810 *yuan*. At the prefectural level, one city government, namely Guiyang, merely follows the provincial regulation and provides the exact amount of money to *shidu* families. By contrast, governments of the other two cities have taken a step further by offering better treatment. Xi’an adds another 100 *yuan* on top of the provincial standards regarding *shidu* people from the age groups 49-59 and 60-69, and it offers a total subsidy of 1200 *yuan* per month for those aged 70 and over. Xiamen is even more outstanding in this regard, as its current prefectural standard is upgraded to 1200 *yuan* for *shidu* people of all cohorts.

Table 4 Current Standard of Monthly Subsidy in Provincial Regions (in Chinese *yuan*)

Shaanxi		Guizhou	Fujian*		Shanghai	Beijing
	Xi’an**			Xiamen		
49-59 y.o.	49-59 y.o.	Fixed 810	49-59 y.o.	Fixed	49-59 y.o.	Fixed 720
450	550		610	1200	820	
60- y.o.	60-69 y.o.		60- y.o.		60-69 y.o.	
1000	1100		710		870	
	70- y.o.				70- y.o.	
	1200				920	

\* In particular, Fujian Province provides *shidu* people who live on subsistence allowance with higher standards. The subsidy amount is 900 *yuan* for 49-59 y.o. people, and 1000 *yuan* for those are 60 y.o. and over. Following the provincial regulation, Xiamen government also offer extra 300 *yuan* for *shidu* family who live on subsistence allowance.

\*\* According to personal interviews, all *shidu* parents from Xi’an aged 60 and over receive the unitary amount of 1200 *yuan* per month, as the prefectural standard is further improved by district governments.

Source: Health Commission of Shaanxi Province et al. 2018, Health Commission of Guizhou

Province et al. 2018, Health Commission of Fujian Province et al. 2018, Health Commission of Xi'an 2019, Health Commission of Xiamen 2016

It is noteworthy that the provincial subsidy standard for *shidu* family is not positively correlated with the region's economic condition, albeit the fund largely comes from the budget of regional government. Shanghai and Beijing, as two of the most economically advanced regions in China, are outperformed by Shaanxi in this respect. Even Guizhou, one of the least developed provinces of the country, also offers more money for local *shidu* people compared with the two municipalities. On the other hand, at the prefectural level, the offered subsidy amount in each city is not necessarily based on their local living standards either. The monthly economic aid of Xi'an (for elderly aged 60-69) accounts for 31.5% of the local disposable income per capita. Yet the same figure turns out to be 25.4% in Guiyang and 24.4% in Xiamen, despite these two cities respectively having the lowest and highest income levels among the three. Additionally, this also reveals that the *shidu* financial support, though not insignificant, is far from being able to fully cover *shidu* elderly's spending.

Table 5 2019 Disposable Income per Capita of Urban Residents (in Chinese *yuan*)

	Xi'an	Guiyang	Xiamen
Annual	41850	38240	59018
Monthly	3487.5	3186.7	4918.2

Source: Xi'an Municipal Bureau of Statistics 2020, Guiyang Municipal Bureau of Statistics 2020, Xiamen Municipal Bureau of Statistics 2020

*Attitude toward Shidu Family.*

Thirdly, there is a discrepancy in the attitudes of interviewed local family planning agents toward *shidu* people. Whereas some informants expressed sympathy toward bereaved parents during interview, there is also official who bluntly describes the latter with pejorative words, referring them as “unsatisfied and annoying troublemakers”. In general, sympathetic officials tend to acknowledge *shidu* people's contribution to the state's family planning project and therefore show more understanding for their claims to state support. As mentioned earlier, it is widely shared among local agents that the previous one-child policy was over harsh. Thus, a number of informants are inclined to the view that China's birth control is inseparable from the full dedication and sacrifice of Chinese families,

particularly those who became *shidu* later.

“In the one-child policy era, the state’s slogan for that is ‘one child is good, the state takes care of old-age support’. Now we have reached such a situation (of *shidu* issue). [...] They (*shidu* parents) devoted themselves to the state and the four-decade-long family planning campaign. These people answered the call, so that the country’s economy could boost. Now people from the current generation can enjoy the universal two-child policy, but how about those *shidu* ones? You should not only look at those who smile but ignore those who cry, right?” (Interview A2, 01/2019)

In addition, it is also commonly agreed that the current official aid and policy attentiveness to *shidu* issue are far removed from being sufficient for this vulnerable group of people.

“I think policies regarding these leftover problems are not enough yet. [...] They (*shidu* parents) are really pitiful. We visited them before the Spring Festival comes. [...] Some are really old now and no one takes care of them. Even the thousand *yuan* from government cannot comfort their spirit.” (Interview A2, 01/2019)

“Some people became *shidu* and later went for reproduction surgery at the age of fifty. But in this case, we have to cancel their state subsidy. [...] They are already in their fifties or sixties, what kind of happy life can they still enjoy? They are going to raise another kid for the state and now you withdraw these several hundred *yuan*. [...] It is already a challenge for them to raise another child at this age. [...] The 300 *yuan* for *shidu* family,<sup>21</sup> [sigh...] not enough, cannot solve the problem.” (Interview B1, 11/2019)

For these reasons, parts of *shidu* people’s appeals, such as demands for a moderate improvement of financial aid or old-age support, are usually deemed to be acceptable and necessary by sympathetic agents. They not only consider *shidu* family as a special group which suffers from various difficulties and therefore deserves more attention from the state, but also express a high degree of willingness to give a helping hand, for example by reporting *shidu* appeals to their superior department in charge. Remarkably, local

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<sup>21</sup> Local officials are supposed to visit *shidu* families during important festivals and offer the latter a certain amount of condolence money. The 300 *yuan* refers to this condolence money here.



officials' narratives also indicate a direct causal link between the state's birth control program and *shidu* family's miserable life, although such individual interpretation is clearly undesirable from the perspective of central government. However, it is also indispensable to note that the understanding and support from sympathetic agents certainly do not cover all requests of *shidu* family. What is deemed to be unreasonable, for example a completely free health insurance which makes up for all aspects related to medical service, will be denied definitely and decisively. As a matter of fact, the nerves of sympathetic officials are also set on edge when they confront the perceived unreasonable pursuits, and undoubtedly, they have to resort to strategies of stability maintenance in this case.

Yet in contrast to sympathetic agents, statements from one informant represent another type of local officials who overall assess *shidu* family negatively. While believing the state has been generous enough by providing them with a wide range of support, the informant further accused *shidu* group of not being grateful at all but remaining insatiable in their confrontation with government. The aversion to the special group turned out to be all too clear, when he used the term "pathetic but hateful" to describe the latter regarding their demands. Conceivably, the informant was frustrated or even irritated by the overwhelming tasks centering on *shidu* issues day after day. Unpleasant interactions filled with alleged overcharges to government, increased financial burden induced by the upgrade of subsidy standard in the region, and the continuously growing size of *shidu* group all lead to the apathy of some local agents toward the tough life of bereaved parents. The concern about potential conflict between the two parts further reinforces the former's hostility, as any social instability incident, particularly the clash between government authority and people of disadvantaged group, is going to damage the political career of local officials.

"Although receiving 810 *yuan* per month from government, they still have various demands. [...] Some of them want free medical treatment, but it is impossible! The state cannot accomplish that. [...] You build houses for them, you develop the economy for them, and all these anti-poverty programs for *shidu* families. [...] They are still unsatisfied, feeling that the state owes them." (Interview B2, 10/2019)

### 4.3. Summary

In sum, fieldwork in this research finds that the implementation of universal two-child policy at local level shows an overall similarity with minor divergence in Chinese cities, which stands contrary to the expectation of a wider differentiation between local policy enforcement given their distinctive political status and demographic backgrounds. The similarity firstly lies in officials' identic appreciation for universal two-child policy. On the one hand, all interviewees firmly reject that they have encountered any problem in the new policy era, through which an intentional preservation of the policy's legitimacy and government's authority can be spotted. On the other hand, a sincere regret for the late introduction of the new policy usually comes behind in their following narratives, as it is widely shared by informants that the previous birth control program used to be excessively strict. From the work experiences of local family planning agents, socioeconomic development, increased pressure in life and career, and the lack of childcare service in Chinese society are well acknowledged as major shaping factors which have led to a low fertility desire among contemporary Chinese people. Given the country's serious population and social problems, all local agents agree that China needs to completely abrogate its birth limit and invest more in fertility boost in following years.

Meanwhile, fieldwork also finds that local officials from all research sites generally show the same routineer trait that their attention is completely fixed to programs launched by central government without any self-initiated project. In the selected three cities, the current work of officials covers all aspects related to the policy package proposed by central government, which aims to encourage birth in an indirect way. Instead of resorting to monetary incentives, local governments are merely focusing on the construction of fertility-friendly society. Besides, the reliance on superior level is also remarkable that a guidance from provincial or central government is always expected when policy dysfunction appears. The strategy of passive waiting could be much more favored by some officials as they even decide not to take any initiative until there are sufficient experiences from other regions.

Another important, if not the most important, similarity is that the daily work of local agents is largely overwhelmed by tasks of coping with *shidu* family, although China's current population policy is oriented to birth encouragement in this new era. As an unintended byproduct of the earlier harsh one-child policy, *shidu* parents, who lost

their only child and now experience various “special difficulties” in their life, now allegedly form a salient challenge to the stability of Chinese society and a major work pressure for local family planning agents. Chinese government has established a support system which provides *shidu* parents with various kinds of assistance, and local officials have devoted most of their time to relevant issues, but it can hardly be said that the current state aid is able to cover all the demands from *shidu* people regarding their daily life, old-age support, and medical care, as some informants agree. For this reason, they have confronted various “unreasonable demands” in their interaction with the *shidu* group, which sometimes turns out to be rather unpleasant. In this case, local officials have to pay full attention to the prevention of any conflict between the two parts, since social stability is a red line for their political career. While the number of *shidu* people keeps growing in the society, local family planning agents, in contrast, have experienced a considerable downsizing of their offices and staffs due to an organizational reform since 2018. Conceivably, their work stress can only be higher in the future.

Still, some noteworthy differences exist between research sites apart from their general similarity of policy enforcement. Firstly, policies become effective at various times at both provincial and prefectural level. The progress of ongoing programs related to universal two-child policy, such as the construction of maternity facility and the expansion of childcare institutes, turn out to be vastly different in the selected three cities, as the contrast between Xiamen’s proactivity and Guiyang’s reluctance demonstrates. Secondly, similar to the parental leave system, a significant divergence of content and standard can be found in other regional population policies. The amount of monthly subsidy for *shidu* family differs not only between provinces, but also at lower administrative level in cases. Bereaved parents from Xiamen can receive much better treatment in this sense compared with those from Guiyang, as the subsidy amount of the latter is only two third of the former. Thirdly, the attitude toward *shidu* group vary markedly between individuals. Given social stability as a red line for Chinese officials, *shidu* people’s “unreasonable demands” combined with their growing size have become a considerable torment for local family planning agents in most places. However, some informants acknowledge the contribution of *shidu* parents to the state’s family planning program and therefore have sympathy for their current life as well as parts of their claims to official support. A direct causal link between one-child policy and *shidu* phenomenon

is often indicated on this account, albeit it goes against the intention of central government. In comparison, the negative evaluation made by one informant could represent the authentic feeling of those “unfriendly agents”. Since some *shidu* families repeatedly appeal for various state aids that are improbable to be met, displeasure of local officials keeps increasing and finally develops to a hostility to the former. Such hostile attitude seems unlikely to dissolve as the fundamental conflict between supply and demand of state support persists in near future.

Nonetheless, despite these three marked differences, it needs to be readdressed that family planning agents from all cities are essentially working in a homogenous way while being tormented with the same “leftover problem”. Despite the differed effective time and contents of regional policies, local governments only limit their attentiveness to programs launched by central government, without bringing any complementary policy as regional innovation. Local officials’ attitude toward people who lost their only child varies between individuals, but all of them are experiencing the significant challenge derived from this *shidu* issue, since it is closely related to the hard target of social stability maintenance. It is conspicuous yet unanticipated that the implementation of universal two-child policy at local level is, to a significant degree, running on a deviated track from birth encouragement, which serves as the main purpose of the new population policy. What could be the explaining factors for this divergence between the designed purpose and enforcement in practice? A detailed discussion will be offered in the following section.

### **5. *Shidu* Family - An Unexpected Historical Consequence**

Field experience finds that family planning agents from local Chinese government have placed their work focus on *shidu* family rather than being fully devoted to birth encouragement in the universal two-child policy era. Even though the country’s population policy has been shifted to a, relatively speaking, pronatalist one given the existing population and social problems, its implementation at local level has essentially deviated from its pre-designed purpose.

This research argues that such deviation can mainly be explained from two perspectives. Firstly, the implementation of the new population policy is running in another direction because of the vast number of *shidu* parents emerged in Chinese society after the long history of family planning. As the official term “families with special

difficulties” indicates, *shidu* parents are highly disadvantaged in various aspects such as health conditions and eldercare. The support from government becomes extraordinarily vital and indispensable to them due to their permanent loss of the only child, but given the limited government capacity, there is a perpetual gap between the demand and supply of official aid, which generates not only the dissatisfaction from *shidu* families, but also tremendous work stress for local officials, eventually leading to a constant tension between the two parts in contemporary Chinese society. As the strained relationship is deemed to undermine the “social harmony and stability”, local officials have to take good care of the *shidu* issue.

And second, local agency’s emphasis on social stability is particularly enhanced under the influence of the current cadre management in China. As officials’ political career is closely tied to their performance of several key tasks, which includes the maintenance of social stability, their individual behavior has been significantly structured by the mechanism of responsibility assignment and performance assessment. For the reason of career advancement, family planning agents have to do their utmost to cope with *shidu* people’s dissatisfaction so as to prevent any mass incident, but not investing more time and money in tasks which bring minor impact on their career. Consequently, *shidu* issue has replaced birth encouragement to be the real work focus of local officials during their implementation of universal two-child policy.

This section applies a historical perspective to explain why *shidu* family has drawn special attention from local family planning agents and become their top priority task. To reveal the seriousness of *shidu* problem, it first looks at the predicament of bereaved parents with an introduction of their inflating group size and the majorly encountered difficulties in life. Then the section delves into the historical development of the state support system at both central and local level. By contrasting the high demand and limited supply regarding *shidu* support, it can be found that the gap can be hardly filled, so local family planning agents have to constantly confront the continued, and sometimes even aggressive, pursuit from bereaved parents. Some notable interactions and the dynamics between *shidu* activists and the central government are also incorporated to illustrate the tense relationship between the two parts at national level. Through this, it can be better understood how *shidu* as an unexpected historical consequence of one-child

policy has become a crucial pressure source to officials and further shaped the implementation of universal two-child policy in terms of deviated work focus.

### ***5.1. The Conflict between Demand and Supply of State Support***

As rounds of interviews unveiled, local family planning agents are generally tormented by a heavy work stress derived from both the wide variety of their assignments and the continuously increasing size of *shidu* family. More importantly, the decisive factor behind such pressure is their crucial task of maintaining social stability, which is often challenged by various “unreasonable” pursuits from some *shidu* parents who believe the current official support is far from meeting their actual needs. Given this, it is necessary to first elaborate this conflict between supply and demand before explaining local official’s dedication to *shidu* issue. On the one hand, what kind of “special difficulties” *shidu* families have been suffering from need to be identified so as to understand their insistence on more state compensation. An abundance of existing literature on this topic can offer a clear picture of the economic, physical, and psychological problems plaguing bereaved parents. On the other hand, in order to capture the state’s effort, a closer look will be paid at the evolvement of support system in a longer time span. This is achieved through a policy review of both central and regional aid for *shidu* family.

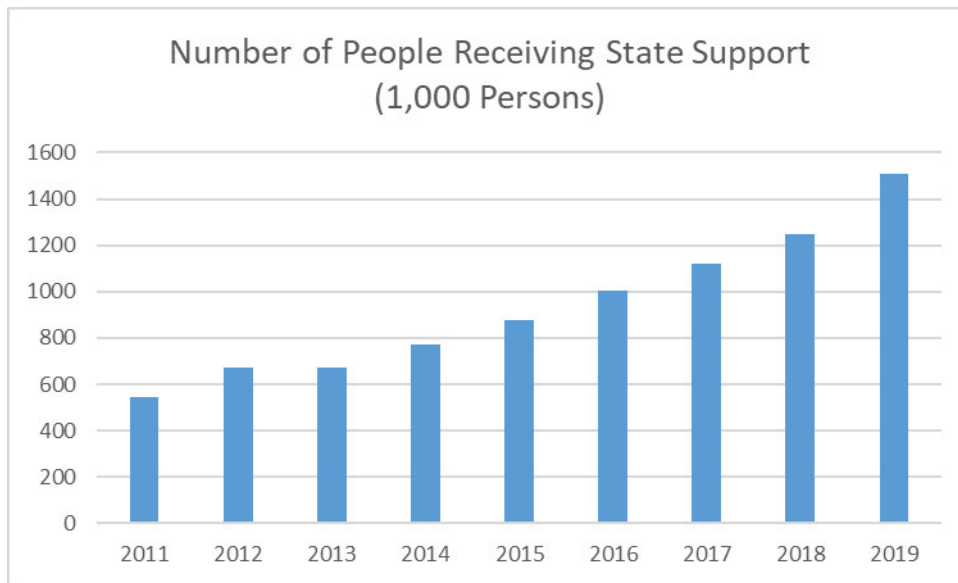
#### *5.1.1. Shidu Family’s Scale and Demand*

##### *The Scale of Shidu Group.*

It has to be readdressed that the exact figure of *shidu* family is largely missing. The only relevant and regularly updated official source is the bulletin annually published by the *National Health Commission*. Nonetheless, the data rather refer to the number of people who benefit from the state support for “family with special difficulties”, including both families with disabled only child and *shidu* ones. Thus, the scale of *shidu* group remains less than clear to the public. Chinese government once acknowledged in 2013 that there were 671,000 beneficiaries of the state support for “family with special difficulties”, while 407,000 of them, which take up more than 60% of the total number, belong to the *shidu* group (Xinhua News Agency, 2013). However, only six years later, the reported total number of recipients soared to 1.51 million according to the 2019 official bulletin (NHC, 2020). The subgroup of *shidu* beneficiaries is left unmentioned this time, but if

calculated with the 2013 ratio of 60%, there should be around 900,000 people who are receiving official support after losing their single child by 2019. Noteworthy is that these 900,000 people are merely the recipients of state support but cannot represent the whole *shidu* group due to the coverage problem.

Figure 12 Number of People Receiving State Support for “Family with Special Difficulties”



Source: National Statistical Bulletin on the Development of Health Services (2011-2019)

The most detailed statistical data specifically about *shidu* family can be found in a report published by the *National Bureau of Statistics* in 2015. Based on the 2010 national census data, researchers from NBS conclude that there were already 660,000 *shidu* women aged from 30 to 64 years in 2010, and the figure would rise with an annual increase of 87,000 death of only child in the country (NBS, UNFPA, & UNICEF, 2015). Following this logic, there should be around 1.44 million *shidu* mothers by 2019. Given that only about 900,000 *shidu* people, both bereaved mothers and fathers included, are receiving the state support in that year, the undercoverage of the state aid turns out to be salient.

Apart from official sources, many scholars also participated in the discussion by providing their own calculation and estimation of the *shidu* group size. Since one-child policy is often believed to be closely linked to *shidu* phenomenon, their estimated figure can largely be shaped by the author’s attitude toward the previous family planning program (Alpermann & Yang, 2020:133). The most widely cited research, which is based

on the death rate of 15-30 years old youths from the 2010 national census data, suggests that there were more than one million *shidu* families in 2010, and the figure could increase by 76,000 annually (Yang & Wang, 2012; Fang 2013; Ci & Zhou, 2015). Yet according to Zhou (2013), the number of *shidu* families in the same year should have already exceeded the mere one million but reached about 2.41 million. Chen (2013) argues the size of *shidu* family depends on whether the group is narrowly or broadly defined, so the estimated figure in 2010 could be either 635,000 or 8.52 million respectively. However, some critics of one-child policy tend to hold a more pessimistic view about the situation. For instance, the calculation from Mu Guangzong (2015) suggests a total number of 8.64 million bereaved parents in 2005, which implies there were already more than 4.32 million *shidu* families in that year. Another critic of the country's strict birth control program, Yi Fuxian (2013), further alerts that the number of *shidu* group would even reach 10 million by 2035, which implies there will be 14 bereaved parents of every 1000 people. Despite the divergence on the estimated size, it is less disputable that there have been more than 1.5 million *shidu* families in contemporary Chinese society, and the figure could be significantly larger according to academic studies. Even worse, as acknowledged by both the authority and scholars, the scale of *shidu* group will keep increasing fast, so the *shidu* problem can only become growingly challenging in the next two decades.

#### *"Special Difficulties" Face by Shidu Family*

In Chinese culture, a child is commonly viewed as the life continuity, spirit comfort, pillar of old-age support, and more generally the very meaning and hope for parents (Li & Chen, 1993; Xie et al., 2013). Once their child passed away, *shidu* people's confidence in life soon disappears and the bond between the couple also becomes fragile, as proved by an escalated divorce rate among them (Zhao, 2009; Wu, Guo, & Gao, 2015; Guo, 2015). Besides, their relationship with other family members could deteriorate as well because of disputes over issues such as heritage or grandchild custody (Guo & Lin, 2018). Even if the family survived the shock and further persists, bereaved parents are commonly found to be exposed to numbers of serious problems regarding their health, social life, old-age support etc..

First, comparative studies have shown that *shidu* parents are overall worse off in both physical and psychological conditions than the control group (Chen, 2016; An & Xu,



2018). The loss of only child makes them much more vulnerable to chronic diseases (Wei, Jiang, & Gietel-Basten, 2016), and even the death rate of *shidu* mothers turns out to be twice higher than that of non-*shidu* ones (NBS, UNFPA, & UNICEF, 2015). Meanwhile, being traumatized, bereaved parents are permanently trapped in the torment of numerous psychological problems such as deep sorrow, loneliness, and depression. A sample survey in Beijing finds that nearly 80 percent of *shidu* couples are tortured by symptoms of depression (Liu & Chen, 2016). Zheng, Lawson, and Head (2017) also reveal that the impact of depression is much deeper on parents who experienced the loss of their only child. More specifically, Wei, Jiang, and Gietel-Basten (2016) provide one of the most comprehensive studies on the health problems faced by *shidu* family, indicating that bereaved parents are 2.88 times more likely to suffer from chronic diseases, while their prevalence of depression is five times higher compared with the non-bereaved group. Particularly alerting is that even more than half of *shidu* people ever had the thought of suicide (Guo & Lin, 2018). As Mu (2015) suggests, such “complete mental-emotional-psychological crisis” could be the biggest problem confronted by *shidu* parents.

Restrained social life counts as the second major challenge for bereaved parents after their trauma. Having a child is important in Chinese context not only because it is the preservation of family line, but also for it serves a common topic of daily conversation or small talk between people (Chen & Chen, 2020). The cultural emphasis on family continuity often leads to a biased view toward childless couples (Mu 2016; Zhang & Jia, 2018), thus some *shidu* parents feel stigmatized by others because of their loss (Huang, 2018). Generally, to avoid stigmatization or any unpleasant recall of their miserable experience, bereaved parents tend to refrain from interacting with other parents (Xiang & Zhou, 2015; Mu & Zhou, 2020), or simply limit their contacts only to other fellow *shidu* families from self-help groups, who are deemed as the only audience that can truly understand their pain and sorrow given common experiences (Liu, 2014a). Such voluntary self-isolation can function as a comfort to *shidu* parent’s broken heart and protect them from undesired embarrassment. However, as Chen asserts (2017), the closed network and the homogeneity among self-help group members also increases their marginalization and social exclusion, therefore eventually playing a deconstructive role to their integrity to the society.

The third difficulty faced by most *shidu* parents is their shortage of old-age support. Early in 2004, Mu (2004) already depicted one-child family as “risk family” and underlined its fragility due to single child. Since elderly people’s old-age support principally relies on their children in Chinese tradition, the loss of only child also means that bereaved parents have lost their most reliable source of financial backup and daily care. Empirical studies have revealed that *shidu* couples usually live with a worrying economic condition which subsequently amplifies their anxiety about future medical costs (Wu, Guo, & Gao, 2015; Huang, 2018). Even worse, it is not rare that the economy of some *shidu* families has been completely ruined because of the high costs they spent to save their dying child (Jin 2013; An & Xu, 2018). Beyond that, bereaved parents are also in dire need of emotional support (Chen, 2014; Lu & Lu, 2014), which has replaced economic aid to be the most valued resource for elderly people in contemporary Chinese society (Huang, 2005). Studies find that parents often expect more spiritual care from their children in their old age (Li et al., 2006; Chen, 2009), and their well-being will be significantly enhanced by a close connection with their children (Zhang & Wang, 2010; Zhang & Li, 2020). Reversely, if their spiritual needs are not met, it can cause more pain to elderly people than physical diseases (Zhang, Liu, & Zhao, 2006). It becomes evident that *shidu* couples are going to suffer more trauma, for the spiritual care from their child will never be available again. Consequently, the permanent loss of their only child only leaves bereaved parents the persistent feeling of uncertainty and distress about their rest of life.

Fourthly, *shidu* parents are heavily disadvantaged in daily care that most of them lack an essential helping hand in everyday housework and more critically an escort to hospital (Wang, 2015). On the one hand, informal support is overall less unreliable for *shidu* people in various aspects. The aid from family members becomes no more solid as the family bond weakens along with their child’s death. In the meantime, the fear of stigma and the unwillingness to be reminded of their childlessness also drive *shidu* parents to keep minimum communication with their neighbors, eventually left them a smaller social network (Wei, Jiang, & Gietel-Basten, 2016). Consequently, it can be said that they “voluntarily” turned down the support from their neighborhood and community. Although self-help groups can sometimes provide *shidu* families with necessary support, for example a signature for surgery (Xie & Wang, 2015; Chen, 2017), the general shortage

of informal support for *shidu* people has not been essentially improved, since these groups are only loosely organized and offer limited services. On the other hand, compared with informal support, formal service offered by eldercare institutes are not favored by *shidu* people, primarily because the life there involves lots of undesired interactions with non-bereaved parents. Besides, it also remains doubtful if *shidu* parents can afford relevant fees at all given their prevailing financial difficulties, let alone these homes usually demand a signature on the admission form, in most cases from a child, which inevitably denies *shidu* people's access to their services. Instead, many bereaved parents are expecting the government to build a special eldercare institution exclusively for them (Liu & Ni, 2016), but unfortunately, such service can be scarcely found in current Chinese society, except for some pilot projects.<sup>22</sup>

In sum, traumatized by the loss of their only child, *shidu* parents are plagued by both physical and psychological problems such as chronic diseases and depression. In fear of being reminded of their tragic childlessness or even stigmatized out of tradition reasons, they remain unwilling to communicate with others and therefore become gradually marginalized in the society. Without the only child being their most stable and irreplaceable pillar of financial and emotional support, *shidu* people's life in advanced age also looks less secure but much grimmer compared with others. Especially, one of the biggest challenges they have to face is the lack of a helping hand in their daily life. Whereas the support from relatives becomes less reliable because of the weakened family bond, neither the informal aid from neighbors and community nor the formal service from eldercare institutes works well on them given their general reluctance to interact with others. Consequently, the state support becomes the last resort which can alleviate their pain and sorrow by reducing their disadvantages in old-age support. In particular, as the state used to massively propagate in the 1980s that it would take responsibility for the eldercare issue for couples who followed the one-child policy, *shidu* parents naturally have a high expectation and dependence on the support from government.

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<sup>22</sup> For example, the Beijing Fifth Social Welfare Institute offers exclusive eldercare service for *shidu* people since 2016. However, only more than 100 bereaved parents are accepted due to the institute's limited capacity.

### 5.1.2. The Evolvement of State's Supply

#### *At National Level.*

The *Population and Family Planning Law*, which came into effect in 2002, counts as the first official document related to the state support for *shidu* families. Its Article 27 stipulates that local government should provide families in which the single child either died or becomes disabled with necessary aid, as long as the parents give up having another child. However, the “necessary aid” is not elaborated in detail but remained rather obscure. The state support system experienced its first substantial enrichment in 2010, when the Ministry of Finance and NHFPC formally introduced a national standard regarding the monetary subsidy for *shidu* families. The minimum amount of the financial aid was set to 100 *yuan* per month for each *shidu* parent, and it is expected to be further improved by regional governments by adding more on top of such lower limit. Yet before *shidu* parents receive the official support, there are still a number of relevant prerequisites to be met. For example, the subsidy would not be available until the wife becomes 49 years old, because it is primarily oriented to families in which the mother already passed her fertility age. In addition, as strictly prescribed in the law document, applicants shall never have another child, either by birth or adoption, in order to be entitled for the monetary aid. Along with the introduced standard and prerequisites, the 2010 motion from MoF and NFPHC laid the foundation for the further development of China's *shidu* support system. Nevertheless, it is obvious that the suggested subsidy amount of monthly 100 *yuan* could hardly meet the real demands of its addressees.

Recognizing the necessity to raise the subsidy standard, the NHFPC and four other ministries jointly proposed to further enhance the state support in 2013. According to the new policy, the minimum of *shidu* subsidy has been substantially improved to 170 and 340 *yuan* respectively for rural and urban families, and “a dynamic growth” is also pledged to ensure the financial aid would match the society's future economic condition. In the meantime, Chinese government took a step further by incorporating a broad range of care services for all *shidu* couples into the state support system, covering issues such as eldercare, medical service, and psychological counselling. In this process, regional government is assigned the major responsibility to offer necessary monetary aid and care services for bereaved parents, while social groups are relied on as the main provider of

psychological comfort, or in official term “spiritual care from society”. Noteworthy is that non-governmental entities, including education institutes, army, and mass groups, have been attached with special significance regarding *shidu* support that the NHFPC readdressed their crucial role in the spiritual care provision in 2014 that they are particularly encouraged to establish “family bond” with *shidu* parents (NHFPC & China Family Planning Association, 2014). Even at the time when universal two-child policy was initiated, the central leadership explicitly appealed for more support and charity work from social organizations (CCP Central Committee & State Council, 2015).

Since 2013, the state support system for *shidu* families has experienced rounds of improvements. This is first of all evidenced by the cancellation of subsidy difference between rural and urban families in 2016, which brings more benefits to rural *shidu* people. The unified subsidy standard was set to 340 *yuan* per month, and later raised to 450 *yuan* in 2018. In addition, an increased number of policies and laws have been introduced to further upgrade the support system. A special emphasis is placed upon prioritized medical service and insurance for *shidu* family at this stage (China Family Planning Association, 2017). For a better management of the official aid, the central authority also urged regional governments to establish a specific databank which contains the personal information of *shidu* parents and relevant record if the state support is well delivered (NHC, 2018).

*Table 6* Evolvement of National Subsidy Standard for *Shidu* Families (in Chinese *yuan*)

	2010	2013	2016	2018
Minimum (per person/ month)	100	170 (rural) 340 (urban)	340	450

Source: MoF & NHFPC 2010, NHFPC et al. 2013, MoF & NHFPC 2016, MoF & NHC 2018

*Table 7* Law and Policies Regarding the State Support System for *Shidu* Families

Title	Issued by	Effective Date
Population and Family Planning Law 人口与计划生育法	NPC	2002 / 2016 (revised)
Notice on the Pilot Program of the National Support System for Families with Disabled or Dead Single Child 关于印发全国独生子女伤残死亡家庭扶助制度试点方案的通知	NPFPC, MoF	2007

Interim Measures for the Administration of Special Funds for Birth Control Families 全国计划生育家庭特别扶助专项资金管理暂行办法	MoF, NHFPC	2010
Notice on Further Enhancing the Support for Families with Special Difficulties Due to Birth Control 关于进一步做好计划生育特殊困难家庭扶助工作的通知	NHFPC et al.	2013
Notice on Developing Social Care for Families with Special Difficulties Due to Birth Control 关于开展计划生育特殊困难家庭社会关怀的通知	NHFPC, China Family Planning Association	2014
Decision on Implementing the Universal Two-Child Policy, Reforming and Improving the Management of Family Planning Services 关于实施全面两孩政策, 改革完善计划生育服务管理的决定	CCP Central Committee, State Council	2015
Opinions on Further Improving the Investment Mechanism for Family Planning 关于进一步完善计划生育投入机制的意见	MoF, NHFPC	2016
Notice on Carrying out the Work of Inpatient Nursing Subsidy Insurance for <i>Shidu</i> Families 关于开展失独家庭住院护理补贴保险工作的通知	China Family Planning Association	2017
Notice on Further Improving the Priority and Convenience of Medical Services for Families with Special Difficulties Due to Birth Control 关于进一步做好计划生育特殊家庭优先便利医疗服务工作的通知	NHFPC	2017
Standards of Service Information Regarding Families with Special Difficulties Due to Birth Control 计划生育特殊家庭服务管理信息标准和规范	NHC	2018
Notice on Adjusting the Support System Standards for Families with Special Difficulties Due to Birth Control 关于调整计划生育家庭特别扶助制度扶助标准的通知	MoF, NHC	2018

Source: Author's compilation.

In brief, Chinese central government has been taking the *shidu* topic more seriously in recent years. However, given the fast expansion of *shidu* group, the limited financial capacity is holding the state back from providing a full range of care for all bereaved parents. The situation is further worsened by the organizational reform of family planning agency since 2018, characterized by a substantial shrinking of both its organizational scale and personnel. Consequently, government authority has to resort to

the involvement of social actors in the support provision, and it can be expected that the development of the support system in the near future will more follow a neoliberal model that non-official entities are going to gain increasing importance in the provision of social care and services for *shidu* families (Alpermann & Yang, 2020: 136).

#### *At Regional Level.*

Similar to other population policies, the development of *shidu* support system at regional level has largely followed the design of central government. While gradually improving the local subsidy standard according to national policy, regional governments also incorporated comprehensive care services into the support system as the central government urged. However, given their large administrative discretion at the same time, the support standard between provinces and even prefectures can be markedly different, and such spatial distinction has been existing for years if observed in a broader historical context. To take the selected research sites as an example, the current *shidu* support in Shaanxi, Guizhou, and Fujian is attached with differentiated degrees of political attention and legitimacy by each provincial government, which can be reflected in their relevant laws and policies. The standard of monthly monetary aid in these three regions also develops at different paces in history that the current divergence between them could be wider in earlier times.

Although all support measures and services proposed by the central government have been well implemented, usually with extra offer, at the regional level, it is noticeable that Chinese regional governments often provide distinguished policy prescriptions regarding the state support, which usually leads to a divergence of its legitimacy. A remarkable contrast can be found between the selected research sites where Shaanxi Province stands out as an example. Early in 2002, it was already stipulated in the Article 40 of the *Population and Family Planning Regulation of Shaanxi Province* that *shidu* parents should be granted a state subsidy by from local government either in one-off or periodical form. Relevant preconditions and support standard later evolved along with the regulation's historical revisions respectively in 2009 and 2016. Beyond that, Shaanxi Province has introduced the most official documents to upgrade its *shidu* support system, covering various topics such as subsidy standard, old-age support, and reproduction assistance. In comparison, though similar structure is also established based on a cluster

of regional policies in Guizhou and Fujian, neither of their provincial population and family planning regulation, which serves as the constitutional document, has ever mentioned the *shidu* support at all despite rounds of amendments. Clearly, the support system in Guizhou and Fujian lacks certain legitimacy and therefore can be argued to have been relatively downplayed given such absence of relevant prescriptions.

Meanwhile, it needs to be pointed out that the disparity of subsidy amount between provinces has been existing ever since the introduction of the monetary aid in 2012. Note that according to the most recent standard, each of the local *shidu* couple over 60-year-old can now receive a monthly subsidy of at least 1000 and 810 *yuan* respectively in Shaanxi and Guizhou, while the corresponding minimum in Fujian is set to 710 *yuan*. However, the gap between the three provinces was much greater back in 2012. At the time Fujian only provided 400 *yuan* per month for urban bereaved parents aged 60 and over, the same group of people in Shaanxi could already receive a monthly subsidy of 1000 *yuan*. More strikingly, the minimum in Guizhou was merely 166 *yuan*, which did not even reach the half of Fujian’s offer. Nevertheless, Guizhou has given the most effort in terms of subsidy upgrade among the three provincial governments. In 2015 the Guizhou standard for urban *shidu* families was raised to 605 *yuan*. Though still fell far behind compared with Shaanxi, it surpassed the equivalent of Fujian which was set to 500 *yuan*. Overall, Fujian government provides the most moderate amount of monetary aid. It used to be more than twice the amount of Guizhou’s offer but was completely exceeded by the latter in 2015 and becomes uncompetitive nowadays.

*Table 8* Development of Regional Subsidy Standard for *Shidu* Families in Research Sites (in Chinese *yuan*)

Minimum (per person/month)	Shaanxi		Guizhou	Fujian*	
	49-59 y.o.	60 y.o.			
2012	140	1000 (urban)	166	400	
2014	340	1000	400	500	
2015	340	1000	605	500	
2018	450	1000	810	610 (49-59)	710 (60 y.o.)



				y.o.)	
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\* For *shidu* people who live on subsistence allowance in Fujian Province, the subsidy standard used to be 800 *yuan* from 2014 to 2018. Since 2018 it has been raised to 900 *yuan* for 49-59 y.o. people, and 1000 *yuan* for those are 60 y.o. and over.

Source: Population and Family Planning Commission of Shaanxi Province & Shaanxi Department of Finance 2012, Population and Family Planning Commission of Fujian Province & Fujian Department of Finance 2012, Population and Family Planning Commission of Fujian Province 2013, Health and Family Planning Commission of Shaanxi Province et al. 2014, Health and Family Planning Commission of Guizhou Province et al. 2015, Health Commission of Shaanxi Province et al. 2018, Health Commission of Guizhou Province et al. 2018, Health Commission of Fujian Province et al. 2018

The prevailing gap regarding support standard between provinces is sometimes questioned by not only *shidu* families, but also local officials. In regions where the support system is relatively underdeveloped, bereaved parents often feel dissatisfied as they receive less state aid from local government, which even leads to direct confrontation with local authorities.<sup>23</sup> This is also part of the reason why most informants of this research think their daily work is stressful, especially given that *shidu* people’s unrest can become more serious if the disparity lasts consistently. In the meantime, it is notable that such gap also results in considerable pressure for local family planning agents due to the latent inter-regional competition. Lin and Tussing (2017) underline the critical role of peer comparison in pushing self-funded provinces to expand welfare expenditure so as to match the higher retirement benefits of regions which receive transfer payment from the central government. In the case of *shidu* support, officials from regions with better standard are usually proud of their work, since they are often portrayed as models that should be emulated by peers elsewhere. Yet even so, they are fully aware that the intergovernmental competition launched by their policy innovation has imposed considerable pressure on colleagues from other regions.

“Regarding the ‘home-based eldercare (居家养老)’ for *shidu* family, we offer each elderly 300 *yuan* per month as extra subsidy, so that they can purchase food or cleaning service with it. This is exclusively available in our district. When it was introduced, several other districts and counties were actually a bit dissatisfied with

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<sup>23</sup> Interview B1, 02/2019.

us, as they believed some *shidu* families (in their administrative regions) would complain and ask for the same treatment.” (Interview A1, 10/2018)

By contrast, officials from regions that offer smaller amount of subsidy have to confront not only the stress induced by those “leading models” to catch up, but also the questioning of local *shidu* families why they are treated unfairly. As a consequence, some of them had to respond by upgrading the local subsidy standard passively in spite of an increased financial burden, although what they really wished is the intervention of central government, so that both subsidy difference and the stress derived from intergovernmental competition can be completely eliminated.

“Originally the national standard of the subsidy for *shidu* family is 30,000 *yuan*, a one-off subsidy from the state. [...] Liuzhi (one county-level region in the same province) improved their one-off standard to 50,000 *yuan*, and then this forced us to upgrade too. Guiyang could not be worse than Liuzhi. But the number of *shidu* family even from a single district of Guiyang City exceeds that of their whole prefecture, the financial burden becomes larger (for us). [...] The state should unify the standard. It is good to have a unified national standard.” (Interview B1, 02/2019)

Nevertheless, a uniform standard of monthly subsidy across the country seems to be unrealistic. Given *shidu* people’s prevailing pursuit for more state aid, the central government cannot set the unified standard overly low. However, a higher standard would hardly work either, as it is going to impose a substantially increased expenditure on regional government, given that the monetary aid for *shidu* families is mainly financed by provincial and lower-tier governments. For these reasons, the current policy-making pattern which is based on the combination of centrally suggested minimum and local improvement will further persist, and the long-lasting standard divergence between regions will keep bothering both *shidu* family and local officials in the future.

## ***5.2. Interaction between Shidu Activists and Central Government***

Before the discussion dives into the confrontation between activists and the government, it is worth briefly reviewing how petitioning works under China’s administrative system. After the foundation of the People’s Republic, the petition system was institutionalized by the CCP to reinforce the connection between the Party and the mass, and its primary focus has been particularly set to reinforcing social stability since the reform and opening-up at the end of the 1970s (Ying, 2004). Accordingly, the Public Complaints and

Proposals Administration (信访局 *xinfangju*, literally Letter and Visit Bureau, or also known as the Complaints Bureau) has been established at the national, provincial, prefectural, and county levels, allowing disgruntled residents to complain about their experienced injustice or dissatisfaction, especially those caused by grassroots government or officials, by sending letters or paying visits to the agency. Although the role of the Complaints Bureau is more coordinative as it only forwards the received complaints to relevant departments rather than directly solving problems, petitioning is still particularly favored by Chinese citizens given the general lack of public input channels, especially because it poses relatively lower risk of repression than demonstrating, and the induced economic and time costs are also much lower compared to administrative litigation.

Complainants are allowed to resort to higher level authorities, even used to include the central government in earlier days, since such “leapfrog petitioning” not only addresses the public concern about the interconnection between the complained officials and local Letter and Visit agencies, but also facilitates the supervision of subordinates by higher level governments (Feng, 2012). However, as petition cases received by the central government skyrocketed in the early 2000s, the State Council had to revise the *Regulations on Letters and Visits* in 2005, emphasizing the principles of territorial jurisdiction that local governments should be responsible for resolving the grievance of petitioners. In the meantime, petitioners are also demanded to only complain at the Letter and Visit Bureau at the corresponding level or only one level higher. In so doing, the work pressure of the central government becomes much relieved, while citizens’ dissatisfaction could also be distracted to local governments (Cai, 2008b; Benney, 2016). Nevertheless, it is still very common these days that complainants insist on petitioning in Beijing due to their strong distrust of local governments.

As aforementioned, *shidu* parents have been tortured by various problems in health, social life, and eldercare after losing their only child. Although the state has established and continuously upgraded the official support system to help these families with their life in advanced age, a full range of care services required by bereaved parents can hardly be met at the current stage. Conceivably, their life prior to the introduction of state support could only be worse off, when the *shidu* issue was not put on the official agenda at all. To get their predicament officially addressed, some activists choose to directly confront government authorities. And since collective action is more likely to be

answered by Chinese government (Chen, Pan, & Xu, 2016), the tension between the two parts has eventually led to a number of large-scale petitions in the last decade, aiming to make their voice heard by central government so as to receive an effective solution to their difficulties.

Table 9 Petitions of *shidu* Parents at the National Level

Time	Number of Signatures	Target	Title
05. 2010	600+	NPFPC	我们的诉求 (Our demands)
06. 2012	2432	NPFPC	关于要求给与失独父母国家补偿的申请(Application regarding demands by <i>shidu</i> parents for state compensation)
04. 2014	240	NHFPC	N/A*
06. 2014	7700+ families	Standing Committee of NPC; State Council	落实政府对失独家庭帮助的呼吁书(Written appeal to the government to implement assistance for <i>shidu</i> families)
05. 2015	1753	General Office of the CCP Central Committee, State Council, NHFPC	全国部分失独者的诉求 (Demands by a section of the nation's <i>shidu</i> )
12. 2015	N/A	Prime Minister, Ministry Leaders	全国失独家庭诉求书 (Written demands by the nation's <i>shidu</i> )

Sources: <https://www.weibo.com/p/2304186037e1870102wjm3> 2016; <https://www.mala.cn/thread-9189028-1-1.html> 2014; <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2014-04-25/141530011113.shtml> 2014; <http://www.sdzzj.net/thread-4142-1-1.html> 2014; [https://www.weibo.com/2913557071/EfmQ6gKtM?type=comment#\\_rnd1573314211053](https://www.weibo.com/2913557071/EfmQ6gKtM?type=comment#_rnd1573314211053) 2016; <http://www.sdzzj.net/thread-148785-1-1.html> 2015

\* Appeal for formal written answer from government to the petition in June 2012

### 5.2.1. Petition Contents

In May 2010, 18 activists collected more than 600 signatures from *shidu* parents and presented their collective demands in a letter at the NPFPC, appealing for official attentiveness to their torment and an upgrade of their monetary subsidy. Family planning agents at central level did not respond directly or offer any explicit reply to their petition. Instead, they soon applied the previous pilot subsidy policy to the whole country by introducing the *Interim Measures for the Administration of Special Funds for Birth Control Families*. However, the first-round confrontation with the central government

turned out to be overall fruitless for *shidu* people, as there lacks an explicit answer and solution from the state to their problems, and the monetary aid remains unchanged at the monthly 100 *yuan*. In particular, activists were enraged by the official definition of subsidy as a “supportive money (扶助金)” rather than “compensation (补偿)”. Because the former term generally describes various subsidies for disadvantaged social groups, such as homeless or disabled people, the use of “supportive money” is believed to have blurred government’s responsibility for all *shidu* families as a unique victim of state policy. Under the category of “supportive money”, the aid to *shidu* parents becomes a “voluntary” and benevolent offer from government, which could be simply cancelled when the authority believes such support is beyond their capacity. For these reasons, petitioners went further with petitioning and became determined to pursue both the increase of subsidy amount and the change of its official term.

In June 2012, *shidu* activists proposed a more detailed plan about the improvement of their subsidy that its standard should be calculated based on the annual disposable income per capita of their residence region. Since then, their collective action has become characterized by the pattern of “rightful resistance”. Suggested by O’Brien and Li (2006), rightful resistance discusses a special form of public protest in Chinese society that protesters deliberately maneuver within established institutional structure and appeal to policies and official ideologies to justify their protest against the violation of civil entitlements or rights caused by local policy implementation. This can be first seen in the fact that *shidu* activists unequivocally referred to existing laws and social justice in their second petition letter to underpin their demands. The petitioners blamed although about 27,000 million *yuan* are annually levied as social supporting fees by family planning agency, Chinese government never used them to compensate *shidu* people’s sacrifice. Even worse, according to their estimation, there could have been 13 million of “births out of quota” who should be punished but actually escaped from a total fine of 260 billion *yuan*. By comparing themselves to these families, *shidu* parents perceived huge injustice as they followed the state’s call as loyal and rightful citizens but have to suffer unbearable trauma, which is poorly compensated by the government. As a result, petitioners once again reaffirmed their strong demand for “state compensation”, while fiercely bashing those who violated family planning laws and had “births out of quota”. By resorting to laws and justice, *shidu* parents expected to make their pursuits

more convincing so that they would be better addressed by authority, and in fact, they made a breakthrough with such strategy this time, since the central government, despite reluctance, held some representatives from the petition group in a meeting and had a deep conversation with them. Both explanation and promise were made from the official side that the central government would work out a more refined policy within 3 or 4 months to essentially improve the *shidu* support. However, at the same time, the NHFPC vigorously rejected the petitioners' demand for a "state compensation", which was claimed to have no legal basis. Disappointed by such response from government, activists turned to the National People's Congress and suggested amendments to the Family Planning Law. Unsurprisingly, they failed to receive any reply from authority.

In September 2012, central family planning agency gave their first feedback to *shidu* parents after the meeting in June that a formal answer could not be available in short time because of the coming organizational reform. In fact, it took more than one year for the newly formed NHFPC to readdress the *shidu* appeal. The authority introduced the *Notice on Further Supporting Families with Special Difficulties Due to Birth Control* in December 2013 to upgrade the national minimum from the mere 100 *yuan* to 170 *yuan* and 340 *yuan* respectively for rural and urban *shidu* families, and a "dynamic growth" of subsidy in the future is guaranteed as well. Notably, the improvement shortly followed the announcement of a conditional two-child policy proposed at the Third Plenary Session of the Party's 18th Central Committee in November, which allows all couples to have the second birth as long as either of the spouses is an only child. As such birth relaxation could disappoint or even enrage *shidu* parents, the increase of subsidy standard is likely also an intentional alleviation to their dissatisfaction. However, *shidu* activists were far from being satisfied about the improvement, contending their old-age support had not been secured by any specific law or regulation. Their discontent soon escalated when the state reemphasized the subsidy was an official aid rather than a compensation for their infringed right, especially when the central authority repeatedly rejected their pursuit with the rhetoric that such compensation was not underpinned by any law or policy. Given *shidu* people's failed attempt to amend the *Population and Family Planning Law*, it seems to be a dead end for them to fully depend on legal documents to support their demand for government compensation and responsibility.

The struggle over the definition of monetary aid and government responsibility did not cease but went further. Activists decided to confront the reformed NHFPC in April 2014, only a quarter after the introduction of the newest policy. While explicitly articulating their rejection of the current term of “supportive money”, bereaved parents particularly protested against the official categorization of them as the indistinct “family with special difficulties”. Instead, they strongly urged the central government to formally recognize them as a specific group of bereaved single-child parents, excluding those families with disabled only child and thereby highlighting the *shidu*’s special status. Through this, they wished to call for more serious concerns from government. Meanwhile, as part of their pursuit of justice, petitioners reclaimed that their sacrifice to the country must be compensated by the officially levied social supporting fees. But unfortunately, all their efforts turned out to be in vain, as the central authority once again emphasized that the state’s family planning campaign is not the direct cause of their becoming bereaved (See for example, People.cn, 2014). It becomes evident that from the government’s point of view, there is no space for relevant discussion at all, as long as petitioners aim at the official acknowledgement of its responsibility for causing *shidu*.

Having had enough disappointing interactions with family planning agents, bereaved parents promptly collected more than 7700 signatures within two months and jumped over family planning agency but resorted to superior political organs in June 2014. Notably, such strategy also conforms with rightful resistance that after failing to have their grievance resolved by relevant government departments, activists would gradually confine their petition addressees to a few but specific top leaders with higher authority. This time, the activists targeted at the Standing Committee of National People’s Congress and State Council, expecting their serious problems to be heard by top leaders and solved by answers with higher authority, so that they could be saved from the current predicament ultimately. Meanwhile, to get rid of frustrating contacts with perfunctory family planning agents in the future, *shidu* parents proposed the establishment of a specific government organ to facilitate their communication with the central authority. Though did not spend much in the dispute over subsidy minimum this time, petitioners explicitly mentioned some other major challenges in their life regarding the issue of old-age support that deserve high attention from government, for example bonuses for public

transportation, medical service, and, most importantly, a particular nursing home which is exclusively accessible for *shidu* group.

In 2015, another two petitions were launched by *shidu* family and again presented at leaders from the very top tiers, such as the heads of the General Offices of the CCP's Central Committee and State Council, as well as the prime minister. In general, activists repeated their demands that the state must take responsibility for their old-age support, including subsidy improvement, the establishment of communication channel, and bonuses in daily life. But it is worth noting that they reemphasized in May that *shidu* people deserve to be categorized as a unique group for their extraordinary and incomparable sacrifice, while their petition in December particularly underlined that the subsidy inequality between rural and urban parents should be removed. As a routinized part, activists urged over and over that the official support must be enshrined in laws so as to specify the state's responsibility for causing *shidu*. However, for legitimacy reasons, it is conceivable that these demands could receive no prompt and direct answer from central authority at all. Instead, central government responded again in a roundabout way by introducing an increasing number of policies from 2015 to 2018 to upgrade the state support for *shidu* families. Some special pursuits from petitioners, for example a unified standard of economic aid for both rural and urban bereaved parents, have been fulfilled as well. Through this, the government has avoided direct confrontations that could escalate conflicts with petitioners. Meanwhile, by incrementally improving the living conditions of all *shidu* families, the state could have somewhat relieved the tension between the two parts, as evidenced by the fact that there have been no more *shidu* petitions targeting at the central government since 2015.<sup>24</sup> Most essentially, the legitimacy of both the state and family planning program has been well preserved, since the state neither recognized the causality between state policy and *shidu*, nor made any promise about such recognition.

### 5.2.2. Trend and Features

#### *Disputes over State's Responsibility.*

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<sup>24</sup> Certainly, this could also be explained by local official's good work in maintaining social stability that they managed to prevent *shidu* activists from going to Beijing.



Over the half decade, the contest between *shidu* activists and the state focuses on the question if the government should take unequivocal responsibility for the miserable life of millions of bereaved parents. Petitioners insist in every letter that the strict birth planning is the direct cause of their being *shidu*, as one-child policy restricted them to have only one child, the death of which subsequently resulted in their current tough situation. Based on this logic, they firmly hold the view that the state must acknowledge its responsibility. For the severe damages induced by the state's family planning policy, the official monetary aid must be clearly defined as a compensation, but not any "charitable help" to general weak groups that can be arbitrarily revoked depending on government's financial capacity. *Shidu* petitioners even took a step further by suggesting an amendment to relevant laws in 2012 to formalize their demands. However, these efforts are determined to fail, because they clearly challenge and are going to undermine the legitimacy of the state policy or even the regime.

Conversely, central authority explicitly denied the suggested causal link between the status of *shidu* and the state's family planning campaign, arguing that all parents could choose to have more births in one-child policy era, even though "birth out of quota" led to severe economic sanction and probably also the dismissal from employment at that time. By ignoring *shidu* people's attempts to redefine "supportive money" as "compensation", central government exempts itself from the legal responsibility for bereaved parents and defended the legitimacy of its decades-long birth planning. Nonetheless, as Lu and Lu (2014) point out, *shidu* support as a "social policy" should focus on the assistance to bereaved parents so as to achieve social justice, but it actually serves the implementation of birth planning as a "public policy" and provides legitimacy for the latter. Consequently, the function and development of *shidu* support is largely constraint by its dependence on family planning program.

#### *Diversified Demands.*

While the emphasis of the first two rounds of petitions is primarily placed on the subsidy amount and the definition of state support, *shidu* people's claims have become growingly complex over time. In earlier years, activists mainly complained about the low subsidy standard. They explicitly demanded a large one-off payment based on local economic condition in 2012, and later enlarged it to a combination of both lump-sum solatium and

periodic subsidy in accordance with local average wages in 2014. Moreover, for the reason of justice, *shidu* parents also made it clear that social supporting fees ought to be specifically used to compensate their loss. Despite the significant improvement of financial aid at both central and regional level, many scholars still hold a critical view that the current standard is too low, and the disparity between regions needs to be balanced (Jin, 2013; Lü et al., 2016; Lu & Wu, 2016).

Since 2014, more non-monetary pursuits have been integrated into *shidu* people's petition in addition to their appeal for more subsidy. The new demands principally center on their dire need of a full-ranged old-age support, and included are bonuses and priority in medical service, an insurance covered by local government, and a "special guardian system" which provides them with necessary signatures for surgeries or operations. For better eldercare in their advanced age, petitioners particularly asked for a separate nursing institute exclusively available for them to avoid any contact with non-bereaved parents, which is also supported by scholars (Liu & Ni, 2016). Besides, given years of ineffective interactions with family planning agents at both local and central level, the establishment of a specific state organ as communication channel is also suggested by *shidu* activists, expecting their future needs will be addressed with sufficient attention from the authority.

Another focus of the *shidu* petitions is the rectification of the group's official term, which goes to accompany their demand for government responsibility. As articulated in many petition letters, they refused to be categorized as "families with special difficulties" together with those with disabled single child. By underlining their particularity, namely their incomparable pain and sorrow, *shidu* activists try to create a more homogenous collective identity and further specify the boundaries between bereaved parents and other disadvantaged groups such as homeless people. Through this, it is highlighted they are a unique group of poor victims of state policy. Consequently, while imposing greater moral and political stress on government authority, such rectification strategy with an emphasis on their bitterness serves to underpin their insistence that official support must be defined as compensation. It can be seen that the petition aim of *shidu* activists starts from the subsidy amount but goes beyond economic claims in following years, targeting at state's responsibility, a comprehensive system of old-age support, as well as the channel for better communication with authority.

### *Firm Trust in Central Authority.*

Noteworthy is that *shidu* activists have thoroughly kept a high expectation and trust in the central government during their petitioning, albeit such trust could be in fact only limited to a few top leaders. Even though their dissatisfaction with government's responses is frequently seen in journalist or online reports, activists still demonstrated their solid conviction in each confrontation that government would take good care of their grievance and bring them the justice they have in mind, as evidenced by the full recognition and support for central authority in their petition letters. Even after rounds of unsuccessful petitioning at the national family planning agency, they did not give up the negotiation with the central government but turned to leaders from higher ranks and placed their earnest expectation on the latter. *Shidu* activists first shifted their aim to the highest level of both legislative and executive branches in June 2014. After being disappointed again, they resorted to the General Offices of both the CCP Central Committee and State Council in May 2015 and finally submitted their last letter to the Prime Minister as well as other ministry heads seven months later. In general, activists expect there will be certain upright and sympathetic leaders in the central government who really understand *shidu*'s sacrifice to the country and thus are willing to work for their benefits. Even if some officials from certain branches let them down, petitioners' persistent trust in central authority will not disappear. Instead, it only drives them to address some other top leaders, especially those from higher tiers, so that their pursuits could attract enough official attention and the previous "wrongdoings" of lower-level agents could be corrected.

### *Rightful Resistance.*

In their rounds of petitions, *shidu* activists can be found to have followed the pattern of rightful resistance. To make a point of their predicament and the urgent need of an upgraded state support, petitioners cited not only laws and policies, such as the constitution, the *Marriage Law*, and the *Law on Protection of the Rights and Interests of the Elderly*, but also various speeches of top leaders to provide legitimacy for their claims. Though they once warned in 2012 that the state's insufficient attention to their demands could lead to *shidu* parents' radicalization and "extreme problems" for society, activists have overall presented themselves as lawful and loyal citizens who are more inclined to

negotiate with reason and rationality, therefore should be handled with fairness and justice from the central authority.

In the meantime, their attitude toward historical family planning can reflect such rightful resistance. Petitioners have repeatedly stressed their historical compliance with birth planning and the firm support for central authority. They even turned to support one-child policy in earlier letters to emphasize their significant contribution to the state policy. In 2012, activists fiercely attacked those 130 million unregistered “over-quota” births, which escaped a total fine of around 260 billion *yuan*. *Shidu* parents abided by rules in the one-child policy era but have to suffer from a bitter life currently. This is tremendously unfair to them, given that families violated laws at that time not only escaped economic punishment, but can now enjoy the happiness of a complete family. With such stark contrast, petitioners highlight the injustice of their being ignored by authority, again using their compliance to the state to reinforce the legitimacy of their demands (Greenhalgh, 2003). However, as government keeps shirking responsibility, the resistance of *shidu* activists goes stronger that they started to openly blame the one-child policy as a deprivation of their reproductive right, while considering the introduction of universal two-child policy is to rub salt into their wound. Still, petitioners never give up the rhetoric in their letters that they “answered the call of the state and fulfilled their obligation to family planning”. By referring to relevant laws and policies, as well as their huge contribution and sacrifices for state policy, *shidu* activists consistently rely on reasons to convince the central government to fulfill their needs.

In sum, the serious conflict between *shidu* parents and government authority is demonstrated by series of petitions at the central government. Activists have overall exercised restraint in their collective actions, for example by respecting the authority of top leaders and emphasizing their contributions and sacrifices in earlier days, trying to convince the government with reason. Nonetheless, the conflict between the two parts remains unlikely to be resolved, not only because the pursuits of bereaved parents cover multiple dimensions and are often beyond the government’s supply capacity, but more importantly, because neither of the two parts is willing to concede on the core dispute, namely if the government is responsible for the emergence of *shidu*. Given that, it is certain *shidu* families are going to further confront officials in the future for the upgrade

of state aid, regardless at the central or local level. Thus, family planning agents still have to take this special group seriously and also bear huge work pressure in work.

### 5.3. Summary

One-child policy was introduced by Chinese central government to control the fast population increase so as to better balance the natural resources and socioeconomic development. However, an enormous number of *shidu* families have emerged after decades of strict family planning as an unexpected by-product, which in turn has deeply shaped the implementation of the current universal two-child policy. Notwithstanding the divergence in the estimated figure, *shidu*'s group size turns out to be shocking that the number could have exceeded one million in the early 2010s, and it keeps growing rapidly with an annual increase of approximate 76,000 families. Besides, bereaved parents overall suffer from a hardened life due to the death of their single child that they become much more disadvantaged in various fields such as health condition, social network, and eldercare. Particularly, since they lost their only child as the irreplaceable and most reliable support provider in advanced age, formal aid from the state becomes indispensable for *shidu* parents in this sense.

Initiated by the central government, a comprehensive support system for *shidu* parents has been set up and incrementally improved by local authorities within the last decade, dealing with their eldercare issues such as economy, medical service, and insurances. While the national standard of *shidu* subsidy has experienced an essential improvement from 100 *yuan* to 450 *yuan* in the last decade, its upgrade at provincial level is even more significant, as proved by the increase of Guizhou's minimum from 166 *yuan* to 810 *yuan* per month. However, the prevailing conflict between the demand and supply of state support persists that the offer from government can barely cover *shidu* people's needs. Many *shidu* people ask for a full-ranged official support, including for example the completely free medical service and eldercare institutes exclusively available for them, as Chinese government used to pledge to take care of one-child parents in their old age. Unfortunately, this can hardly work in practice given the large group size and rapid expansion of *shidu* families. As the fieldwork of this research proves, a slight increase of subsidy standard can impose considerable financial burden on local governments, let alone to offer a support system that fully meets *shidu*'s demands. In fact, such burden is

often increased by the competition between regional governments to provide better treatment, eventually resulting in a larger work stress for local agents and even strong negative feelings toward *shidu* people.

The persisting demand and supply conflict over state support has eventually led to rounds of petitions to central government participated by up to thousands of bereaved parents in the recent decade. While complaining about the insufficiency in monetary aid, *shidu* petitioners urged the state to stick to its commitment and provide them with full-ranged old-age support. Moreover, they relentlessly bashed government's responsibility shirking, as officials persistently refused to recognize the causality between one-child policy and their *shidu* status. Yet, despite the frustration from unsuccessful appeals, *shidu* activists have never changed their firm trust in central authority. Once disappointed by certain government branches, they did not cease to protest but turned to some other top leaders, or more specifically those from higher tiers. In general, petitioners have followed the pattern of "rightful resistance" in the collective action. They not only referred to relevant laws and policies to support the legitimacy of their demands, but also emphasized their obedience to authority and contribution to the previous family planning campaign. By portraying themselves as lawful citizens, *shidu* parents wish to find certain righteous leader of the central government who can treat them with justice and fairness and therefore make their demands fully met.

In contrast, Chinese central government's persistence in the definition of state support has not been altered at all despite series of *shidu* petitions at national level. For reasons of policy and government legitimacy, officials have categorically denied the direct causality between the emergence of *shidu* and family planning, therefore the state support remains as an aid to disadvantaged social groups instead of any compensation suggested by bereaved parents. Especially, such logic has been echoed in a number of studies as well. Though there is also research speaking for *shidu* families, arguing bereaved parents are "policy-driven" and therefore the state should take its responsibility (Mu, 2015; 2016), most of others stand with government and contend one-child policy is not the direct cause of the loss of only child, thus the state is only partially responsible for the issue (Lu & Lu, 2014; Lu & Wu, 2016), or should be totally excused from relevant accusation at all (Ci & Zhou, 2015; Wei & Zhan, 2019). A consensus is reached that official aid is still indispensable, but this primarily serves the core agenda of stability

maintenance, as some straightforwardly warn that *shidu* parents might be mentally unstable and easily radicalized toward state's policy (Liu & Ni, 2016; Mu, 2016; Liu et al., 2019).

Given the unresolvable dispute between bereaved parents and government over both the amount and definition of the state support, local family planning agents' nerve are often on edge that they must spare no effort to prevent any escalation of conflicts. For this purpose, they not only need to upgrade monetary aid for *shidu* families in general, but must well handle those activists as well, who allegedly always insist on claims that can hardly be settled. As the informant from Xi'an plainly puts it, their aim is to ensure those who have "unreasonable claims" not to cause any trouble for local government or to bother the central authority in Beijing.<sup>25</sup> However, in extreme cases that *shidu* activists managed to protest in front of central officials, local agents would not hesitate to take more effective measures to minimize their previous failure in conflict control and stability maintenance, for example by making a long journey to Beijing to stop petitioners from confronting the central government in collective action. As a *shidu* activist confirms:

"On 5th June 2012, 80 (*shidu*) people from different provinces arrived in Beijing and we 5 representatives prepared to submit our application for state compensation. Due to the bureaucratic work style of the NPFPC [...] we received no response, but those 70 people who stayed in hotel received phone calls from their local family planning agency, asking them to return. [...] At that night, family planning agents from all related regions rushed to the NPFPC with a top speed by taking planes or high-speed trains, wishing to take us home."<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> It is common that Chinese local officials offer more generous treatment to those who are particularly non-compliant in the conflict with government to trade for their compromise and "being stable". As revealed in many resettlement disputes, families that strongly resisted would usually receive a larger amount of one-off compensation from the state. However, the fieldwork experience of this research could not provide similar evidence. All interviewed officials carefully avoided detailed description about how they handle different irrational petitioners, since they regard the stability maintenance work as politically sensitive. The question remains open, if local officials will offer differentiated treatment to repetitive petitioners so as to cease their protests in the case of *shidu*.

<sup>26</sup> Available HTTP: <[https://weibo.com/p/2304186037e1870102wjm3?reason=&retcode=>](https://weibo.com/p/2304186037e1870102wjm3?reason=&retcode=) accessed (24 March 2021).

Officials from the central government can now feel relieved as they have not been addressed by petitioners in recent years since 2016, but local authorities remain deeply troubled by daily interactions with *shidu* families. In particular, since many bereaved parents are well connected and actively engaged in both local self-help organizations and online forums, this special group becomes to form a potential of “destabilization”, bringing intense pressure on local family planning agents in the new birth policy era. Unfortunately for this reason, some grassroots governments even showed open hostility to all *shidu* families by categorizing them as “evil forces” that must be wiped out, albeit such grievous insult aroused widespread question and criticism from the society (Yang, 2019). As the *shidu* group size keeps expanding fast, the “left-over problem” reasonably becomes the major focus of local family planning agents, and its significance will continue to grow.

## **6. Cadre Management System and the Focus on Shidu Family**

Historical factors such as the *shidu* group’s fast expansion, their serious difficulties in life, and the unresolved disputes over the state support all together have pushed local family planning agents to pay special attention to these bereaved parents. Yet to better understand why the focus of universal two-child policy shifted from fertility encouragement to *shidu* family in practice, it is also indispensable to take a closer look at the institutional framework in which Chinese officials are embedded. More specifically, the preference and behavior of family planning agents are fundamentally structured by the target responsibility system, which is introduced by Chinese central authority to control local cadres by linking their political career to work performance. As targets are attached varied priorities by top leaders and the performance of maintaining social stability outweighs fertility boost in the decision of cadre’s promotion, it becomes rational and reasonable for local family planning agents devote themselves to the leftover problem rather than the construction of a fertility-friendly society. This chapter further elaborates why officials’ focus is placed on *shidu* issue under the shaping influence from the target responsibility system.



## 6.1. Cadre Management System

### 6.1.1. Development of the Systematic Cadre Control

After the reinauguration of Deng Xiaoping, Chinese politics is themed with comprehensive reforms, and the upgrade of cadre management system plays a key role in this process (Manion, 1985). On the one hand, more and more younger cadres with better education experience are recruited to replace those revolutionary veterans in state organs (Li & Bachman, 1989; Goldstein, 1994; Zhou, 1995). On the other hand, the promotion of cadres increasingly relies on their performance rather than faction (Edin, 2003; Nathan, 2003; Whiting, 2017). With the assessment of cadre's work, behavior, and political loyalty, top leaders of the CCP manage to maintain an effective control over its members at local level and have successfully integrated decentralization into its authoritarian system (Landry, 2008).

Table 10 Policy Documents of Cadre Management

Title	Effective Time	Issued by
Opinions on Implementing the Cadre Assessment System 关于实行干部考核制度的意见	1979	Organization Department of the CCP Central Committee
Notice on Trial Implementation of the Annual Work Assessment System for Local Leading Party and Government Cadres 关于试行地方党政领导干部年度考核制度的通知  Plan for the Annual Assessment of Leading Party and Government Cadres at the County (City, District) Level 县(市、区)党政领导干部年度考核方案	1988	Organization Department of the CCP Central Committee
Plan for the Annual Assessment of Leading Cadres at the Department Level of Central Government (Trial) 中央国家机关司处级领导干部年度考核方案(试行)	1989	Organization Department of the CCP Central Committee
Notice on Improving the Work Performance Assessment of the Leadership of County (City) Party Committees and Governments 关于加强和完善县(市)党委、政府领导班子工作实绩考核的通知	1995	Organization Department of the CCP Central Committee
Assessment Methods and Standard System of County-Level Party and Government Leadership 县级党政领导班子政绩考核办法及考评标准体系	1996	Organization Department of the CCP Central Committee

Interim Provisions on the Assessment of Leading Party and Government Cadres 党政领导干部考核工作暂行规定	1998	Organization Department of the CCP Central Committee
The Outline of Deepening the Reform of the Cadre and Personnel System 深化干部人事制度改革纲要	2000	General Offices of the CCP Central Committee
Provisions on the Administrative Liability for Extraordinary Safety Accidents 关于特大安全事故行政责任追究的规定	2001	The State Council
Regulations on the Selection and Appointment of Leading Party and Government Cadres 党政领导干部选拔任用工作条例 <sup>27</sup>	2002	General Offices of the CCP Central Committee
Trial Measures for Comprehensive Assessment and Evaluation of Local Leading Party and Government Leaders 体现科学发展观要求的地方党政领导班子和领导干部综合考核评价试行办法 <sup>28</sup>	2006	Organization Department of the CCP Central Committee
Interim Provisions on the Implementation of the Accountability of Leading Party and Government Cadres 关于实行党政领导干部问责的暂行规定	2009	General Offices of the CCP Central Committee and the State Council
Opinions on Insisting and Improving the Responsibility System of Family Planning Target Management 关于坚持和完善计划生育目标管理责任制的意见	2016	General Offices of the CCP Central Committee and the State Council
Provisions on the Responsibility System of Production Safety for Local Leading Party and Government Leaders 地方党政领导干部安全生产责任制规定	2018	General Offices of the CCP Central Committee and the State Council
Regulations on the Assessment of Leading Party and Government Cadres 党政领导干部考核工作条例	2019	General Offices of the CCP Central Committee

Source: Author's compilation.

The assessment system dates to 1979 when the CCP Central Committee introduced four fundamental qualities as the determinants of cadre's promotion, namely their political discipline (德), competence (能), diligence (勤), and achievement (绩). Both regular and annual evaluation of cadre's work performance are suggested, with corresponding reward and punishment attached.<sup>29</sup> The system was further refined in the

<sup>27</sup> Revised in 2014 and 2019.

<sup>28</sup> Upgraded to *Opinions on Establishing the Evaluation Mechanism for Party and Government Leading Cadres* 《关于建立促进科学发展的党政领导班子和领导干部考核评价机制的实施意见》 in 2009.

<sup>29</sup> The 2019 updated guideline provides the latest regulations about cadre assessment, according to which the evaluation of officials is comprised of four parts, including the regular and annual

late 1980s, marked by the enactment of three relevant policies that prescribe the annual assessment of both local and central cadres. Notably, it is primarily designed to regulate leading officials from regional governments, as the Party's Central Committee first applied new rules to local cadres rather than their colleagues at central level, and then issued extra documents respectively in 1995 and 1996 to strengthen the performance review of county-level leadership groups. Nevertheless, the earlier published documents did not offer detailed prescriptions about how the performance assessment should be conducted.

A milestone in the institutionalization of cadre control is reached when the *Interim Provisions on the Assessment of Leading Party and Government Cadres* came into effect in 1998, which for the first time offer explicit stipulations to deal with the assessment process and participants. Four years later, the interim provisions are further upgraded and replaced by the *Regulations on the Selection and Appointment of Leading Party and Government Cadres*. The document not only incorporates probity (廉) as the fifth necessary quality for cadres, but also underlines the significance of work performance for their political career. Most importantly, a broad range of work tasks are specified in the new policy to be accomplished by leading cadres for relevant performance evaluation, covering multiple aspects such as economic development, education, employment, production safety, environment protection, social stability, and family planning. By far, a full-fledged assessment system has been formally established. As noted by Heberer and Trappel (2013), while defining the behavioral framework and providing incentives for Chinese officials, the assessment system also functions as an instrument of discipline and political communication, since it not only regulates the behavior of officials in conformity with moral standards, but also enables higher-level governments to express their expectation and receive feedbacks about policy implementation from their subordinates. Through this, the system becomes conducive to a rational and efficient bureaucracy.

Since the 21st century, an increasing number of new rules have been introduced by the Party's center to optimize its control over local cadres with an emphasis placed on their responsibility for several key targets. For instance, production safety became a

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evaluation of their daily work, the accomplishment of special tasks, and the review at their term's end.

prioritized task when the State Council published the *Provisions on the Administrative Liability for Extraordinary Safety Accidents* in 2001. Similarly, the initiation of *Opinions on Insisting and Improving the Responsibility System of Family Planning Target Management* in 2016 reflects top leaders' great concern on family planning program. In particular, the prevention and proper handling of emergencies and accidents is also set as a top agenda for local cadres. On the one hand, it is noteworthy that "competence" as one of the fifth fundamental qualities serves the measurement of cadre's ability to tackle accidents and mass incidents. On the other hand, as prescribed in the interim provisions on accountability issued in 2009, leading cadres must take political responsibility when mass incidents or accidents happen in their administrative region "because of their decision-making and work mistakes, poor management, power abuse, or improper handling of emergency which leads to situation deterioration and adverse impacts".<sup>30</sup>

In general, since the reform and opening-up, Chinese government has attached growing significance to official's actual work achievement, which serves as the yardstick to determine their promotion. The cadre assessment system primarily aims to regulate the behavior of local leading officials, both as individuals and in leadership teams. With the specification of concrete work targets in the late 1990s, the evaluation of performance becomes operationalized. Moreover, a number of targets, such as family planning and the prevention of conflicts between the mass and government authority, have been given higher priority by the CCP top leaders, as reflected in the regulations which establish special responsibility for these tasks. In order to become advantaged in promotion, local cadres have to be fully devoted to the key tasks and act in line with the expectation of central leaders.

### *6.1.2. Target Responsibility System*

As Tao et al. (2012) point out, the current systematic assessment of cadres covers four different types of work, including the evaluation of the leadership team's comprehensive

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<sup>30</sup> Notably, it remains vague how many participants will constitute a mass incident. Usually, mass incident is defined by whether the collective action has caused "situation deterioration and adverse impacts" to society. However, the yardstick "situation deterioration and adverse impacts" itself is highly subjective as well and often needs to be determined by superior government leaders in practice.

target responsibilities, individual leader's five fundamental qualities, the target responsibilities of the subordinate organ of the same administrative branch, and the regular evaluation of all government officials. In particular, the former two types have stronger influence on cadre's behavior, because the first can substantially determine whether leading cadres receive corresponding reward or punishment, while the second has the closest connection to their appointment and promotion.

In stark contrast to the assessment of cadre's five qualities, the result of which primarily derives from the opinion poll and voting within a small group, the target responsibility system is based on clearly specified indicators, for example a concrete figure of local GDP growth rate. The central government first translates macro policies into concrete objectives and then assign them downwards through multiple government levels. As the next step, local governments make a list of targets to be achieved based on these objectives and set up corresponding performance standards for relevant assessment. To formalize the responsibility of leading cadres, a performance contract will be signed between leadership team members and the government one-tier higher. Though other officials are not explicitly included in the contract, they have to take the assigned tasks with full seriousness as well for reasons such as promotion, finance, and security (Zuo, 2017). Eventually, the performance of each target in contract will be reviewed at the political turnover and further decide the career of local leaders.

#### *Targets with differed weights.*

As the term "comprehensive target responsibilities" suggests, the performance evaluation covers a variety of tasks such as economic development, the maintenance of social stability, environment protection, and political loyalty etc.. However, these targets vary from each other in terms of their impact on the result, as they are given different weights in assessment. For instance, the government of Guangzhou City sets the weight of "economic development" to 28% in their assessment of cadre's performance, followed by "social justice" with 25%, "public satisfaction" with 20%, "environment protection" with 15%, and "government cost-saving" with merely 12% (Zheng & Li, 2010). Such difference derives from local leadership team's discretion granted by official regulations that they may determine their own sets of assessment indicators and relevant weights in light of regional conditions (Organization Department of the CCP Central Committee,

1998). For the same reason, it is also common that the same target is attached distinguished importance between regions. In comparison to Guangzhou, the result of “economic development” counts as 30% of the performance in a district government of Xi’an City, whereas “social development” makes up 16%, “the construction of leadership team” 15%, “people’s livelihood” 15%, “public security” 12%, and “resource and environment” 12% (Chen, Ma, & Bao, 2011: 275). Conspicuously, the task of environment protection is less relevant to officials from Xi’an than their colleagues from Guangzhou. Yet, despite all these differences, it needs to be noted that economy turns out to be the unequivocal top target for most Chinese local governments.<sup>31</sup> Economy gains its prominence in the assessment system first of all because it is in line with Chinese government’s work focus on economic development since the reform and opening-up. Besides, it is much easier to quantify economic target so as to assign tasks to subordinate cadres and evaluate their performance in an objective way. Given this, most studies on the incentivizing effect of target responsibility system revolve around the causal link between economic progress and cadre promotion.

More specifically, targets are further distinguished between hard and soft ones to specify their differentiated influences on cadre’s behavior (O’Brien & Li, 1999; Edin, 2003). Hard targets refer to key tasks which must be fully carried out by local officials, including economic development, tax collection, safe production, and environment protection etc.. Usually, they are assigned specific quota from superior leaders to facilitate the assessment and have larger weight. By contrast, soft targets are less quantified but involve more qualitative evaluation. They are usually attached less attention, and some of them can be easily accomplished in a formalistic and routinized way (Qin, X., 2017). To take an example, the improvement of leadership team’s work style count as a typical soft target, and local cadres are granted considerable levy space during its implementation and evaluation. In addition, there are a number of veto targets as the most crucial determinants of performance result. Once officials fail to accomplish these tasks, they will lose the promotion opportunity or even receive severe punishment, regardless of how successful the result of other performances look. Veto targets are applied to ensure that

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<sup>31</sup> Similarly, “economic development” used to take up 60% of the performance assessment in the Da County of Sichuan Province in 2005. See Zhang (2013).

tasks deemed vital by top leaders will be duly accomplished. For instance, family planning as a state policy used to be categorized as a veto target in the one-child policy era and had been faithfully carried out by local governments in the past decades.

*Effectiveness of Cadre Control.*

Lengthy discussions have been dedicated to the impact of performance on cadre's behavior, with an emphasis on those hard and veto targets which play a more crucial role in assessment. Notably, while some scholars interpretate the system's influencing mechanism as institutional constraints (Rong, 1998; Xu & Huang, 2002), many others more view it from the perspective of incentives. The model of political tournament is frequently applied to understand the target responsibility system, suggesting higher-tier government launches tournaments by setting relevant rules and standards to encourage subordinate officials to compete for better work results and promotion (Zhou, 2007). After lower-level government received the assigned standard from their superior leaders, they may bring out higher requirements to further incentivize their subordinate to compete. Thus, the standard goes higher at lower administrative levels, as evidenced in the case of *shidu* monetary aid. A similar explanation is offered by Caldeira (2012) with the model of yardstick competition to elaborate the linkage between the local officials' performance in public spending and their promotion. In general, winners of the competition will be rewarded with career advancement, and those who failed to accomplish orders from the superior level would become disadvantaged in development resources and therefore have fewer chances to be promoted (Zhu & Zhang, 2005). Extensive research confirms that local leaders who are more successful in boosting local economy will be promoted to positions of higher ranks (Chen, Li, & Zhou, 2005; Landry, 2008; Wu & Chen, 2015), and it is believed that China's fast economic expansion is driven by such "promotion based on performance" (Wang & Wang, 2009), implying cadres have devoted themselves to economic construction due to the incentivizing influence of the target responsibility system.

Xu and Huang (2002) argue that local cadres are aware that the accomplishment of assigned tasks is closely related to their political career, so they will intentionally pursue the fulfillment of assigned tasks, especially those which are attached larger weights by the superior leaders. As a number of scholarships confirm, local officials often

adjust their work strategy, either out of constraining or incentivizing impact, to the guidelines from their superior leaders. O'Brien and Li (1999) point out that the "one-level-down management" based on the target responsibility system is one of the reasons why unpopular policies, such as family planning and tax collection, are faithfully carried out by local cadres. Chan and Gao (2012) find that production safety is more strictly carried out by local governments once a specific fatality indicator is incorporated to their performance assessment. Similarly, for better achievement in economic progress, officials from some cities start to work hard on upgrading their regional business environment, instead of merely relying on the conventional yet less efficient way to attract investment (Song & He, 2019). Therefore, the target responsibility system can be argued as an effective control of local cadre's behavior (Tsui & Wang, 2004), which aligns agents' interests with their principal's.

However, doubts also arise regarding the system's effectiveness. As a critical response to the political tournament model, Zhou et al. (2014) contend local officials also have the incentive to maintain political coalition while striving to complete the assigned tasks from superior leaders. This pushes them to help their subordinates prior to the evaluation by tampering with data or readjusting allocated targets, so that the polished performance could meet the criteria set by higher-level governments. Their improvised strategies and search for short-term solutions in the process of policy implementation exhibit the behavior pattern of "muddling through", instead of consistent, anticipatory, and goal-oriented actions as the tournament-style approach suggests. The collusion between local governments clearly shows the disparity between agents' action and principal's expectation despite the target responsibility system as an effective regulatory framework (Zhou, 2010). Heberer and Trappel (2013) further note that local officials' collusive behavior and the particular focus on coping strategies are the consequence of hard and veto targets.

Meanwhile, there are lots of studies questioning the causal link between performance and promotion. For example, after reviewing the career paths of the Party's Central Committee members from 1987 to 2007, Shih, Adolph, and Liu (2012) point out there is no solid proof that better economic performance leads to higher ranks. Their argument is shared by Tao et al. (2012) and Zuo (2017) as well. Chen and Kung (2016) further find that the regional difference in revenue from land sales could counteract the



effectiveness of the “promotion based on performance” mechanism. Thus, it remains less than clear if local cadres would be motivated by the promised promotion. In fact, empirical evidence has proved that the work strategy of local cadres also depends on factors such as individual characteristics, career prospects (Liang & Langbein, 2015), and their perceptions if performance really leads to promotion (Gao, 2017). The motivation of local cadres turns out to be complex.

Besides, even the constraining effect of key targets could be uncertain sometimes. Studies find that local cadres may intentionally downplay veto task but prioritize innovation or special campaigns such as household resettlement, for achievements in these fields may bring greater chance for career advancement in circumstances (see for example Yu, Cai, & Gao, 2016; Gao, 2017). Similarly, though environment protection is categorized as one of the key tasks, local leading cadres could shirk the responsibility because their frequent rotation undermines the consistency of local environment policy and hinders their performance and promotion (Eaton & Kostka, 2014). The research of Heberer and Trappel (2013) furthermore reveals that Chinese local officials are in fact very reluctant to punish their subordinates for the fear of demotivating them. This also explains the limited number of punishment records among Chinese local governments. Thus, the evaluation system should not be simply understood as an instrument of punishment, and its constraining effect may not be as solid as one anticipates.

In sum, the target responsibility system specifies concrete tasks for local leading cadres and introduces quantified indicators to measure their work achievements. By linking their performance to political career, the system regulates cadre’s behavior in both incentivizing and constraining ways, and its influence has been proved to be significant by many scholarships. In particular, veto and hard targets are attached high priority by top leaders and therefore play a more important role in shaping the work strategies of local cadres. However, it needs to be acknowledged in the meantime that the mechanism of “promotion based on performance” remains contestable, and the behavior control through veto or hard targets can be deficient as well, since local officials not always act in accordance with the expectation of top leaders. Nevertheless, as Edin (2003) notes, the failed implementation of certain policy at local level does not imply the central government is unable to well control local officials, but because the system cannot deal with multiple tasks simultaneously, especially when these tasks conflict with each other.

Therefore, it is better to take the system as an institutional structure which is overall effective in controlling embedded agents by molding their interests, while recognizing its restricted power and possible dysfunction.

## ***6.2. Social Stability Maintenance as Key Target***

The maintenance of social stability is the political task given top priority on the national policy agenda and must be strictly carried out by local officials (Qin, X., 2017). As indicated the Party's 16th Congress Report in 2002, social stability covers two domains, namely both the regime's security and the general social order. Accordingly, the maintenance task involves the fight against "sabotage plots from hostile forces", terrorism, crimes, and "the proper handling of contradictions among the people", for example to reduce social unrest, which mainly derived from the country's economic transition and its induced continued interest conflicts (Wang & Zhang, 2012; Jiang, 2014). Notably, since the country's first wave of collective action from 1978 to 1989 is marked by strong pursuits which challenge the regime's ideology and political system (Feng, 2015), Chinese top leaders become hypersensitive toward mass incidents. Especially given that mass incidents in contemporary Chinese society are characterized by several trends such as increasing scale, diversified participants, sudden burst, and violent confrontation with government authorities, they are deemed as the most prominent threat to social stability and the Party's ruling legitimacy (Research Group of the Political and Legal Commission of the CCP Zhejiang Provincial Committee & Liu, 2010). Therefore, stability maintenance with a special attention to mass incidents occupies a prominent place on the political agenda of Chinese officials and even becomes the largest source of stress for them (Gao, 2015).

### ***6.2.1. Task with Special Significance***

The particular significance of social stability in Chinese politics can be first of all reflected by the slogans formulated by top leaders. Given the rising tide of political pursuits for democratization at the end of 1980s, Deng Xiaoping proposed "stability overwhelms everything (稳定压倒一切)",<sup>32</sup> which sets the main theme of Chinese

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<sup>32</sup> See for example, Deng (2001: 284-285).

politics since the 1990s. Nevertheless, such slogan does not necessarily devalue economic growth in the country's transition era. Instead, the Party later put forward another catchphrase "development is the first task, and stability is the top responsibility (发展是第一要务, 稳定是第一责任)", paralleling the two objectives as the most crucial missions for Chinese officials without downplaying the importance of stability (Sohu.com, 2012). As a matter of fact, "stability overwhelms everything" did not disappear from history, since it was still readdressed in the *Decision on Strengthening the Party's Governing Capacity* in 2014. Despite these political slogans being rarely mentioned in recent years, stability maintenance as the core agenda of Chinese government remains unchanged.

Secondly, the central authority of the CCP has promulgated a set of rules to direct cadres' focus onto stability maintenance (See *Table 11*). As the first detailed guideline devoted to the issue, the *Decision on Strengthening the Comprehensive Management of Public Security* introduced in 1991 counts as a milestone, for it sets up the fundamental framework for Chinese officials when dealing with problems with regard to public security or stability. Despite the policy's primary focus on striking crimes, it specifies the significance, objectives, work contents, and responsible bodies for the task. More importantly, it prescribes the full mobilization and involvement of all cadres in maintaining public security that leading officials of both the Party and state organs, regardless of their administrative level, are required to "work on the task hard and consistently" and to solve problems "item by item". Meanwhile, the target responsibility system is also incorporated into the guideline, aiming to incentivizing local cadres with both reward and punishment to complete the assigned mission in accordance with the expectation of top leaders.

Since then, more policies have been adopted in the following decades to further emphasize and refine cadre's responsibility for stability maintenance based on the structure set up in 1991. For example, the CCP revised its Party Constitution in 1992, highlighting "the comprehensive management of public security and long-term social stability" as a major task. In 2001, Party leaders explicitly underline mass incident as a crucial destabilizer in their *Opinions on Further Strengthening the Comprehensive Management of Public Security*, while setting the primary work focus on the prevention of such risks. To make sure local officials pay full attention to the task, the CCP top

leaders urged at the Fourth Plenary Session of the Sixteenth Central Committee in 2014 that the responsibility system must be “further improved and strictly implemented”. As a step further, it is suggested in the *Regulations on the Assessment of Leading Party and Government Cadres* introduced in 2019 that the performance of stability maintenance as a constraining indicator should have a larger weight in the assessment result. Eventually, the CCP Central Committee (2020) once again defines social stability in the newly published Fourteenth Five-Year Plan as the foundation for the country’s future development. This is the most recent official document mentioning the task’s significance.

*Table 11* Policy Documents with Regard to Stability Maintenance

Title	Effective Time	Issued by
Decision on Strengthening the Comprehensive Management of Public Security 关于加强社会治安综合治理的决定	1991	The CCP Central Committee and the State Council
National Five-Year Plan for the Comprehensive Management of Public Security (1996-2000) 1996年——2000年全国社会治安综合治理五年规划	1996	The Central Comprehensive Management Committee for Public Security
Opinions on Further Strengthening the Comprehensive Management of Public Security 关于进一步加强社会治安综合治理的意见	2001	The CCP Central Committee and the State Council
Opinions of the Central Comprehensive Management Committee on Strengthening Public Security Prevention Work 中央综治委关于加强社会治安防范工作的意见	2002	General Office of the CCP Central Committee and the State Council
Opinions Regarding Strengthening the Development of Township, Street-Level Comprehensive Management of Social Order Grassroots Organizations 关于加强乡镇、街道社会治安综合治理基层组织建设的若干意见	2003	The Central Comprehensive Management Committee for Public Security and State Commission Office for Public Sector Reform
Decision on Strengthening the Party’s Governing Capacity 中共中央关于加强党的执政能力建设的决定	2004	The CCP Central Committee

Plan for Deepening the Reform of the Party and State Institutions 深化党和国家机构改革方案	2018	The CCP Central Committee
Regulations on the Assessment of Leading Party and Government Cadres 党政领导干部考核工作条例	2019	General Office of the CCP Central Committee

Source: Author's compilation.

Thirdly, it is notable that the CCP additionally established special agencies to cope with stability maintenance, thereby giving the task greater importance. Early in 1991, the Party set up the Central Comprehensive Management Committee for Public Security right after its decision to launch hard strikes on crimes and other challenges to its ruling position. Members of the committee include heads of Ministries of Public Security, Commerce, Culture, and later the National Family Planning Agency as well. Evidently, public security is considered a complex task that it covers multiple areas and can only be achieved through the cooperation between government branches. As social conflicts, especially the dispute between the mass and government authorities due to corruption (Yang, 2017), further intensify during the transition period, the Central Small Leading Group for Stability Maintenance is formed by the Party's Central Committee in 1998, specifically aiming to investigate and tackle cases that undermine social stability and the regime's authority. Both agencies have also established their own subordinate offices at various administrative levels to coordinate inter-regional and inter-departmental actions. Although the two special agencies have been merged to the Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission since March 2018, the priority of stability maintenance has not dropped, since the commission is a powerful subordinate organ of the CCP Central Committee that oversees all legal authorities in China. All these factors can highlight the significance Chinese top leaders attached to social stability.

### 6.2.2. Alienation in Implementation

As indicated by these three factors, social stability is categorized as a critical objective by Chinese top leaders, especially the conflict between the mass and government has attracted growing attention since the 21st century. Because a stable society is considered the very foundation of the country's development and the CCP's long-term ruling legitimacy, the Party leaders apply target responsibility system and set stability

maintenance as a veto target to ensure local officials will attach utmost importance to the task. Consequently, though the introduction of performance assessment was intended to maintain the governance capacity, the system later becomes to mainly serve the amelioration of the conflict between fast economic growth and the social unrest derived from imbalanced development (Gao, 2009), as can be seen in numerous resettlement cases where local governments attempted to expropriate land to develop real estate but at the same time had to carefully placate the mass who strongly protested against insufficient compensation.

In practice, performance assessment has successfully driven local officials to place great value on maintaining social stability. The fieldwork of Ding, Wen, & Luo (2009) reveals that 60% of the leading cadres' work revolves around combatting instability, and this task could take up 30% of the workload for other officials as well. Such investment is considered inappropriately large that the authors even fear that it will drag down local economic growth. However, local cadres have no other choice under the influence of target responsibility system, since they will be disqualified for any rewards, as long as local petitioners made their way to Beijing. As confirmed by Gao's (2015) study of Zhouzhi County, once failed to well handle nonstandard petitions, cadres who are in charge of the local Letter and Visit organ must submit a report to the country's leadership team, offering detailed analysis of the causes as well as improvement measures. Once the failure happens again in the next year, they will be ruthlessly demoted, transferred, or removed, and unsurprisingly, leading cadres of the county will lose their promotion chance as well. Given this mechanism, local officials usually take stability maintenance as one of the most crucial determinants for their political career. Yet the task could be highly challenging because there is a dilemma for all Chinese local officials that they must prevent people's petitions to the provincial or central government while being cautious about the use of repressive measures, which might conversely intensify the resistance of petitioners and even undermine the regime's legitimacy (Cai, 2008a). In addition to such political risk, local governments' limited capacity of controlling society and their fear of greater mobilization of protesters (Cai, 2008b) also make repression the last resort for them in maintaining social order. There is no doubt that local officials have to face higher work pressure in this context and their excessive attention and devotion to

social stability, which derived from performance assessment, have even led to the alienation of the responsibility system in its implementation (Yu, 2012; Tang, 2012).

*Politicization, Distorted Focus, and Rising Costs.*

Suggested by Yu (2009), the term rigid stability is frequently applied to describe the hard control of Chinese government over ideology and society. Accordingly, stability in Chinese context is achieved under the mechanism of high tension without any resilience that all kinds of demonstrations, protests, and strikes will be absolutely suppressed by the state's exclusive power. Besides, due to the high tension from performance assessment, there exists an "illusion of instability" among local officials that they stay hypersensitive to any expression of interest of the mass and automatically take it as a threat to social stability as well as the regime's legitimacy (Sun, 2010). Stability maintenance, thus, becomes highly politicized for them and is often dealt with *ad hoc* governance in a campaign-style that both Party and government organs are highly mobilized, and they tend to devote everything to putting out mass incidents (Yang, 2010; Xu & Zhu, 2011). However, Chinese politics is thereby trapped in a vicious circle that the maintenance itself, which should be a measure to facilitate development, actually becomes the primary task of governments (Jin & Zhao, 2012). It not only leads to huge economic costs, but also much escalated social risks, for it could turn law-abiding citizens to political dissents of the regime (Yu, 2009).

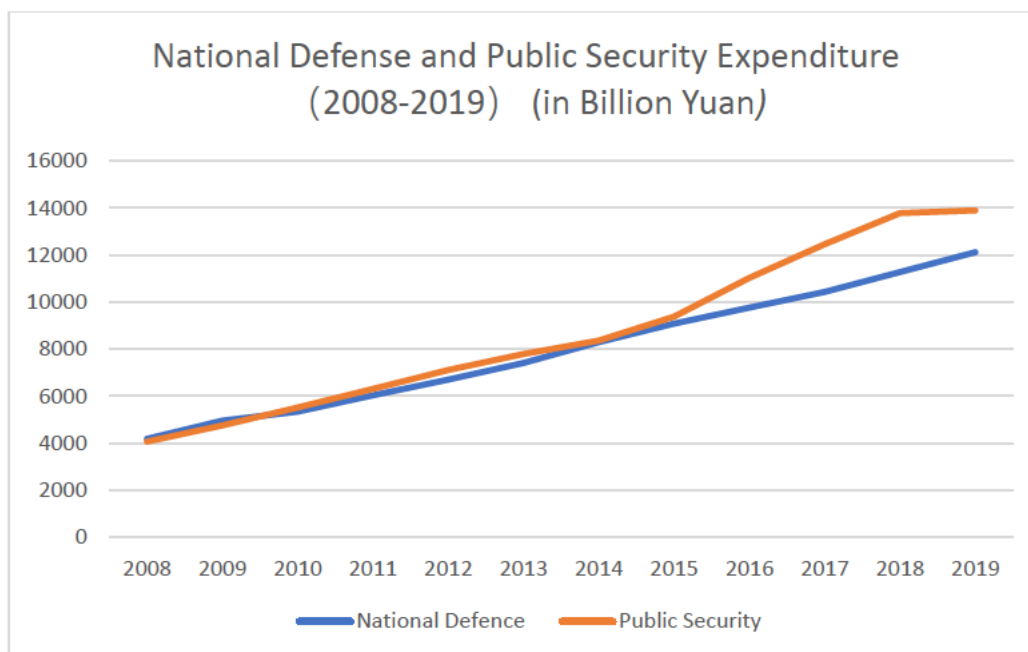
Notably, Chinese government's annual spending on public security has surpassed that of national defense since 2010. Although these expenses do not equal the money used for putting out social unrest, because the former is majorly invested in the maintenance of the regime's police forces and legal authorities,<sup>33</sup> the ever-rising expenditure is still

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<sup>33</sup> The official narratives about the expenditure on stability maintenance remain vague and sometimes contradictory. It was implied in an official media report in 2011 that such expenditure exists as a minor part of public security costs. However, in 2014 the Ministry of Finance explicitly denied the existence of any "stability maintenance fees". See Huanqiu.com. (2011). 官媒：中国公共安全支出超军费不用大惊小怪 [Official media: China's public security spending exceeds military spending, no need to make a fuss]. Available HTTP: <<https://mil.huanqiu.com/article/9CaKrnJqLpC>>; People.cn. (2014). 财政部昨日公布中央预算5年公共安全支出增长七成 (The Ministry of Finance announced the central budget yesterday

alerting, while it is comprehensible that the spending for stability maintenance also grows significantly along with the trend. Moreover, given that about  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the public security costs are funded by regional governments, the financial burden for them is considerable. Especially officials from the country's less developed regions could face much greater economic pressure, and it is even warned that many provinces would be in debt because of stability maintenance (Tang, 2012). However, despite the large amount of money spent at local level, it often reflects the dysfunction of veto target, since it is unveiled that the costs of bringing activists back to their hometown from Beijing “far exceed the spending needed to solve the problem which induced the petition” (Ding, Wen, & Luo, 2009).

Figure 13 National Defense and Public Security Expenditure (2008-2019)



Source: NBS 2020

#### *Violence and Illegal Measures.*

As a matter of fact, it is common that local officials would rather focus on covering unrest, either by violent suppression or “unprincipled payment” for the compromise of petitioners (Rong & Chen, 2011; Tian, 2012), rather than tackling the original conflict that induced confrontation. The reason behind is that the pursuit of petitioners cannot be

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that public security spending has increased by 70% in 5 years) Available HTTP: <<http://finance.people.com.cn/n/2014/0326/c1004-24737430.html>> accessed (27 April 2021).



properly addressed at local level at all. On the one hand, many top-down imposed, result-oriented targets regarding stability maintenance are at odd with local conditions in practice, so they turn out to be irrational and can hardly be achieved (See Gao, 2015). On the other hand, it often goes beyond the capacity of local authorities to coordinate and solve complex problems which generated petitions, as they are not given the corresponding discretion regarding finance and personnel management. In cases, some disputes are so complicated that an amicable settlement cannot even be expected from higher-level governments (Qin, X., 2017). Conceivably, the situation could only be tougher for lower-tier cadres, as they have to face stricter targets and more pressure imposed by levels of superior leaders.

However, since it is impossible for the lower-level officials to correct or adjust the decision or “mistakes” made by their leaders (Rong & Chen, 2011), driven by the target responsibility system, they have to take some extreme measures to ensure the fulfillment of the assigned stability target so that potential political punishment can be avoided. For example, typical measures include the falsification of local “instability figures” to deceive superior leaders (Minzner, 2006). Besides, to stop petitioners from troubling central leaders in Beijing, local cadres may conduct 24-hour surveillance on them, although such behavior often leads to larger discontent and fierce resistance from activists (Qin, X., 2017). Some local governments even contracted security firms in Beijing to handle stubborn petitioners with intense violence, deterrence, and “black jails” (Yang, 2017). It is frankly acknowledged by grassroot officials that many of their adopted methods to deal with activists are illegal, but they also insist there is no other choice left for them under the pressure of performance assessment (Ding, Wen, & Luo, 2009).

It is worth mentioning that Chinese government has developed several new strategies since the 21<sup>st</sup> century to improve the current inadequate stability maintenance, with its emphasis placed on the institutionalization of preventive mechanism. Instead of purely focusing on quelling conflicts after their eruption, the new institutions aim to reduce instability generated by mass incidents from its origin, so that official’s maintenance work can be more legalized, and “the country’s rigid stability will shift to a long-term one” (Liu & Zhu, 2015). For this purpose, the social stability risk evaluation system (社会稳定风险评估制度) is introduced nationwide in 2007, according to which all major projects can only be launched after they are proved to be not detrimental to the

interests of the mass and society. And again, to make sure the new system is strictly implemented by local cadres, some regions have defined risk evaluation as a determinant of official's performance in stability maintenance (Zhang, 2014). Moreover, "grid management (网格化管理)" is also initiated to divide community into several small grids and assign each of them dedicated "problem-solvers" including administrator, policeman, judicial worker, and firefighter etc.. Through this, the government expects that direct services to residents could avert potential conflicts (Zhou, 2013).

Nevertheless, the strong influence of performance assessment should never be underestimated in the observation of Chinese official's behavior. As long as social stability is still categorized as a veto target, the maintenance task will remain politicized for local cadres, and they will stay hypersensitive toward mass incidents, therefore suppress any kind of expression of interest of the mass even with illegal measures. Especially given the irrational target assigned by superior leaders and the limited capacity of local governments, such alienation of stability maintenance at regional level is inevitable in practice.

### ***6.3. Explaining the Shifted Focus***

To better understand why the *shidu* issue has replaced birth-supporting programs as the primary focus of local family planning agents in the universal two-child policy era, it is indispensable to place the behavior and action logic of family planning agents in the structure of target responsibility system. Given the close link between work performance and career development, Chinese local officials overall tend to faithfully carry out orders from their superior leaders for better political rewards. However, since tasks are attached differentiated weights by top leaders, it is common that they are selectively implemented at local level (See O'Brien & Li, 1999; Deng, O'Brien, & Chen, 2018; Chen & Li, 2020). Instead of making great effort in soft targets which usually lack of quantification, local officials are generally inclined to focus on veto or hard targets, as they have greater impact on their political career. In the case of population policy, since *shidu* families are considered to destabilize the society, family planning agents reasonably stay highly vigilant against the special group due to the sensitivity of stability maintenance. Meanwhile, after birth control is removed from the veto list along with the introduction of universal two-child policy, fertility rate has become much less influential on officials'

career, therefore no longer serves as a main goal in their daily work now. Although the central government introduced universal two-child policy to encourage more births, the task is outweighed by the leftover problem in practice for both priority and feasibility reasons.

### *6.3.1. Coping with Shidu as Critical Mission*

After rounds of *shidu* confrontation and petitions in Beijing, the ever-growing scale of *shidu* families and their demands have set the nerves of both central and local officials on edge. The pressure is especially high for local family planning agents, because they, as the regional policymaker and enforcer, are not only the group of people who have most frequent and intense interactions with bereaved parents, but also have to meet stricter assessment standards regarding stability maintenance imposed by higher level governments. Once failed to properly handle *shidu* people's expression of interest in their administrative region, officials are going to be disqualified for promotion or even face severe political penalty, since the negative result of veto target will nullify all other achievements, no matter how outstanding they are.

Notably, the responsibility for stability maintenance is not only confined to the leading cadres, namely the heads of the Party and state organs. Instead, everyone including ordinary cadres are held accountable for the task, so while doing their own jobs well, they must also try their best to resolve petitioner's problems and settle disputes (Tian, 2012). As confirmed by a report from a district level family planning commission in Shangqiu City (Qin, T., 2017), both the leading cadres and ordinary agents were actively engaged in the stability maintenance task regarding *shidu* parents so as to guarantee "the Party's 19th National Congress will not be disturbed by petitions from family planning branch". For this purpose, the commission designated officials to each *shidu* family to supervise that the state support is in place as expected. But in fact, it is comprehensible that the designation also functions as the assignment and specification of responsibility to stabilize bereaved parents and make sure there will be no escalated conflicts. Meanwhile, agents were also asked to pay visit to all parents with the purpose of hearing their pursuits and informing them of the increased financial aid from the state, even though the bereaved parents were already familiar with the policy. Evidently, such visit serves to placate *shidu* families by showing them the state's concern about their

predicament. Yet more importantly, it is officially admitted that the communication facilitates the “early knowledge of *shidu* people’s thoughts”, so that the potential threat to social stability can be eradicated as early as possible. The full mobilization of officials clearly demonstrates that stabilizing *shidu* parents is at the core of local family planning agency’s agenda. To better accomplish the mission, officials have to do their utmost to quell the dissatisfaction of bereaved parents on the one hand. On the other hand, once the dissatisfaction grows to open confrontation, they must stay sharp to prevent its further intensification and any petitioning in Beijing.

*Preventive Payment for Shidu Family’s Stability.*

Following top leaders’ principle to give growing significance to preventive methods, Chinese local governments have been firmly committed to upgrading their appeasement policy for *shidu* parents in the recent decade, which can be manifested in their continuous improvement of the support package and regular visits to all bereaved families. Firstly, while developing a comprehensive support system covering *shidu* people’s insurance, medical service, and other bonuses in life, local family planning agents have particularly raised their expenditure to increase the *shidu* financial aid. The aid amount has first experienced substantial growth at the provincial level in conformity with national guidelines, and as the cases of Xi’an and Xiamen exhibit, district or city government could be more generous by adding extra money on top of the provincial offer. Depending on *shidu* people’s age, the official aid from Xi’an City can be 100 or 200 *yuan* more than the Shaanxi provincial amount. Similarly, all *shidu* parents from Xiamen can receive 1200 *yuan* monthly, whereas the Fujian provincial standard only remains between 610 and 710 *yuan*. Nonetheless, the current economic support can still hardly meet the actual needs of bereaved parents. Especially given their repetitive complaints about the insufficiency of subsidy amount through rounds of petitions in Beijing, which led to a “dynamic growth” promised by top leaders, it can be foreseen that local agents have to spend more money in the future to alleviate the discontent of bereaved parents.

Meanwhile, as suggested in the *Notice on Further Enhancing the Support for Families with Special Difficulties Due to Birth Control* issued by the NHFPC in 2013, a regular visit system has been established by local family planning agents to appease bereaved parents during traditional festivals. For instance, officials from Xi’an annually

pay 4 visits to *shidu* families, whereas there are 3 mentioned in other regions. Besides, to further display the state's care about their life in old-age, it becomes routinized that local officials hand out extra money to *shidu* people during their visit. In Guiyang, bereaved parents nowadays can receive 300 *yuan* when visited by officials prior to the Spring Festival, which has been recently increased from 200 *yuan* since 2018. However, since the concrete amount of such financial bonus is not prescribed in the central government's guideline, the upgraded standard of this special bonus is totally a voluntary decision of local governments, and its induced larger financial burden has caused wide discontent among local agents. At any rate, traditional festivals are mostly featured with family reunion, so they always remind *shidu* parents of their current tragedy and therefore could result in their rising resentment against the government. For this reason, local family planning agents cannot save their budget in this field but have to increase their financial investment to "buy" their compromise and stability during these sensitive periods.

Yet compared to resettlement disputes, which form another salient challenge to social stability, *shidu* families appeared to be much under-funded by the state despite rounds of subsidy improvement in the last decade. In most resettlement cases, relocated people receive a one-off compensation based on the size of their households. The standard is established by grassroots government with reference to local real estate prices, so the amount of compensation is considerably large. Still, it is common to find resisters, also known as "nail households", in relocation cases who insist on a significantly increased official payment and keep petitioning against local authority. Given that the compensation package is determined through the negotiation with each household individually, those who purposefully remain tough for a longer period and protest strongly are likely, though not always, to benefit from a better treatment. The logic behind is similar to the *shidu* case, namely local governments face constant pressure to defuse the unrest generated by citizens' resistance, but at the same time they have to rely on negotiation and bargaining (Wu & Wang, 2020) instead of repression and coercion to avoid the escalation of conflicts. Nonetheless, once the compensation contract is signed between the two parties, the resettlement problem becomes completely resolved, because there will be no more resistance and petitioning, nor any threat to social stability.

However, the *shidu* problem appears to be rather different. The state's monetary support for *shidu* family is comprised of both lump-sum and monthly subsidy.

Additionally, there are extra handout seasonally given to bereaved parents during festivals. Although the subsidy standard also differs between regions, *shidu* parents of a district or county, in cases of a prefecture, receive exactly the same amount of money rather than case by case treatment. Furthermore, whereas the eventual compensation agreed in contract must be satisfying, or at least acceptable, to resisters in resettlement cases, the *shidu* financial aid all together can still hardly meet the demands of petitioners, so the looming risk of petitioning and protests of *shidu* activists persists despite the incremental improvement of state support. This is a major difference from the resettlement case, where the threat to social stability could be ultimately eliminated by economic means. In particular, the festival handout should better be understood as a symbolic gesture rather than a solution to the financial predicament of *shidu* parents, since local governments are fully aware that *shidu* people's demands, most of which are often regarded as unreasonable, are far beyond their capacity, so the money is only expected to convey the care from the Party and the state about the special group, attempting to placate the latter with an emphasis on spiritual support. Notably, the most fundamental divergence between the two cases lies in the specification of the state's responsibility. While it is more than clear that residents to be relocated are entitled to a state compensation for their expropriated real property, it remains contestable in the *shidu* case, if the state is obligated to compensate the loss of *shidu* parents' only child due to the ambiguous causal link between family planning and their bereavement. Especially given the considerable fiscal income from the sale of expropriated land, local governments are generally willing to handle resettlement conflicts with reasonably higher spending. In contrast, such economic incentive is absent in their coping with *shidu* families.

#### *Suppression and Control of Petitioning.*

Yet besides of the payment as preventive method, officials are always up for crackdown once *shidu* people show signs of confrontation with government authority. Although all interviewees skirted the issue of how they handle the conflict with *shidu* people in detail, their narratives clearly reflect that they are deeply troubled by the latter's expression of interest. Thus, as admitted by the informant from Xi'an, though being inclined to adopt preventive measures by helping *shidu* parents express their reasonable pursuits, they will tightly control petitioners who bring out demands that appear to be overcharging

government and stop these activists from “creating more disturbances either at local level or in Beijing”. Yet in fact there are always some activists who managed to make their trip to the capital city. In that case, local officials must promptly take action to prevent their visit to the central authority, and usually, these measures include persuasion, intimidation, economic bribery, or even illegal detention. As mentioned by the bereaved mother who led the last national *shidu* petition, almost all participants in Beijing received phone calls from the family planning agency of their hometown before they meet central officials, being advised to give up further confrontation and return. After the telephone dissuasion turned out to be unsuccessful, local agents immediately rushed to the capital regardless of the costs, aiming to bring petitioners back before the meeting with top leaders happens, so that an absolute failure of controlling instability in their jurisdiction and the following political penalty in career can be averted. Although it is left unmentioned how local officials interacted with petitioners and tried to take them back, it is conceivable that this process involves degrees of coercion in view of the existing cases how local cadres handle petitioners in Beijing in illegal ways. The immediate suppression will be adopted without hesitation, when *shidu* petitions jeopardize cadres’ work performance with regard to social stability. However, it should be noted again that violent repression also brings the risk of incurring more fierce resistance and subsequently greater damage to social stability, so it is only the last resort of local officials when other attempts such as economic appeasement, negotiation, and bargaining fail to placate discontented *shidu* petitioners.

Given *shidu* parents’ insistence on a state compensation and repetitive confrontations with government authorities at both local and central levels, they are considered to have resentment toward government and therefore undermining public security and stability (Liu, 2014b). The informants’ negative attitude toward the special group also reflects the strained relationship between the two sides and their struggling work on the *shidu* issue. Thus, local family planning agents have to fully devote themselves to the leftover problem, focusing on stability maintenance by both appeasing bereaved parents and resolutely suppressing their expression of interests. This explains why more than 80% of their tasks now revolves around *shidu* family, involved with huge costs, strict control, and constant complaints about work pressure.

### 6.3.2. *Less Attention to the “Fertility-Friendly Society”*

In the responsibility system, a target is not always fixed as hard or soft but could be shaped by political dynamics (Kennedy, 2007). In the previous one-child policy era, the strict control of regional fertility was set as a veto target, forcing local officials to carry out the task with full attention so as to avoid political punishment. However, along with the introduction of universal two-child policy, birth control has been removed from the list of veto targets, despite the prohibition of a third birth on paper. Family planning agents have been much relieved from the worry about their career being devastated by the excessive births in their jurisdiction. In the meantime, there is no imposed duty for them to boost local fertility as well, because “it is feasible to forbid couples to have a baby but impractical to let them have one, especially when they are unwilling to do so”,<sup>34</sup> as one informant frankly puts it. Moreover, the latent risk of provoking *shidu* parents is another factor which deters officials from taking more encouraging measures as well. Thus, the task of family planning now overall has a much lower priority on the to-do-list of officials in the new policy era. Rather than investing more time and money in the birth encouragement, a better political career is more likely to be guaranteed through adequately coping with the *shidu* issue, including not only the upgrade of regional aid package, but also the proper control over petitions and mass incidents in their own administrative region. For these reasons, local officials are now principally dedicated to the *shidu* problem but remain less concerned about the progress of fertility-friendly society.

Though family planning agents have been working on building more baby-care rooms and infant care institutes in their region, the tasks are only given limited attentiveness. This can be firstly seen in the much-delayed construction of baby-care rooms in public places. For instance, according to the plan of Xi’an City (Health and Family Planning Commission of Xi’an, 2017), baby-care rooms must be equipped in all government workplaces in the first half of 2018 and subsequently expanded to major tourist sites and parks by the end of the year. However, the informant plainly acknowledged in October 2018 that it would take extra time before they meet the policy

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<sup>34</sup> Interview B2, 10/2019.



requirements.<sup>35</sup> Secondly, due to the perceived difficulty in operationalization, no significant achievement in the expansion of infant care institutes can be identified in all selected research sites. At the time when field research was conducted, local governments have not even formulated any relevant policy to guide the construction and management of institutes, except Xiamen launched a preliminary project to push local SOE to run some inclusive institutes as experiment. In fact, local agents are overall reluctant toward the construction of inclusive childcare institutes in their administrative region, complaining that the plan initiated by central government has severe flaws in policy clarity, so the implementation is infeasible at all. By early 2020, Xi'an officials were still trapped in extended meetings and discussions for their draft regulation. In comparison, colleagues from Guiyang ubiquitously expressed their determination to wait for experiences from other regions, so that they can simply “introduce more practical regulations after learning from the advanced models”.

Thirdly, the policy innovation and financial investment regarding fertility-friendly society are limited compared with the *shidu* issue. It is evident that local officials are more proactive to introduce and improve policies for *shidu* families. They have not only spent a lot of money to upgrade the economic aid, which far exceeds the national standard suggested by the central government, but also voluntarily set up the rules to hand out financial bonuses to *shidu* parents during their regular visit before traditional festivals, though it is not required by top leaders. In contrast, local governments appear to be very passive in the construction of fertility-friendly society that they struggled for a long time to work out regional guiding policies, yet none of them made detailed official funding plans to encourage the expansion of childcare institutes. Despite fertility boost being the main purpose of the newly introduced birth policy, it has not been set as an assessment target regarding cadre's performance. Hence, it turns out to be indifferent for local officials whether to work hard for the fertility-friendly society or not, as it only brings minor impact on their political career. Similarly, birth subsidy can hardly be seen at local level, given officials are not obliged to apply economic incentives, let alone it would induce extra financial expenditure for local government. For these reasons, local family

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<sup>35</sup> Interview A1, 10/2018.

planning agents are more innovative and proactive in the policy-making and implementation regarding *shidu* support rather than birth encouragement.

#### **6.4. Summary**

Since the 1980s, Chinese government has begun to reform its cadre management with a focus placed on the introduction and optimization of its target responsibility system, intending to regulate cadre's promotion through the assessment of their work performances in assigned tasks. By specifying concrete work targets and providing rewards and punishments based on corresponding assessment results, the target responsibility system transmits top leaders' expectation to local officials and incentivizes them to act in conformity with it. Yet notably, tasks are given varied weights in the process and therefore have differentiated influences on cadres' political career. Despite a few exceptions (Yu, Cai, & Gao, 2016; Gao, 2017), veto and hard targets count as the most powerful determinant in most cases.

As a veto target, social stability is on top of Chinese cadres' agenda, as reflected by political logans, the introduced policies, and established special agencies which supervises the task. Since stability maintenance is involved with high tension, scholars have brought sharp criticism that China's stability is overly rigid and lacks flexibility (Yu, 2009; Tang, 2012), which eventually leads to the target responsibility system' alienation. In practice, local officials are hypersensitive to social stability, so they tend to treat people's expression of interest, especially those in collective form, as a challenge to the regime's authority and legitimacy. Moreover, local governments are neither given the discretion to determine their regional finance and personnel, nor could they correct those targets irrationally set by their superior leaders. Therefore, it is destined that many conflicts cannot be resolved at the local level due to the limited capacities of local governments. The only option for officials regarding stability maintenance then turns out to be preventing and carefully suppressing *shidu* people's expression of interest, instead of dealing with the problem which caused the conflict. However, this has also resulted in the soaring costs of stability maintenance, and even the adoption of illegal measures to stop petitioners from confronting the central authority.

The shift of universal two-child policy's focus from birth support to stability maintenance is a consequence of the target responsibility system. Local officials'

behavior is largely directed by the mechanism of performance assessment based on specified targets. On the one hand, social stability as a veto target becomes one of the most critical tasks for both leading cadres and ordinary family planning agents. Since *shidu* activists keep demanding a state compensation and have constantly confronted government authorities at both local and central level, they are regarded as potential threats to social stability which must be taken good care of. Thus, in order to avert political punishment, family planning agents have to devote themselves to quelling the dissatisfaction of *shidu* parents. Especially given that top leaders now place growing emphasis on preventive measures for social stability, local governments have not only increased their financial investment in the state support for *shidu* families, but also routinized regular visits to bereaved parents while offering them additional funds, although such extra financial aid is beyond the plan of the central government and obviously serves the appeasement. However, as demonstrated by rounds of national *shidu* petitions in Beijing, there have always been some activists who tried and managed to travel to the capital city for the direct confrontation with the central authority. As such confrontation marks the failure of local agents to maintain stability in their administrative region and therefore indicates severe penalty, they would also resort to suppression against activists when necessary, which usually includes persuasion, strict control, and even coercion to bring them back home, despite the huge economic and social costs.

On the other hand, the task of building fertility-friendly society has been much downplayed by local family planning agents, for their political career is largely independent from the demographics of their administrative region. Fertility rate has lost its veto status in the new population policy era, so officials no longer need to exert themselves in the work of birth control. In the meantime, due to feasibility reasons and concerns about provoking *shidu* people, population growth has not been defined as an assessment target. Therefore, the expansion of baby-care rooms and childcare institutes at the local level remains slow. Compared with the *shidu* issue, the construction of fertility-friendly society has overall attracted less funds and policy innovation from family planning agents. It is clear that universal two-child policy has been selectively implemented at the local level and eventually led to the distortion of the central authority's intention, namely combatting population problems by encouraging more births in the country.

It can be foreseen that social stability will further exert strong influence on local cadre's behavior as a veto target, because it is one of the most mentioned phrases in various top-level official reports, including the CCP National Congress Report, the annual government work report, and the recent 14th Five-Year Plan which predesigns the state's main development goals in the nearest future. The significance of the task is clearly indicated by the high political attention of Chinese top leaders. For this reason, local family planning agency's focus on *shidu* issue is unlikely to be changed, and more importantly, the dysfunction of stability maintenance will persist.

As the number of *shidu* families grows, it is conceivable that the pressure and cost of family planning agents to maintain stability will keep up rising. In fact, *shidu* people's expression of interest has already been politicized by local officials that petitioners are automatically deemed as trouble-makers, if they choose to confront government authority to make their demands heard. Since there will be more bereaved parents in the following decades and therefore considerably increased pursuits from the special group, it is inevitable that officials are going to have more frequent interactions with *shidu* activists, so the risk of escalated tension between the two parties could be very high. Notably, the achievement of social stability, even an apparent one, essentially relies on whether the requirements of *shidu* parents can be met. However, given that a large part of their demands is beyond the government's capacity, such as higher financial subsidies, full reimbursement for medical expenses, and nursing homes exclusively accessible for them, the conflict between the *shidu* group and government is determined to be unpreventable. This also means that the threat to social stability induced by the leftover problem of family planning cannot be eliminated at all, so local agents cannot be relieved from the stressful duty before these bereaved parents are "finally metabolized by generations of people".<sup>36</sup>

Instead, their task of stability maintenance regarding *shidu* family can only be much thornier. On the one hand, it is highly questionable if Chinese local governments can provide *shidu* families with more financial support in the future. Given the rapidly aging population in China (Flaherty et al., 2007; Zhang, Guo, & Zheng, 2012), Chinese government's expenditure on pensions continues to rise (Zeng & Wang, 2014; Cai, Feng, & Shen, 2018). However, it is still found that the pension insurance fund has been running

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<sup>36</sup> Interview A1, 10/2018.

low in 13 provinces by 2017, and it even had a huge deficit of 20 billion *yuan* in Heilongjiang (Xinhuanet, 2017b). In this context, the economic appeasement of bereaved parents as a preventive strategy for stability maintenance becomes growingly unreliable. On the other hand, for the conflict between the demand and supply of *shidu* state aid remains unresolvable, it is probable that suppression will be more frequently applied by local agents for the stability on paper, and in particular, more illegal handling of petitioners might be witnessed in the future as a consequence of the enlarged work pressure for local family planning agents. If the central authority does not adjust the assessment standard of social stability, for example by loosening the assigned quota for allowed petitioning, the responsibility system is going to further push local officials to complete relevant tasks with coercive measures, finally resulting in more social problems and dissatisfaction rather than contributing to general social stability.

## **7. Conclusion**

Family planning was first initiated in China in the 1960s to balance population growth and natural resources, when top leaders increasingly took the country's large population as a burden. A turning point is marked by the introduction of one-child policy in 1979. Since then, harsh methods such as coercive sterilization, abortions, and the insertion of IUD have been commonly used by local officials to limit the fertility in their jurisdiction (Wang, 2005; Kennedy & Shi, 2019: 27). Dramatically, although the fast population increase stopped after decades of strict birth control, some thornier problems, such as skewed sex ratio and ever-deteriorating population aging, began to plague Chinese society along. As a response to the newly emerged demographic challenges, the central government relaxed its birth control with the introduction of a pronatalist universal two-child policy in 2016, which is prominently featured with a substantial extension of parental leave and the cancelation of the special reward for couples who voluntarily have one child in the new policy era. However, the policy's incentive effect is soon found to be very limited, as evidenced by the dramatic decrease of newborn babies since the second year after it became effective.

Regarding such cold response to the new population policy, existing literature has provided valuable insight into Chinese people's low fertility desire and relevant shaping factors through extensive empirical research. Yet the discussions remain narrow-sighted,

since the role of government authority, especially regional ones, is largely omitted in their analyses, or government is simply supposed to promptly respond to the demands from policy environment by providing whatever the mass required, while leaving its feasibility unconcerned. It must be acknowledged that the low fertility level in contemporary Chinese society is primarily determined by the socio-economic advancement, however, scholarships also find that the underdevelopment of public services, for example childcare, has become a salient restricting factor holding Chinese couples back from having more babies (Peng, 2019; Zhou, 2019). So, if officials at local level take effective countermeasures and clear these obstacles, the government intervention could still make a difference in boosting birth. Besides, because of their administrative discretion in localizing guidelines from the central leadership, Chinese regional states can essentially impact the output and outcomes of national population policy at local level, for instance by introducing regulations based on their regional conditions or adopting different behavior patterns. For these reasons, a micro scrutiny on the implementation at local level becomes indispensable for a more accurate understanding of China's current population policy.

This research is built on a comparison of policy enforcement in three cities, namely Xi'an, Guiyang, and Xiamen. While the demographic statistics as well as policy documents at both national and regional level serve as analysis background, academic interviews with the leader of local family planning agency in the selected research sites reveal how officials perceive and carry out universal two-child policy in their administrative region with specific strategies. In general, fieldwork experience of this research indicates that Chinese local governments are overall similar regarding their work in the new population policy era despite some minor differences. More importantly, it is found that the work focus of Chinese local officials substantially deviates from fertility encouragement, which is the predesigned purpose of the new policy, but is placed on a historical byproduct of one-child policy, namely *shidu* family. This research suggests such phenomenon is not only determined by the constant supply and demand conflict regarding state support between *shidu* family and government authority, but also the country's cadre management system which strongly incentivizes local family planning agents to be devoted to social stability maintenance while downplaying other tasks, for example the construction of fertility-friendly society. Eventually, based on the review of the historical

development of China's population policy and the analysis of local officials' behavior, the research can not only contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of China's population policy and its future development, but also shed light on the governance of Chinese local state.

### ***7.1. Summary of Findings***

Through fieldwork in three Chinese cities, this research finds the new population policy has been overall selectively carried out at local level that family planning agents mainly concentrate on the leftover problem of the previous one-child policy, namely the *shidu* issue, whereas the construction of a fertility-friendly society, which serves to encourage more births, only attracts limited political attention from local governments, albeit the new policy is introduced to boost the country's alarmingly low fertility.

#### *7.1.1. Implementation: Similarity with minor difference*

Chinese local governments are given considerable discretion to develop their own regional population policy in accordance with the principle proposed by the central government. Yet in the case of universal two-child policy, officials from the selected three cities show a similar work pattern, even though the demographic situation in each city is distinctively different.

The overall similarity between regions is firstly evidenced by the converged evaluation of local family planning agents on universal two-child policy. While they applaud the relaxation of birth limit for its contribution to China's future population development, it is yet shared as a consensus that the policy is introduced too late. In fact, most of officials frankly expressed their criticism toward the previous one-child policy that it was overly harsh and damaging to the country's demographic structure. Given the low fertility desire prevailing among Chinese couples and a cluster of its restricting factors, local agents agree that the country's population will not experience any explosive growth in the future, even though it is anticipated that birth control will be completely canceled by the central government by 2025.

The second similarity can be reflected in the routinized trait of local officials during their policy enforcement. Chung (2000) suggests three different types of Chinese local officials, namely pioneers, resisters, and bandwagoners, to understand the policy

implementation at the local level. Based on the typology, Göbel (2011) discusses the uneven enforcement of the rural tax and fee reform between localities that while some counties are eager to support the project, there are resisters who shirk their responsibility or even sabotage the central government's plan. Yet such differentiation seems to be lacking in the case of universal two-child policy, especially regarding birth-supporting programs. Admittedly, family planning agents have been faithfully carrying out policies related to the leftover problem and fertility-friendly society, for they soon incorporated all programs into their agenda after the central government's initiation, while offering no worse standard than the suggested national minimum. However, little proactivity and policy innovation could be witnessed in birth-supporting programs. Though it is expected that the selected three cities would take measures based on their varied demographics and socioeconomics to facilitate more births, differentiated local policies are generally absent in practice. Meanwhile, local agents exhibited a heavy reliance on the directives from higher level authorities during policy implementation. It is common that local officials purposefully abstain from drafting local regulations or pushing campaigns for reasons of limited power, poorly coordinated cooperation between government departments, and unmotivated staffs. Instead, they would rather wait for the guidance from superior leaders or the experiences from pioneer colleagues so that they could skip the phase of "meaningless exploration".

Thirdly, and most importantly, this research reveals that officials from local family planning agency are overall overwhelmed by tasks revolving around the leftover problem rather than working on fertility encouragement. The leftover problem refers to *shidu* family, who followed the state's one-child policy but later lost their only child. As acknowledged by local officials, the *shidu* issue takes up at least 80% of their work amount and has generated essential work stress for them, because the bereaved parents keep demanding for more compensation from the state, while many of these pursuits are deemed as unreasonable from the perspective of family planning agents. Subsequently, the interest expression of *shidu* parents is taken as a latent threat to social stability, and local agents have fixed their work emphasis on *shidu* family, as can be seen in their policymaking, enforcement, and conflict mediation. Especially given the continuously growing size of this special group and drastic decrease of family planning staffs due to the organizational reform in 2018, all interviewees are certain that they are going to bear



larger work pressure in the future. Noteworthy is that Xiamen officials stand as an exception that they denied the seriousness of *shidu* problems in their jurisdiction and justified that with the regional tradition of having more births. Yet it remains doubtful if they can really be relieved from the challenge, as the one-child rate in Xiamen used to merely be slightly lower than that in Xi'an and Guiyang. It is likely that their terse narratives about the issue are only official answers, thus, this research suggests Xiamen officials still need to take *shidu* families with full attention, but only with a somewhat lower work pressure than their colleagues from the other two cities.

Refrained policy propaganda in the universal two-child policy era counts as the fourth similarity. In general, family planning agents at local level abstain from openly propagating fertility encouragement. Conventional propaganda methods that used to overwhelm the mass, including slogans on walls, banners, posters, and publicity windows, have been mostly abandoned. According to interviewed officials, they cannot apply the old publicity strategy, because the sharp change of population policy from rigid birth control to birth boost is going to cause popular criticism and therefore undermines the authority of the party state. In particular, the resentment of *shidu* people, who are now suffering from their sacrifice for one-child policy, is underlined as another major factor that stops officials from massively publicizing the pronatalist policy.

Nevertheless, despite the high commonalities, some discernable differences can still be identified in their local policy enforcement. Firstly, not only the effective date of policy documents, such as provincial population and family planning regulations, but also the progress of expanding baby-care rooms and childcare institutes vary between the research sites. For instance, agents from Xiamen showed certain degree of entrepreneurship in developing local childcare institutes, as they proactively worked out a preliminary plan combined with academic surveys to guide the project in their jurisdiction. In comparison, Guiyang officials more fit the category of authoritarian personality suggested by Hasmath, Teets, and Lewis (2019) that they would passively wait for and follow the directives from the central government instead of taking any early action. Informants from Xi'an stand in between, as they struggled hard for a local policy on their own despite the sluggish progress due to their reliance on superior authorities. Secondly, another difference can be found in the *shidu* support standard. The amount of *shidu* subsidy usually differs at both provincial and prefectural level, and such divergence

has existed for decade in history. Thirdly, the attitude of family planning agents toward *shidu* families could vary between individuals. Whereas sympathetic officials acknowledge *shidu* people's contribution to the state's family planning program and therefore are willing to help these parents with their "reasonable pursuits", there are unfriendly agents who fundamentally show impatience and disgust towards the special group, describing them with negative vocabulary.

At last, it needs to be readdressed that the implementation of universal two-child policy is largely similar at macro level regarding official's perception about the national policy, their work pattern, emphasis, and strategy. The difference between regions is more evidenced at micro level in terms of local policy's effective time, concrete contents, and individual attitude toward bereaved parents.

#### *7.1.2. Shidu as Unexpected Historical Consequence*

The shifted focus of universal two-child policy must firstly be understood within a larger historical context of China's family planning program. As an unexpected result of decades-long strict birth control, there have been at least 1.5 million *shidu* families in contemporary Chinese society despite the divergence on the estimated size, and the figure keeps growing rapidly with an annual increase of 76,000. Traumatized by losing their only child as the most reliable provider of economic support and spiritual comfort, *shidu* parents become seriously disadvantaged in various issues, such as physical and psychological health, social life, old-age support, and daily help. Unfortunately, because of the broken family bond and existing social stigma, informal support from family members or community turns out to be unreliable or unfavored by them. For this reason, the formal support provided by the state gains special significance for their life in advanced age.

However, the enormous gap between the supply and demand for state aid has generated a constant tension between *shidu* families and government authority, forcing local family planning agents to pay full attention to the special group. It was not until 2010 that the central government introduced the state subsidy with a minimum of 100 *yuan* per month for each *shidu* parent. But, since the state used to promise a complete responsibility for the old-age support of all parents who follow one-child policy, many *shidu* families are deeply dissatisfied with such tiny subsidy and insist on full-ranged

official support. Failed to have their pursuits well addressed at local level, up to thousands of *shidu* activists launched rounds of petitions from 2010 to 2015, explicitly targeting the central authority in Beijing. They not only appealed for larger amount of economic aid, but also urged the government to provide more non-monetary support, such as free medical services and special nursing homes exclusively accessible for them. In particular, activists also expressed their rage at the official definition of subsidy as a “supportive money”, because the term equals them with all other vulnerable groups in the society, therefore downplays their unique bereavement due to state policy. Instead, they protest vigorously against such responsibility shirking of the state, demanding the term to be changed to “compensation”, which explicitly indicates that one-child policy is the direct cause of their current tragic life.

Because “compensation” undermines the legitimacy of both the family planning program and even that of the CCP regime, Chinese government did not make any compromise on the issue, even though *shidu* petitioners consistently demonstrated high trust in the central leadership and presented themselves as lawful and loyal citizens by undergirding their pursuits with relevant laws. Still, as a consequence of top leaders’ changed perception about leftover problem, the state support system is established and evolves along with the dynamic interaction between *shidu* petitioners and the central government. While abstaining from giving any direct and immediate response to *shidu* activists’ demand, the central government keep upgrading the official support system in the recent decade by raising subsidy standard and incorporating more services into it. So, the national subsidy standard has experienced rounds of improvement and reached 450 *yuan* by 2018. Regional governments also followed the trend by offering more generous treatment based on the national minimum. Nevertheless, given that many *shidu* pursuits are beyond the state capacity, the huge gap between the supply and demand still exists. In fact, the fast-expanding *shidu* group, downsized family planning agency, and financial burden of local governments all hinder the fulfillment of their demands. Thus, a greater reliance on non-official provision of social care and services for *shidu* families is going to be witnessed in following decades (Alpermann & Yang, 2020: 136). More importantly, the dispute over the subsidy’s definition between *shidu* family and government authority remains unsettled and even turns out to be unresolvable, because it is linked to the regime’s legitimacy. Consequently, the tension between the two parts may lead to

escalated conflicts in the future, which requires local officials to give more efforts to maintain their relationship.

Apparently, the implementation of universal two-child policy has been significantly affected by the previous family planning program. The emergence and expansion of *shidu* family has directed the work focus of local agents on the leftover problem rather than birth encouragement. Meanwhile, even their strategy for carrying out new policy has also been constrained by the outcome of one-child policy that local governments have to always take *shidu* parents into consideration when making decisions. As stated by the interviewed family planning agents, *shidu* people's resentment against government authority is one crucial factor which stops them from introducing material incentives to encourage birth, or massively propagating the loosened birth control in the society. Although dealing with population aging is the predesigned goal of universal two-child policy, local officials obviously care more about what is appropriate rather than what is effective, as Pierson (2000b) notes. In sum, though one-child policy has been abolished for years, *shidu* family as its historical legacy has been exerting enormous influence on the current implementation of universal two-child policy and is going to further shape its future development, since its number will keep increasing steadily in the following decades. This special group still deserves careful attention from officials at both central and local levels, especially when the government needs to justify its birth encouragement.

The research of Kennedy and Shi (2019) reveals there is a "mutual noncompliance" between local cadres and villagers in the one-child policy era that grassroot cadres from village and township level commonly underreport and conceal out-of-plan births of their villagers. By sacrificing the goal of national policy, village leaders can ease the strained cadre-mass relationship, while township officials still have good performance on paper for political promotion (38-51). Nonetheless, it needs to be pointed out that *shidu* people's rightful resistance are vastly different from mutual noncompliance, because the latter does not involve the expectation to alter central policy but tends to conceal the noncompliance from superior leaders. Conversely, *shidu* activists openly confront government authorities at both regional and central levels. Besides, mutual noncompliance can hardly be applied by urban grassroot cadres, since they are granted less autonomy to cope with conflicts in

their jurisdiction, albeit the work amount of Resident Committee is twice than that of Village Committee (198).

### 7.1.3. Stability Maintenance as Strong Incentive

The deviation of universal two-child policy's implementation is not only determined by the historical birth control program, but also the rational choice of local family planning agents. It is taken that these agents are driven by their personal interest, so they do their utmost in work in order to be promoted, or at least to avoid political penalty. But it must be pointed out that their strategy for a better career is fundamentally shaped by the institution they are embedded in, namely the target responsibility system.

Local family planning agents are primarily dedicated to *shidu* families, because this special group of people are considered as a salient challenge to social stability, which is one of the most crucial determinants of officials' career, due to their persistent petitioning and its generated tension with government authority (Liu, 2014; Liu & Ni, 2016; Mu, 2016). The maintenance of social stability and public order has become one of the key tasks for Chinese officials since 1991, when the CCP top leaders decided to reinforce their ruling position. As a veto target, it means that once there is any out-of-quota petitioning launched by activists from their jurisdiction, cadres will be disqualified for promotion or even penalized, no matter how successful the other performances are.<sup>37</sup> Particularly given that each level government will raise the requirements for its subordinates when transmitting the central leadership's expectation downwards, officials from lower-level states have to face stricter or, in cases, irrational assessment goals in work. Therefore, to minimize the threat to their political advancement, it becomes rational for local agents to spend excessive time and money in those bereaved parents or to take extraordinary measures to maintain an apparent stability on paper. Just as scholars point out (Yu, 2012; Tang, 2012), the overemphasis on the task of stability maintenance can lead to the incentivizing mechanism's alienation. This is exactly reflected in how family planning agents deal with bereaved parents. Under the strong incentive derived from the

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<sup>37</sup> For example, Gao's (2015) empirical research finds that in Shaanxi Province, each county is assigned concrete quotas from the provincial government respectively for limiting petitioners who confront prefectural, provincial, and the central authorities. County-level leading cadres are going to face political consequences once the allocated number of petitioners is exceeded.

target responsibility, local agents become hypersensitive toward stability and *shidu* petitioners that they have politicized the latter's interest expression as severe threats to social stability and more generally the regime's legitimacy. Subsequently, overreactive responses to the special group are made.

On the one hand, given that the central leadership adds more value to preventive measures in stability maintenance in the 21st century, local family planning agencies have greatly upgraded the local economic aid based on the national standard and even hand out extra monetary bonus, which is not prescribed by the central leadership, during their regular visit to *shidu* couples in exchange for their temporal peace, even though such expenditure results in their escalated financial burden. On the other hand, when they feel the necessity to impede the meeting between activists and the central leaders, local family planning agents will try to take activists back home regardless of the costs, even though the large expenditure and decisively adopted suppression in this process, often involved with coercion or even other illegal measures, can generate more risks of instability. Unfortunately, the conflict between the supply and demand for *shidu* support is unlikely to be resolved for reasons of legitimacy and government capacity, so the leftover problem as a challenge to social stability is going to last for generations, as well noted by interviewed officials. Eventually, local family planning agents have to keep up concentrating on stability maintenance for better career in the new population policy era. This is the reason why more than 80% of their tasks now revolves around the *shidu* issue.

Meanwhile, it can be observed in the implementation of universal two-child policy that family planning agents deliberately prioritize tasks that affect their careers more significantly, while downplaying those which have relatively minor impacts. As a matter of fact, targets are given different weights by Chinese top leaders in cadre's performance assessment and therefore have varied constraining effect on their career. Since the introduction of universal two-child policy, birth control has lost its veto status, while fertility encouragement including the task of building fertility-friendly society has not been incorporated into the performance assessment. As a result, family planning agents are poorly motivated to push relevant programs or to introduce economic incentives to directly support more births. In contrast to stability maintenance as a veto target, the construction of fertility-friendly society has attracted much less political attention at local level due to its limited influence on local cadres, although birth encouragement is the

predesigned goal of universal two-child policy. In particular, interviewees of this research frankly admit that they refrain from openly welcoming more births in order to avoid provoking *shidu* families. Thus, the policy innovation and financial investment regarding fertility-friendly society turn out to be rather deficient compared with the *shidu* issue. This can be viewed in the much-delayed construction of baby-care rooms in public places and the lack of significant achievement in the expansion of infant care institutes in all selected research sites. Consequently, *shidu* family has replaced fertility-friendly society to be the primary focus of local officials in daily work, and it is clear that the implementation of universal two-child policy at local level is deeply shaped by the target responsibility system.

#### *7.1.4. Outcomes*

Through the investigation of local family planning agents' policy implementation, more problems in universal-two child policy than the cold response are exposed. China's new population policy largely failed to achieve the predesigned goal to boost more births. In terms of demographic statistics, though the relaxation of birth limit led to a baby boom in the first two years after the policy introduction, the number of newborns soon fell to 15.23 million in 2018, which is even smaller than the 16.55 million of 2015. Since then, the figure has never rebounded. For this reason, local officials expressed their regret about the late introduction of universal two-child policy. As admitted by interviewees, cohorts of the late 1970s and early 1980s, who have higher fertility desire, had past their childbearing age at the time when universal two-child policy took effect. Their euphemistic criticism of the central government's previous strict control and late response to demographic change is implied. On 31<sup>st</sup> May 2021, the Politburo of CCP Central Committee made the decision to further relax the country's birth limit by announcing a three-child policy as the "active response to population aging". However, China's annual new births kept decreasing to 10.62 million, with the country's birth rate reached a new low of 7.52‰ in the same year (NBS, 2022). All these factors clearly mark the failure of universal two-child policy, since it did not play the role to continuously boost the fertility in Chinese society as expected.

The low fertility desire prevailing among current Chinese couples is mainly determined by the socio-economic progress, therefore can hardly be altered by a single

relaxation of birth limit. However, this does not mean that public policy has no positive effect on fertility increase at all. As a matter of fact, there are elements such as family economic condition and limited public services regarding childcare and education preventing people from giving births, which could and should be well addressed by government as the principal player in supporting families and fertility (McDonald, 2006). The experience from other countries has also proved that state intervention is effective for maintaining a relatively higher fertility (Rindfuss, Morgan, & Offutt, 1996; Apps & Rees, 2004; Gauthier, 2013). For example, despite the complex mechanism, cash benefits could positively affect fertility level (Gauthier, 2005). Neyer (2006) points out the incorporation of labor market policy, social care, and gender equality into a country's family policy is conducive to retaining fertility, and especially reducing women's opportunity costs of childbearing plays an important part, which could be achieved by providing them with flexible employment models and ensuring they can come back to the job they had before going on maternity leave. Similarly, fertility-friendly programs such as parental-leave benefits and childcare subsidies are also found to contribute to more births, since they facilitate the balance between family and employment for women (Kalwij, 2010). Yet unfortunately, economic subsidy is unlikely to be adopted by Chinese local government. At least all interviewed family planning agents explicitly rejected such monetary incentive, not only due to the increased budget, but also because they believe the aging problem in their jurisdiction can be solved by domestic immigration. Thus, a more feasible strategy for Chinese government is to keep pushing the construction of fertility-friendly society with an emphasis on childcare service, which supports more births by reducing women's high opportunity cost. Nevertheless, the current development of infant care institutes is still rather slow in Chinese cities because of the passive work pattern of local officials. Influenced by the target responsibility system, family planning agents are overall less motivated to carry out relevant projects. Such reluctance can even be reflected in their pessimistic statement that "the construction of fertility-friendly society cannot solve the (population) problem at all".<sup>38</sup> Conceivably, fertility-friendly society will not be established shortly in China, and as a result, it could take longer time

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<sup>38</sup> Interview B1, 11/2019.



as one anticipated to judge if the project can be considered as a successful response to population aging.

In the meantime, as another major component of policy implementation, the current coping with *shidu* issue has achieved certain success in terms of maintaining social stability, because there has been neither national petitions, nor any large-scale social disturbance of bereaved parents since 2015. Such apparent peace can be attributed to the continuous upgrade of the state support system and local officials' decisive suppression of petitioning on the one hand. On the other hand, *shidu* people's preference for lawful measures in their interest expression has also greatly contributed to the situation. However, it can never be argued that *shidu* families have been well and properly handled so that their confrontation has disappeared at local level. Instead, interviewed family planning agents are still being troubled by *shidu* activists with various demands from government, and they frankly acknowledge they are going to face larger stress until the leftover problem diminishes "after a few generations". Given the persistent supply and demand conflict of state support and the unresolvable dispute over official subsidy's definition between bereaved parents and government authority, it is almost destined there will be escalated conflict in the future which deserves further observation.

## ***7.2. Population Policy's Legitimacy and Development***

After inspecting the implementation of universal two-child policy at local level, some implications about China's population policy and its general politics can be offered. This research suggests that one-child policy is a strategic failure if examined in larger historical context. Its generated legitimacy crisis deeply impacts the development of the country's population policy that the work strategy of local officials firstly centers on preserving the regime's legitimacy rather than dealing with various population problems. However, the shifted focus of universal two-child policy and its misimplementation do not mean the central leadership's control over local cadres is weakened. On the contrary, local officials' full dedication to *shidu* family proves that the regulatory effect of the target responsibility system is overly strong that veto tasks have overshadowed the others. Given that, it becomes indispensable to increase the influence of fertility-friendly society on officials' career, if Chinese government is determined to "actively respond to population aging" in the country.

### 7.2.1. One-Child Policy as Strategic Blunder and Legitimacy Crisis

One-child policy can be argued to have fulfilled its primary purpose, as it was initiated to restrict the country's overpopulation and high fertility. However, the policy turns out to be a strategic blunder if examined in a larger historical context, since it is closely related to the emergence of a variety of serious social problems in Chinese society. The drastic decrease of fertility is one of the factors accounting for the deteriorating population aging, while birth limit combined with historical son preference resulted in the distorted sex ratio. Even worse, as revealed by this research, *shidu* families have been expanding fast without any expectation from Chinese top leaders. It is *shidu* activists' relentless petitions that first attracted top leaders' attention to their predicament, and subsequently resulted in the establishment and continuous upgrade of the state support system.

As Pierson (2000b) notes, political actors usually do not possess enough incentives and capacities to make far-sighted decisions, so they only pursue the interim rather than long-term outcomes of a policy. Obviously, Chinese leaders showed the same pattern in the introduction of one-child policy that they were merely interested in fertility control for the balance between population growth and natural resource, while leaving the probable social problems derived from an overly low fertility unconcerned. As a consequence, the policy receives considerable criticism from local family planning agents for its generated problems. Officials converge on the view that "the country's population policy becomes running on the right track" and there should be "no more strict family planning", because the old program is perceived as overly harsh and cultivated the current fertility concept among young couples. Instead, they believe the state should not plan birth at all in earlier times or at least better conduct it in a more loosened way. The critical view from officials clearly indicates that one-child policy is suffering legitimacy crisis, which further endangers the authority of the CCP regime.

Economic development and nationalism are usually regarded as two major sources of contemporary Chinese government (Holbig & Gilley, 2010). Yet scholars also point out that the regime's legitimacy maintenance could be impacted by its social policies as well (Lü, 2014; Moore, 2019). In this context, it is discernable that the policy enforcement and action logic of local family planning agents are always oriented to the legitimacy of both the family planning program and the regime. This is also the very reason why the state stays sensitive to the leftover problem.

The special concern of family planning agents about the policy and regime legitimacy can be firstly witnessed in their rhetoric which is closely aligned with the principle of central government. It is commonly reiterated by interviewed officials that one-child policy has essentially contributed to the country's fast economic boost. Some respondents even intentionally deemphasized the seriousness of *shidu* problem in their jurisdiction. In this way, their critical view toward one-child policy becomes downgraded by the careful defense for its legitimacy. Moreover, all interviewed agents claim that the disproportionately increased ratio of second births should be attributed to the universal two-child policy's strong incentive, while purposefully understating the decrease of firstborns. Although the fact is that many Chinese couples choose not to have any child at all, officials refuse to acknowledge the new policy only has little encouraging effect. Similar attitude can also be found in their subconscious negative answer to the question if universal two-child policy has confronted any problem. These cautious narratives reflect local family planning agents are walking on a tightrope between criticism from personal judgement and the preservation of the central government's authority out of political discipline.

Secondly, legitimacy also stands out in the controversy over the definition of the official subsidy for *shidu* family. Though bereaved parents firmly insisted on a "compensation" from government, the central government repeatedly rejected their demand without any hesitation, since "compensation" indicates the state's responsibility for causing *shidu* people's bitter life and further undermines the legitimacy of both family planning program and the CCP leadership.

Thirdly, legitimacy is the constraining factor which shapes the implementation of current policy and its future development. As acknowledged by interviewed officials, the fear for public criticism against the previous family planning program is one of the major factors that holds them back from applying material incentives and massive propaganda for encouraging more births. Let alone these active methods can lead to stronger backlash from the *shidu* group, who directly challenge the legitimacy of one-child policy. Thus, a relatively refrained strategy turns out to be more appropriate in practice. For the same reason, even when the central government realized the limited effect of universal two-child policy, it did not completely abolish the birth restriction, as local agents anticipated, but replaced it with a further loosened three-child policy. The central government

followed a milder but conservative path to relax the birth control step by step to avoid the sharp change of population policy and public denunciation. It is conceivable that the design and enforcement of future population policy will also be deeply shaped by legitimacy issue, particularly given the *shidu* group's large scale in society.

### 7.2.2. *Misimplementation of Universal Two-Child Policy*

Because of local officials' concerns about the legitimacy of both family planning and the party-state, the focus of population policy implementation has shifted from encouraging fertility to coping with *shidu* families in practice. But this by no means connotes the central authority is unable to maintain a tight control over its local agents, since the target responsibility system is still effective in regulating their behavior in accordance with top leaders' expectations.

This is first of all evidenced in their focus on the leftover problem in work. Though it contradicts the predesigned purpose of universal two-child policy, namely fertility encouragement, officials still give their full attention to the *shidu* issue because social stability as a veto target set by Chinese top leaders can decide their political career on the one hand; on the other hand, bereaved parents are widely considered as a major instability factor due to their continuous confrontations with government authority at both local and central level. Meanwhile, officials' hypersensitivity toward *shidu* family also mirrors the system's strong regulatory power, as reflected by their huge financial investment in the issue and the decisive suppression of alleged unreasonable pursuits with an emphasis on the petitioning in Beijing. It is the concern about political career that drives local agents to spend excessive time and money, in cases also coercion, in the leftover problem, albeit some methods might even increase the resentment of *shidu* people against the state. Similarly, the sluggish construction of fertility-friendly society is mainly the consequence of the task's smaller political impact on local officials but should not be understood as the central government's incapability to control its agents. The shifted policy focus more reflects that the responsibility system's shaping influence, or more precisely that of veto targets, is overly strong. Since it is demanding for local agents to handle multiple tasks at a time, particularly when these tasks conflict with each other (Edin, 2003), it is reasonable that they actively orient their behavior to the targets which are attached top significance by their principal and thereby becoming the decisive factor for their career development,

even though this frequently results in policy misimplementation as pointed out by scholars (Zhou et al., 2013; Heberer & Trappel, 2013).

One example is the previously noted uneven implementation, which focuses on the varied enforcement of the same policy between localities. Since local governments are given the discretion to refine policies introduced by their central leaders based on regional conditions, this enables a competition for better policy outcomes among them. Combined with political rewards and punishments under the hierarchical control, the competition leads to the division of local governments into pioneers that actively work toward the predesigned goal and resisters which cope with or even go against the central government's initiative due to limited capacity. In the case of universal two-child policy, the uneven implementation could be partly found in the *shidu* financial aid offered by local governments, including not only the different standards of monthly subsidy between provinces and cities, but also the upgrade of local one-off subsidy reported by interviewees under interregional competition. However, no apparent resisting behavior could be identified in the case. Instead, local officials still choose to improve the state aid despite reluctance and increased financial burden. Göbel argues local government resist in the rural tax and fee reform because of the disadvantaged economic condition in their region. Yet such rationale is absent in the *shidu* case. On the one hand, the central government did not prescribe a subsidy standard that must be met by local officials but merely suggested a minimum to be improved by local governments. Thus, local officials were given the discretion to set a standard in conformity with both their regional conditions and the central government's principle. On the other hand, the social cost for local governments being resisters is particularly high, as *shidu* activists have vigorously protested the low subsidy amount in rounds of petitions in Beijing, which already demonstrate how serious its challenge to social stability is. Furthermore, respondents from Guiyang also mentioned the anxiety of being outperformed by other prefectures as a driving factor for their upgrade of provincial capital's lump-sum subsidy. For these reasons, all local governments choose to increase their offer for *shidu* families under the pressure without anyone apparently violating the trend.

In comparison, the selective implementation suggested by O'Brien and Li (1999) is more concerned about the issue that policies are attached different degrees of political importance by the same locality and enforced accordingly. The critical role of the target

responsibility system as well as the differentiation between hard and soft targets are highlighted by the authors to understand why unpopular policies such as tax collection and family planning are faithfully carried out, while policies that are welcomed by peasants, for instance grassroots democracy, being relatively neglected by the same group of cadres. Moreover, it is also pointed out that local cadres are not only motivated by the reward and penalty tied to their performance, but their work strategy is also shaped by the “one-level down” management system, according to which officials are only accountable to the leaders immediate above them who are exactly in charge of their performance evaluation. Therefore, Chinese officials’ work is more dependent on the directives from their next higher administrative level, but not necessarily the central government’s principles. The mechanism also explains local governments’ extraordinary enthusiasm for carrying out policies that have a stronger link to higher promotion chances established by their immediate leaders (Deng, O’Brien, & Chen, 2018).

The enforcement of universal two-child policy at the local level is prominently featured with selective implementation. In all research sites, local family planning agents are found to be overwhelmed by tasks related to the *shidu* issue, while the construction of the fertility-friendly society has been attached much less attention, despite its being the primary purpose of the central government’s relaxation of birth limit. Similarly, target responsibility system accounts for such misimplementation. Whereas stability maintenance becomes at the top of Chinese officials’ agenda and therefore set as a veto target, birth-supporting programs only exert minor influence on cadres’ political career and could be further obstructed by the ambiguous responsibility division among administrative organs in the enforcement process, as seen in the expansion of childcare facilities. As a consequence, local family planning agents are highly incentivized to both enhance the investment in the state support and tightly control *shidu* family’s expression of interest for the stability reason, which even incurs the alienation of stability maintenance and generates higher risks of instability, but leave the construction of fertility-friendly society largely deemphasized. However, the selective implementation of universal two-child policy also has its peculiarity. Instead of dividing policies involved in the discussion into popular and unpopular ones, it depicts a special situation that the enforcement of certain policies clearly contradicts the larger policy context in which they are embedded. The overemphasis on *shidu* families and neglected birth support become

inconsistent with the intention of relaxed birth control to boost fertility, even impeding the central government from realizing its strategic plan to “actively react to population aging”.

In sum, whereas the discussion of selective and uneven implementation is based on the investigation of one specific policy, both two forms can be witnessed in the enforcement of China’s universal two-child policy, which as an overarching policy consists of multiple subprojects. The target responsibility system’s regulatory impact is substantial. It aligns local cadres’ attention with tasks assigned by the central government, but at the same time could also push them to distort top leaders’ intention. In addition to the institutional framework that structures officials’ behavior, it is noteworthy that the policy’s misimplementation could also be a consequence of its subproject’s history. *Shidu* family as an unexpected byproduct of the previous one-child policy has not only replaced birth support to be the factual center of universal two-child policy, but also become the focus of the varied state support standard between regions and relevant improvement under intergovernmental competition. Given its ever-growing scale, it is certain that *shidu* family is going to keep shaping China’s population policy in following decades. Therefore, the scrutiny of subprojects’ historical development is also indispensable for a more comprehensive understanding of the overarching policy’s implementation. This suggests the future development and enforcement of China’s population policy should also be observed within such institutional and historical contexts.

### *7.2.3. Possible Readjustment for Fertility-Friendly Society*

If Chinese central government expects to make a difference in fertility boost, it is clear that the central leadership needs to give more political attention to the construction of fertility-friendly society rather than merely loosening the birth limit. Admittedly, the fertility desire of contemporary Chinese couples is unlikely to be changed by policies in a short period of time. Yet studies find that it contributes to improving low fertility to reduce women’s opportunity cost, for instance through the improvement of women’s employment opportunities or childcare service (Neyer, 2006; Kalwij, 2010), so the further building of fertility-friendly society remains essential for China’s demographics in the future. However, it should not be neglected that the target responsibility system is the main cause of local agents’ reluctance to engage in this task. Whereas social stability

maintenance as a veto target has attracted most of attention of local officials, the construction of fertility-friendly society merely plays a minor role in officials' promotion, therefore it is downplayed in their daily work.

Stability maintenance has been the most stressful political task for Chinese officials in the last decade and top priority on the national policy agenda (Gao, 2015). Given such significance by far, it is unlikely that the task will lose its veto status in the near future, implying family planning agents are still going to be immersed in coping with *shidu* family's discontent. So, to facilitate the progress of building fertility-friendly society, it is necessary to reduce the hypersensitivity of local officials toward the *shidu* issue and stability maintenance on the one hand, for instance by assigning each level of local government larger quota of permitted petitions. Notably, the loosened control over interest expression could also be constructive to the general social stability, as it not only reduces the unnecessary spending of local governments in the close surveillance of activists and taking them home from Beijing, but also relieves the tension between *shidu* parents and government.

On the other hand, larger weight could be given to policy innovation regarding fertility-friendly society in the assessment of cadre's work performance, so that local officials can be fully motivated to carry out relevant tasks. Gao's (2017) research finds that local officials may prioritize policy innovation over veto tasks in cases, as the former is deemed to bring greater chance for their promotion. Following the logic, family planning agents are more likely to be encouraged to push the expansion of childcare institutes, if policy innovation or the participation in policy experimentation have larger impact on their career. Therefore, the central leadership could launch a competition among local governments to bring out better policies or development models for concrete political rewards, encouraging more active participation in the program, or simply readjust the weight of fertility-friendly society in performance assessment, enlarging the task's influence on the career advancement of cadres.

Moreover, as mentioned by informants of this research, the division of power and responsibility regarding expanding childcare facilities still blurs between government branches, constituting another factor that restricts its development in addition to the target responsibility system. The health agency is assigned the obligation to supervise the hygiene issue of childcare institutes but lacks the capability to correct relevant wrong-



doing. Such structural arrangement demotivates local agents to push the project. Given the reluctance of local officials to engage in policy innovation, Li (2006) argues the central government should be responsible for the refinement of policy regulations and relevant standards. Thus, a further clarification of power and responsibility from the central or provincial government is necessary to remove the administrative obstacle for a faster construction of fertility-friendly society.

Nonetheless, the increased emphasis on fertility-friendly society does not mean that the *shidu* issue is going to lose its priority on the agenda of Chinese officials. Because of the unavailability of informal support, the formal support from the state becomes the only means *shidu* parents could rely on to alleviate their suffering in life. This fragile social group overall has a higher demand for the support content and standard, particularly given that the state promised them a comprehensive old-age support in the one-child policy era. More importantly, once the state leaves their demands ignored, the vast number of bereaved parents will sharply question the previous family planning program's legitimacy, as they already did in the early 2010s, and thereby seriously challenging the Party's ruling foundation. Consequently, it remains crucial for local family planning agents to well handle *shidu* parents and take good care of the social stability issue.

To conclude, besides of the commonly found factors that hold Chinese couples back from childbearing, this research reveals that the implementation of universal two-child policy has been fundamentally shaped by *shidu* family and its aroused legitimacy concern about both family planning policy and the CCP regime. As a consequence, the central leadership has to initiate three-child policy in 2021 as "an active response" to the country's ever-deteriorating population aging. Universal two-child policy has proved that the relaxation of birth limit can only bring a short-term and weak incentive to fertility, since it failed to encourage people who have low fertility desire, which can be demonstrated in the continuously shrinking number of firstborns. Instead, a steady fertility increase needs to be built on the removal of a cluster of obstacles that prevent people from childbearing, for instance through ensuring women's employment and providing more childcare services. Therefore, the development of China's gender policy and labor market policy becomes growingly significant in the three-child policy era. The construction of fertility-friendly society is a meaningful project to deal with low fertility, but the progress of relevant projects still deserves further observation, for example if the

central government will refine the division of power and responsibility to facilitate the expansion of childcare institutes at local level, if there will be more local governments participating in policy experimentation, and more generally if fertility-friendly society is given larger influence on the political career of local officials so that they are sufficiently motivated to upgrade their investment in the task. Finally, *shidu* family's influence on the population policy in following decades should not be underestimated. Deeper research is called for on the *shidu* group's interaction with government authority and their impact on local agents' work strategy during the enforcement of three-child policy.

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## Appendix

<i>Cited as</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Full Title</i>	<i>Source</i>
<b>1. Central-Level Documents</b>			
CCP Central Committee 1955	1955/3	关于节制生育问题的报告的批示 [Comments on the report on birth control]	<a href="http://www.ce.cn/xwzx/gnsz/szyw/200705/30/t20070530_11542371.shtml">http://www.ce.cn/xwzx/gnsz/szyw/200705/30/t20070530_11542371.shtml</a> (25 March 2022)
CCP Central Committee 2020	2020/11	中共中央关于制定国民经济和社会发展第十四个五年规划和二〇三五年远景目标的建议 [Recommendations on formulating the 14th five-year plan for national economic and social development and long-term goals for 2035]	<a href="http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2020-11/03/content_5556991.htm">http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2020-11/03/content_5556991.htm</a> (19 April 2021)
CCP Central Committee & State Council 1962	1962/12	关于认真提倡计划生育的指示 [Instructions on the serious promotion of family planning]	<a href="http://www.ce.cn/xwzx/gnsz/szyw/200706/12/t20070612_11712313.shtml">http://www.ce.cn/xwzx/gnsz/szyw/200706/12/t20070612_11712313.shtml</a> (25 March 2022)
CCP Central Committee & State Council 1991	1991/5	关于加强计划生育工作严格控制人口增长的决定 [Decision on strengthening family planning work and strictly controlling population growth]	<a href="http://www.ce.cn/xwzx/gnsz/szyw/200706/17/t20070617_11786975.shtml">http://www.ce.cn/xwzx/gnsz/szyw/200706/17/t20070617_11786975.shtml</a> (25 March 2022)
CCP Central Committee & State Council 2000	2000/3	关于加强人口与计划生育工作稳定低生育水平的决定 [Decision on strengthening family planning work to stabilize low birth level]	<a href="http://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2000/content_60154.htm">http://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2000/content_60154.htm</a> (25 March 2022)
CCP Central Committee & State Council 2006	2006/12	关于全面加强人口和计划生育工作统筹解决人口问题的决定 [Decision on comprehensively strengthening family planning work to solve population problems]	<a href="http://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2007/content_534194.htm">http://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2007/content_534194.htm</a> (25 March 2022)
CCP Central Committee, State Council 2015	2015/12	关于实施全面两孩政策,改革完善计划生育服务管理的决定 [Decision on Implementing the Universal Two-Child Policy, Reforming and Improving the Management of Family Planning Services]	<a href="http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2016-01/05/content_5030806.htm">http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2016-01/05/content_5030806.htm</a> (25 March 2022)
CCP Central Committee & State Council 2016	2016/1	关于实施全面两孩政策改革完善计划生育服务管理的决定 [Decision on implementing the universal two-child policy reform and improving the management of family planning services]	<a href="http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2016-01/05/content_5030806.htm">http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2016-01/05/content_5030806.htm</a> (25 March 2022)
CCP Central Committee & State Council 2018	2018/11	关于学前教育深化改革规范发展的若干意见 [Several opinions on deepening reform and standardizing development of preschool education]	<a href="http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2018-11/15/content_5340776.htm">http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2018-11/15/content_5340776.htm</a> (25 March 2022)
CCP Central Committee & State Council 2021	2021/7	关于优化生育政策促进人口长期均衡发展的决定 [Decision on optimizing the fertility policy and promoting the long-term and balanced population development]	<a href="http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/zhengceku/2021-07/30/content_5628356.htm">http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/zhengceku/2021-07/30/content_5628356.htm</a> (25 March 2022)

China Family Planning Association 2017	2017/7	关于开展失独家庭住院护理补贴保险工作的通知 [Notice on carrying out the work of inpatient nursing subsidy insurance for <i>shidu</i> families]	<a href="https://www.chinafpa.org.cn/tzgg/201708/t20170817_12033.html">https://www.chinafpa.org.cn/tzgg/201708/t20170817_12033.html</a> (25 March 2022)
Ministry of Education 2013	2013/1	幼儿园教职工配备标准(暂行) [Provisional kindergarten staffing standards]	<a href="http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A10/s7151/201301/t20130115_147148.html">http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A10/s7151/201301/t20130115_147148.html</a> (25 March 2022)
Ministry of Health 1954	1954/11	关于改进避孕及人工流产问题的通报 [Bulletin on improving contraception and abortion]	<a href="https://www.chinanews.com.cn/gn/2013/12-28/5674500.shtml">https://www.chinanews.com.cn/gn/2013/12-28/5674500.shtml</a> (25 March 2022)
MoF et al. 2019	2019/6	关于养老、托育、家政等社区家庭服务业税费优惠政策的公告 [Announcement on preferential tax policies for community and family services such as elderly care, childcare, and housekeeping]	<a href="http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/zhengceku/2019-11/07/content_5449764.htm">http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/zhengceku/2019-11/07/content_5449764.htm</a> (25 March 2022)
MoF & NHC 2018	2018/4	关于调整计划生育家庭特别扶助制度扶助标准的通知 [Notice on adjusting the standards of the special support system for families following birth control]	<a href="https://www.ahhn.gov.cn/group2/M00/0C/78/CtG0ZGDN-Tt2ARJmVABAujvoMSUY807.pdf">https://www.ahhn.gov.cn/group2/M00/0C/78/CtG0ZGDN-Tt2ARJmVABAujvoMSUY807.pdf</a> (25 March 2022)
MoF & NHFPC 2010	2010/7	全国计划生育家庭特别扶助专项资金管理暂行办法 [Interim measures for the administration of special national family planning funds]	<a href="http://www.gov.cn/zwgk/2010-08/05/content_1671948.htm">http://www.gov.cn/zwgk/2010-08/05/content_1671948.htm</a> (25 March 2022)
MoF & NHFPC 2016	2016/4	关于进一步完善计划生育投入机制的意见 [Opinions on further improving the mechanism of family planning investment]	<a href="http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2016-04/18/content_5065167.htm">http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2016-04/18/content_5065167.htm</a> (25 March 2022)
NDRC et al. 2019	2019/1	加大力度推动社会领域公共服务补短板强弱项提质量 促进形成强大国内市场的行动方案 [Action plan for promoting public services and forming a strong domestic market]	<a href="http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2019-02/19/content_5366822.htm">http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2019-02/19/content_5366822.htm</a> (25 March 2022)
NDRC & NHC 2019	2019/10	支持社会力量发展普惠托育服务专项行动实施方案（试行） [Trial implementation plan for the special action to support the development of inclusive childcare services by social forces]	<a href="http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2019-10/24/content_5444458.htm">http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2019-10/24/content_5444458.htm</a> (25 March 2022)
NHC 2018	2018/3	计划生育特殊家庭服务管理信息标准和规范 [Standards of Service Information Regarding Families with Special Difficulties Due to Birth Control]	<a href="https://www.chinafpa.org.cn/zcfg/xgfg/201901/t20190125_42936.html">https://www.chinafpa.org.cn/zcfg/xgfg/201901/t20190125_42936.html</a> (25 March 2022)
NHC et al. 2019	2019/12	托育机构登记和备案办法（试行） [Trial Regulation of Registration and Filing of Childcare Institutes]	<a href="http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/zhengceku/2020-01/06/content_5466960.htm">http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/zhengceku/2020-01/06/content_5466960.htm</a> (25 March 2022)
NHFPC 2017	2017/11	关于进一步做好计划生育特殊家庭优先便利医疗服务工作的通知 [Notice on Further Improving the Priority and Convenience of	<a href="http://www.nhc.gov.cn/rkjcyjtfzs/zcwj2/201801/f6e7ff4bb9">http://www.nhc.gov.cn/rkjcyjtfzs/zcwj2/201801/f6e7ff4bb9</a>

		Medical Services for Families with Special Difficulties Due to Birth Control]	8a4921934101d939558b7f.shtml (25 March 2022)
NHFPC & China Family Planning Association 2014	2014/1	关于开展计划生育特殊困难家庭社会关怀的通知 [Notice on developing social care for families with special difficulties due to birth control]	<a href="http://www.nhc.gov.cn/jtfzs/s3581/201406/23a8e67c535f43b9a5aa0c6888d729b0.shtml">http://www.nhc.gov.cn/jtfzs/s3581/201406/23a8e67c535f43b9a5aa0c6888d729b0.shtml</a> (25 March 2022)
NHFPC et al. 2013	2013/12	关于进一步做好计划生育特殊困难家庭扶助工作的通知 [Notice on further improving support for family with special difficulties due to birth control]	<a href="http://www.nhc.gov.cn/jtfzs/s3581/201312/206b8b4e214ea5ea2016417843d7500.shtml">http://www.nhc.gov.cn/jtfzs/s3581/201312/206b8b4e214ea5ea2016417843d7500.shtml</a> (25 March 2022)
NHFPC et al. 2016	2016/11	关于加快推进母婴设施建设的指导意见 [Guiding opinions on accelerating the construction of maternity facilities]	<a href="http://www.nhc.gov.cn/rkjcyjtfzs/zcwj2/201611/b1f88c62a7af4156a9ad1f51591f9350.shtml">http://www.nhc.gov.cn/rkjcyjtfzs/zcwj2/201611/b1f88c62a7af4156a9ad1f51591f9350.shtml</a> (25 March 2022)
NPFPC 2011	2011	关于优化人口计生户外宣传环境的通知 [Notice on optimizing the outdoor publicity of family planning]	
NPFPC & MoF 2007	2007/8	关于印发全国独生子女伤残死亡家庭扶助制度试点方案的通知 [Notice on printing and distributing the pilot program of the national support system for families with disabled or dead single child]	<a href="http://www.nhc.gov.cn/jtfzs/s3581/201502/6dd661a9e1214ac0b4330c3ab6ab87a6.shtml">http://www.nhc.gov.cn/jtfzs/s3581/201502/6dd661a9e1214ac0b4330c3ab6ab87a6.shtml</a> (25 March 2022)
Organization Department of the CCP Central Committee 1998	1998/5	党政领导干部考核工作暂行规定 [Interim provisions on the assessment of leading party and government cadres]	<a href="https://zzb.ustc.edu.cn/2008/0329/c23623a78916/page.htm">https://zzb.ustc.edu.cn/2008/0329/c23623a78916/page.htm</a> (25 March 2022)
State Council 1971	1971/7	国务院转发卫生部军管会、商业部、燃料化学工业部的“关于做好计划生育工作的报告” [The State Council forwards the "Report on Well Conducting Family Planning" from the Military Control Commission of the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Commerce, and the Ministry of Fuel Chemical Industry]	<a href="http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2015-11/19/content_10304.htm">http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2015-11/19/content_10304.htm</a> (25 March 2022)
State Council 2006	2006/12	人口发展“十一五”和2020年规划 [The "Eleventh Five-Year Plan" and 2020 Plan for population development]	<a href="http://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2007/content_526981.htm">http://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2007/content_526981.htm</a> (25 March 2022)
State Council 2012	2011/11	国家人口发展“十二五”规划 [The "Twelfth Five-Year Plan" for national population development]	<a href="http://www.gov.cn/zwgk/2012-04/10/content_2109800.htm">http://www.gov.cn/zwgk/2012-04/10/content_2109800.htm</a> (25 March 2022)
State Council 2016	2016/12	国家人口发展规划（2016—2030年） [National Population Development Plan 2016-2030]	<a href="http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2017-01/25/content_5163309.htm">http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2017-01/25/content_5163309.htm</a> (25 March 2022)
State Council 2018	2018/12	关于印发个人所得税专项附加扣除暂行办法的通知 [Notice on the Issuance of the	<a href="http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2018-12/22/content_5351181.htm">http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2018-12/22/content_5351181.htm</a> (25 March 2022)

Interim Measures for the Special Additional Deduction of Individual Income Tax]

State Council 2019	2019/4	关于促进 3 岁以下婴幼儿照护服务发展的指导意见 [Guiding opinions on promoting care services for children under 3 years old]	<a href="http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2019-05/09/content_5389983.htm">http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2019-05/09/content_5389983.htm</a> (25 March 2022)
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Health and Family Planning Commission of Shaanxi Province et al. 2014	2014/11	关于进一步做好计划生育特殊困难家庭扶助工作的通知 [Notice on further improving support for family with special difficulties due to birth control]	<a href="http://www.qishan.gov.cn/art/2014/11/19/art_13646_1258408.html">http://www.qishan.gov.cn/art/2014/11/19/art_13646_1258408.html</a> (25 March 2022)
Health and Family Planning Commission of Shaanxi Province et al. 2017	2017/7	关于加快推进母婴设施建设的实施意见 [Guiding opinions on accelerating the construction of maternity facilities]	<a href="http://sxwjw.shaanxi.gov.cn/zfxgk/fdzdgknr/zcwj/qtgw/201707/t20170707_1832771.html">http://sxwjw.shaanxi.gov.cn/zfxgk/fdzdgknr/zcwj/qtgw/201707/t20170707_1832771.html</a> (25 March 2022)
Health and Family Planning Commission of Guizhou Province et al. 2015	2015/6	关于进一步做好计划生育特殊家庭扶助工作的实施意见 [Notice on further improving support for family with special difficulties due to birth control]	<a href="http://wjw.guizhou.gov.cn/zwgk_500663/xxgkml/zdlyxx/ghjh/gzjh/201610/t20161020_38151226.html">http://wjw.guizhou.gov.cn/zwgk_500663/xxgkml/zdlyxx/ghjh/gzjh/201610/t20161020_38151226.html</a> (25 March 2022)
Health and Family Planning Commission of Guizhou Province et al. 2017	2017/9	关于加快推进母婴设施建设的实施意见 [Guiding opinions on accelerating the construction of maternity facilities]	<a href="http://wjw.guizhou.gov.cn/zfxgk/fdzdgknr/lzyj/gfxwj/202109/t20210914_70381360.html">http://wjw.guizhou.gov.cn/zfxgk/fdzdgknr/lzyj/gfxwj/202109/t20210914_70381360.html</a> (25 March 2022)
Health and Family Planning Commission of Fujian Province et al. 2017	2017/6	关于加快推进母婴设施建设的实施意见 [Guiding opinions on accelerating the construction of maternity facilities]	<a href="http://wjw.fujian.gov.cn/jggk/csxx/jhsyjcfdc/zhgl_53347/202111/t20211110_5770899.htm">http://wjw.fujian.gov.cn/jggk/csxx/jhsyjcfdc/zhgl_53347/202111/t20211110_5770899.htm</a> (25 March 2022)
Health and Family Planning Commission of Xi'an 2017	2017/11	关于加快推进母婴设施建设的实施意见 [Guiding opinions on accelerating the construction of maternity facilities]	<a href="http://xawjw.xa.gov.cn/xxgk/zfwj/bmwj/5d777b17de69b605ecfdbced.html">http://xawjw.xa.gov.cn/xxgk/zfwj/bmwj/5d777b17de69b605ecfdbced.html</a> (25 March 2022)
Health and Family Planning Commission	2017/10	关于加快推进母婴设施建设的实施意见 [Guiding opinions on accelerating the construction of maternity facilities]	

of Xiamen  
2017

Health Commission of Shaanxi Province et al. 2018	2018/12	关于调整计划生育家庭特别扶助制度扶助标准的通知 [Notice on Adjusting the Support Standards for Families with Special Difficulties due to Birth Planning]	<a href="http://wsjsj.weinan.gov.cn/info/610500/201409131431436121/201812031605413937.shtml">http://wsjsj.weinan.gov.cn/info/610500/201409131431436121/201812031605413937.shtml</a> (8 March 2022)
Health Commission of Guizhou Province et al. 2018	2018/12	关于调整计划生育家庭特别扶助制度扶助标准的通知 [Notice on Adjusting the Support Standards for Families with Special Difficulties due to Birth Planning]	<a href="http://wjw.guizhou.gov.cn/zwgk_500663/xxgkml/zcwj/xyzcfg/201812/t20181229_38049174.html">http://wjw.guizhou.gov.cn/zwgk_500663/xxgkml/zcwj/xyzcfg/201812/t20181229_38049174.html</a> (8 March 2022)
Health Commission of Fujian Province et al. 2018	2018/12	关于进一步加强计划生育特殊家庭扶助关怀工作的意见 [Opinions on Further Strengthening the Support and Care Work for Families with Special Difficulties due to Birth Planning]	<a href="http://zfgb.fujian.gov.cn/8777">http://zfgb.fujian.gov.cn/8777</a> (8 March 2022)
Health Commission of Xi'an 2019	2019/10	计划生育特殊家庭扶助信息公开内容 [Open Information on Support for Families with Special Difficulties due to Birth Planning]	<a href="http://www.xa.gov.cn/gk/shfl/jhsytsjtfz/5db7e54b65cbd804f69c96eb.html">http://www.xa.gov.cn/gk/shfl/jhsytsjtfz/5db7e54b65cbd804f69c96eb.html</a> (8 March 2022)
Health Commission of Xiamen 2016	2016/8	关于进一步加强计划生育特殊家庭扶助工作意见的通知 [Opinions on Further Strengthening the Support for Families with Special Difficulties due to Birth Planning]	<a href="http://www.xm.gov.cn/zwgk/flight/sfbwj/201609/t20160906_1359279.htm">http://www.xm.gov.cn/zwgk/flight/sfbwj/201609/t20160906_1359279.htm</a> (8 March 2022)
People's Government of Shaanxi Province 2019	2019/12	关于促进 3 岁以下婴幼儿照护服务发展的指导意见 [Guiding opinions on promoting care services for children under 3 years old]	<a href="http://www.shaanxi.gov.cn/zfxxgk/zfgb/2020/d4q/202003/t20200312_1636248.html">http://www.shaanxi.gov.cn/zfxxgk/zfgb/2020/d4q/202003/t20200312_1636248.html</a> (25 March 2022)
People's Government of Guizhou Province 2020	2020/5	关于促进 3 岁以下婴幼儿照护服务发展的指导意见 [Guiding opinions on promoting care services for children under 3 years old]	<a href="http://www.nwccw.gov.cn/2020-05/13/content_284250.htm">http://www.nwccw.gov.cn/2020-05/13/content_284250.htm</a> (25 March 2022)
People's Government of Fujian Province 2019	2019/12	关于促进 3 岁以下婴幼儿照护服务发展的指导意见 [Guiding opinions on promoting care services for children under 3 years old]	<a href="https://wjw.fujian.gov.cn/xxgk/fgwj/zxwj/201912/t20191231_5171549.htm">https://wjw.fujian.gov.cn/xxgk/fgwj/zxwj/201912/t20191231_5171549.htm</a> (25 March 2022)
People's Government of Xi'an 2020	2020/12	关于促进 3 岁以下婴幼儿照护服务发展的指导意见 [Guiding opinions on promoting care services for children under 3 years old]	<a href="http://www.xa.gov.cn/gk/zcfg/szbf/5fd2e48df8fd1c59665228cd.html">http://www.xa.gov.cn/gk/zcfg/szbf/5fd2e48df8fd1c59665228cd.html</a> (25 March 2022)
People's Government of Xiamen 2020	2020/8	关于促进 3 岁以下婴幼儿照护服务发展的指导意见 [Guiding opinions on promoting care services for children under 3 years old]	<a href="http://xxgk.xm.gov.cn/wjw/m1/09/11/202008/t20200824_2473290.htm">http://xxgk.xm.gov.cn/wjw/m1/09/11/202008/t20200824_2473290.htm</a> (25 March 2022)
Population and Family Planning Commission of Shaanxi Province & Shaanxi	2012/9	关于建立完善失独家庭养老扶助制度意见的通知 [Opinions on establishing and improving the pension support system for <i>Shidu</i> families]	<a href="http://www.shaanxi.gov.cn/zfxxgk/zfgb/2012/d21q_4137/201211/t20121116_1642532.html">http://www.shaanxi.gov.cn/zfxxgk/zfgb/2012/d21q_4137/201211/t20121116_1642532.html</a> (25 March 2022)



Department of  
Finance 2012

Population and Family Planning Commission of Fujian Province & Fujian Department of Finance 2012	2012/5	福建省计划生育特殊家庭救助行动方案 [Assistance action plan for special birth control families of Fujian Province]	<a href="http://www.gov.cn/govweb/fwxw/sh/2012-08/14/content_2203939.htm">http://www.gov.cn/govweb/fwxw/sh/2012-08/14/content_2203939.htm</a> (25 March 2022)
Population and Family Planning Commission of Fujian Province 2013	2013/7	关于加强计划生育特殊家庭扶助工作的意见 [Opinions on Strengthening the Support for Special Birth Control Families]	<a href="http://www.nhc.gov.cn/wjw/dfxw/201307/3d805be54314400eb4ea61eea9a41c2d.shtml">http://www.nhc.gov.cn/wjw/dfxw/201307/3d805be54314400eb4ea61eea9a41c2d.shtml</a> (25 March 2022)
Xi'an Municipal Bureau of Statistics 2020	2020/3	西安市 2019 年国民经济和社会发展统计公报 [Statistical Bulletin of National Economic and Social Development of Xi'an 2019]	<a href="http://tjj.xa.gov.cn/tjsj/tjgb/tjgb/5e782997fd85086744b58f44.html">http://tjj.xa.gov.cn/tjsj/tjgb/tjgb/5e782997fd85086744b58f44.html</a> (25 March 2022)
Guiyang Municipal Bureau of Statistics 2020	2020/4	贵阳市 2019 年国民经济和社会发展统计公报 [Statistical Bulletin of National Economic and Social Development of Guiyang 2019]	<a href="http://www.guiyang.gov.cn/zwgk/zfxxgks/fdzdgnr/tjxx/tjgb/202004/t20200427_57755025.html">http://www.guiyang.gov.cn/zwgk/zfxxgks/fdzdgnr/tjxx/tjgb/202004/t20200427_57755025.html</a> (25 March 2022)
Xiamen Municipal Bureau of Statistics 2020	2020/3	厦门市 2019 年国民经济和社会发展统计公报 [Statistical Bulletin of National Economic and Social Development of Xiamen 2019]	<a href="http://www.xm.gov.cn/zfxxgk/xxgkznm/gmzgan/tjgb/202003/t20200320_2433223.htm">http://www.xm.gov.cn/zfxxgk/xxgkznm/gmzgan/tjgb/202003/t20200320_2433223.htm</a> (25 March 2022)
	2016/5	陕西省人口与计划生育条例 [Population and Family Planning Regulations of Shaanxi Province]	<a href="http://www.shaanxi.gov.cn/zfxxgk/zfgb/2016_4016/d14q_4030/201608/t20160801_1639559.html">http://www.shaanxi.gov.cn/zfxxgk/zfgb/2016_4016/d14q_4030/201608/t20160801_1639559.html</a> (25 March 2022)
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	2016/2	福建省人口与计划生育条例 [Population and Family Planning Regulations of Fujian Province]	<a href="http://www.fujian.gov.cn/zwgk/flfg/dfxfg/201712/t20171207_1200401.htm">http://www.fujian.gov.cn/zwgk/flfg/dfxfg/201712/t20171207_1200401.htm</a> (25 March 2022)
	2016/3	北京市人口与计划生育条例 [Population and Family Planning Regulations of Beijing Municipality]	<a href="http://www.bjdch.gov.cn/n1692481/n2854390/c4288934/content.html">http://www.bjdch.gov.cn/n1692481/n2854390/c4288934/content.html</a> (25 March 2022)
	2016/3	宁夏回族自治区人口与计划生育条例 [Population and Family Planning Regulations of Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region]	<a href="http://hrss.nx.gov.cn/zmhd/12333zx/zx/201603/t20160301_582345.html">http://hrss.nx.gov.cn/zmhd/12333zx/zx/201603/t20160301_582345.html</a> (25 March 2022)
	2016/4	甘肃省人口与计划生育条例 [Population and Family Planning Regulations of Gansu Province]	<a href="http://www.gsrw.gov.cn/html/2016/lfdt_0405/12554.html">http://www.gsrw.gov.cn/html/2016/lfdt_0405/12554.html</a> (25 March 2022)

2016/2

上海市人口与计划生育条例 [Population and Family Planning Regulations of Shanghai Municipality]

<https://wsjkw.sh.gov.cn/sh2/20180525/0012-27412.html>  
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## **Acknowledgements**

The Ph.D. study was never an easy task for me. Hairs on my head have gone increasingly thin with a receding hairline. Most people who studied with me now have a steady income and sweet family, but I am still a single proletariat. Nevertheless, I never thought I was less happy than them, as I have better knowledge of this world, and more importantly, I can enjoy greater spiritual freedom in my life. This could only be achieved through systematic study and deep research, as well as motorbike rides.

A doctoral degree would be the greatest honor in my life by far. First, I must express my sincerest thanks to Professor Alpermann. In fact, my gratitude is beyond words, because his guidance and generous help went through my years of study. He not only taught me how to conduct scientific research, but also how to be an upright scientist through our discussions about research ethics. These values will be kept in my heart and passed on to other young scholars when I become a supervisor someday. I am also grateful for the kind suggestions from Professor Lauth. He is a gentleman who provided me with valuable insights and great patience. Professor Fischer kindly helped me achieve my scholarship. Her critics and suggestions are truly appreciated as well. They are the best persons I have ever met in this planet, and I hope there will be a chance to meet them in China in the future.

My parents are the only ones who unconditionally love me in this world. I love them too and feel proud of them. I lost my cousin who grew up with me and thus suffered from insomnia for years. My dearest friends Qize and Linping backed me up when I was in dire situations, so did Yuansheng, Bo, and Sheng. Moreover, I could not make my field research without the firm support from Qian and Qiaobo. I am also thankful that I have Luyu, Jie, and Zhen by my side. All of them have the respect from my deep heart. I also wish all my informants may have a successful career in Chinese bureaucracy.

I am going to miss the beautiful time I spent in Germany. The country's beer, Schnitzel, sausages, landscape, and lovely people are all my best memories. It is frustrating that the media in both Germany and China never stop their biased propaganda against each other, which continues to generate arrogance and ignorance among the public and lead to global conflicts. I wish I could play a bridging role in the future and contribute to the mutual understanding between people from the two societies.

## Affidavit

I hereby confirm that my thesis entitled *Population Policy and Governance at the Local Level - A Qualitative Research of the Implementation of the Universal Two-Child Policy in China* is the result of my own work. I did not receive any help or support from commercial consultants. All sources and materials applied are listed and specified in the thesis.

Furthermore, I confirm that this thesis has not yet been submitted as part of another examination process neither in identical nor in similar form.

Xi'an 12.07.2022

Place, Date

Signature

## Eidesstattliche Erklärung

Hiermit erkläre ich an Eides statt, die Dissertation *Population Policy and Governance at the Local Level - A Qualitative Research of the Implementation of the Universal Two-Child Policy in China* eigenständig, d.h. insbesondere selbständig und ohne Hilfe eines kommerziellen Promotionsberaters, angefertigt und keine anderen als die von mir angegebenen Quellen und Hilfsmittel verwendet zu haben.

Ich erkläre außerdem, dass die Dissertation weder in gleicher noch in ähnlicher Form bereits in einem anderen Prüfungsverfahren vorgelegen hat.

Xi'an 12.07.2022

Ort, Datum

Unterschrift