

The one-child policy and gender inequality in Chinese society

A política do filho único e a desigualdade de gênero na sociedade chinesa

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Abstract

This paper aimed to analyze the possible contributions of the one-child policy to reducing gender inequality in Chinese society. After the bibliographical survey carried out, it was possible to identify, in works by Brazilian authors, several criticisms, including those that the one-child policy had deepened the subjugation of women to men in China. However, Chinese authors present aspects that have still been little explored in Brazilian academia, which, while pointing out possible negative results, demonstrate how the one-child policy had as one of its consequences the reduction of gender inequality, at least in terms of a more equal division of domestic labor, a greater female presence in the labor market, and the increase in women's education in relation to men.

Keywords: China; population policies; one-child policy; gender inequality.

Resumo

O presente trabalho teve o objetivo de analisar as possíveis contribuições da política do filho único para a redução da desigualdade de gênero na sociedade chinesa. Após a pesquisa bibliográfica realizada, foi possível identificar, em obras de autores brasileiros, diversas críticas, inclusive no sentido de que a política do filho único teria aprofundado a submissão das mulheres aos homens na China. Entretanto, autores chineses nos apresentam aspectos ainda pouco explorados no meio acadêmico brasileiro, que, sem deixar de apontar possíveis resultados negativos, demonstram como a política do filho único teve como uma de suas consequências a redução da desigualdade de gênero, ao menos no que se refere a uma divisão do trabalho doméstico mais igualitária, a uma maior presença feminina no mercado de trabalho e ao crescimento da escolaridade das mulheres em relação aos homens.

Palavras-chave: China; políticas populacionais; política do filho único; desigualdade de gênero.

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Introduction

The one-child policy, a population control measure in force in China from 1979 to 2015, remains a topic of significant recurrence in contemporary academic and media debates. Its analysis, often marked by controversy, is situated not only within demographic discussions but also within the broader context of disputes over political, economic, and cultural hegemony on the international stage.

Among the various issues directly related to this controversial policy is the examination of its consequences for Chinese women. Without disregarding the numerous analyses already conducted on this subject, it is possible to identify aspects that remain underexplored, revealed through extensive field research carried out within the Asian country itself, which substantially contributes to enriching the debate on the topic.

Understanding that the analysis of this policy is inseparable from its contextualization, as well as from an understanding of the process through which China's millennia-old society was formed, a brief historical overview was undertaken in order to uncover the origins of certain ideas and values that continue to permeate Chinese culture, while also identifying significant changes from one generation to another.

Following the description of aspects that objectively characterize the policy in question, works presenting conflicting perspectives were analyzed, revealing the complexity of the measure, whose consequences remain present in the country to this day.

Historical Background

Until the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in October 1949, the Asian country had a predominantly rural population that lived under imperial regimes which legitimized their rule through a Confucian ethic (Leão, 2021).

The term "Confucius" is a Latinization of the name of the renowned Chinese political thinker who lived between 552 and 479 BCE, whose name, depending on the ideograms used, may be written in Chinese in several ways, such as K'ung-fu-tzu, K'ung-tzu, or Kongfuzi. Born into an aristocratic family, he devoted himself to the study of political and social matters and taught men who aspired to attain governmental positions (Feitosa, 2024).

In pre-revolutionary Chinese society, the emperor's decisions were viewed as divine, which favored the consolidation of social hierarchy. According to Leão (2010, p. 18–19, our translation):

[...] the figure of the emperor's prince, who represented the harmony between heaven and earth, froze the political and economic power of Chinese society. These leaders were representatives of a cosmic God, figures chosen to govern society, and the legitimate priests of China. Thus, the Chinese people were expected to recognize them as such, respecting and obeying their decisions, for only in this way could the harmony of civilization be achieved. This obviously resulted in the stabilization and crystallization of social relations.

Based on the analysis by Silva and Lima Júnior (2024), it is possible to state that Confucianism was, for centuries, a source of ideas that contributed to the legitimation of social inequalities, including gender inequalities.

According to the authors, by emphasizing the so-called Three Fundamental Bonds, “Confucianism established a rigid social hierarchy in which loyalty to the leader, filial piety, and female submission were central values” (Silva; Lima Júnior, 2024, p. 55, our translation). Regarding the idea of filial piety, Prozczinski (2017) argues that it is a virtue exalted by Neo-Confucianism, according to which a bad son could never become a good ruler. A good son, in turn, “is characterized by enduring in all situations, including mistreatment by his father and mother, and nonetheless to continue on the path of virtue. If he does so, he will be saved by the forces of destiny” (Prozczinski, 2017, p. 2, our translation).

As a political ideology, in addition to being a system of beliefs and values, Confucianism historically contributed to the preservation of the prevailing social order by legitimizing power hierarchies. The patriarchal structure was reproduced through the imposition of inflexible gender roles, whereby women were expected to limit themselves to childrearing within the domestic sphere and to submit to their husbands’ will (Silva; Lima Júnior, 2024).

Nevertheless, a certain ambiguity can be identified in Confucian texts, particularly with regard to gender issues, which allowed for different interpretations throughout history. For instance, in such texts the same character may refer to “man” or to the nouns “person” or “thing” (Silva; Lima Júnior, 2024, p. 66, our translation). The collection *The Analects of Confucius*, “considered the most important doctrinal book of Confucianism, composed of a selection of texts attributed to the Chinese thinker and his disciples, does not prescribe women’s subservience” (Silva; Lima Júnior, 2024, p. 66, our translation).

Thus, it can be argued that Confucianism, at least in part, was interpreted and employed over centuries in accordance with the interests of the dominant classes in preserving an unequal social structure, assigning women an inferior role in relation to men.

A historical phenomenon that significantly represented the oppression of women over centuries in China was the practice of “lotus feet,” in which girls’ feet were bound from early childhood, causing them to remain small and deformed and resulting in permanent disabilities (Feitosa, 2024).

This practice had already been observed during the Tang Dynasty (618–907), gaining greater popularity between the end of the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) and the period of the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) (Feitosa, 2024).

According to Feitosa (2024, p. 45, our translation), this practice “came to symbolize a future wife’s ability to endure sacrifice and demonstrate absolute obedience to her family, thereby increasing her chances of securing a good marriage through her virtues.”

With the victory of the revolution in 1949 and the subsequent proclamation of the PRC, the Chinese social structure underwent intense changes, with significant consequences for women. Regarding the practice of lotus feet, for example, Mao Zedong issued a decree prohibiting its continuation (Figueiredo, 2021).

For Milaré and Diegues (2012, p. 363, our translation), one of the main determinants of the revolution was “the understanding, across different spheres of society – peasants, workers, and intellectuals – of the need for comprehensive agrarian reform, ultimately aimed at structural changes in pursuit of reducing existing social inequalities.”

It is important to emphasize that when Mao Zedong came to power, China was devastated by the war against Japanese domination, as well as by the civil war against the nationalist Kuomintang. Approximately 80% of the population lived in rural areas, and more than 70% of GDP derived from the primary sector (Milaré; Diegues, 2012).

Henderson (2007) clarifies that in pre-revolutionary China girls had no control over their own future. An arranged marriage was the best outcome they could hope for, in order to avoid being sold as slaves, prostitutes, or concubines.

During the Maoist period, laws were enacted to ensure gender equality, “such as the Marriage Law of 1950 that guaranteed women equality in marriage, divorce and property ownership. It also outlawed the killing and sale of children. Many women applied for divorce soon after it was passed” (Henderson, 2007, p. 7).

The 1954 Constitution also emphasized gender equality. For example, Article 86 stipulated that all citizens of the PRC over the age of 18 “have the right to vote and stand for election whatever their nationality, race, sex, occupation, social origin, religious belief, education, property status, or length of residence, except insane persons and persons deprived by law of the right to vote and stand for election.” It concluded by stating: “Like men, women enjoy the right to vote and to be elected” (China, 2010[1954]).

Nevertheless, among various obstacles faced in reducing social inequalities, including gender inequalities, was the problem of population growth, which will be addressed in the following section.

Characterizing the One-Child Policy

As discussed earlier, until the establishment of the PRC in 1949, China’s millennia-old social structure was characterized by a majority rural population, in which women were responsible for maintaining family harmony, in accordance with the hegemonic interpretation of Confucianism. According to Prozczinski (2017, p. 1, our translation), “it was only with the founding of the PRC that the women’s emancipation movement gained strength and their image began to change.”

In 1979, the government of Deng Xiaoping adopted the one-child policy, which has been the subject of intense debate, both within and outside academic circles, to this day. It is worth noting that although the expression *one-child policy* is commonly translated into Portuguese as *política do filho único*, the measure actually limited the birth of children of both sexes. It is therefore possible to suggest that future academic works consider adopting the translation *política da criança única* (“one-child policy” in the sense of a single child), in order to avoid misleading interpretations that already suggest that the measure reinforced Chinese preference for male children.

According to Fong’s analysis (2002, p. 1100), “much of the literature on China’s one-child policy has emphasized that compulsory fertility limitation harms women”. Among the aspects highlighted by critics of the policy are female infanticide, forced sterilizations and abortions, as well as fines and the loss of benefits or employment.

A search on the Google Scholar platform using the keywords “policy,” “one,” “child,” and “China” reveals that, in Portuguese-language scholarship, there is a predominance of works arguing that the one-child policy had predominantly—or even exclusively—negative consequences for women. Examples include the works of Alves (2019), Bueno (2017), Menin and Billig (2022), Pessini (2014), Prozczinski (2017), and Silva, Lima, and Maciel (2024).

In addition to works published in Portuguese, the book by Susan Greenhalgh, *Just One Child: Science and Policy in Deng’s China*, also deserves attention. Between 1985 and 2006, the author conducted more than 140 interviews with researchers involved in the formulation of the one-child policy, as well as with officials responsible for Family Planning Commissions, identifying questionable aspects of the policy (Greenhalgh, 2008).

Prozczinski’s article (2017, p. 8, our translation) synthesizes some of these problematic aspects, possibly associated with the one-child policy, as follows:

The one-child policy had disastrous results, to such an extent that, since 2016, the government has relaxed the policy to allow two children per couple. In several articles, much discussion focuses on the shortage of women relative to the number of men in China who are unable to find partners. However, we believe it is more important to emphasize the disastrous consequences for women. In rural areas, in particular, countless women were forced to undergo abortions and sterilizations, even in advanced pregnancies. Many had to live concealing their pregnancies, fearing reprisals, continuing to work at the same pace until the end of gestation. When discovered, some children were taken away from their families, while others had to pay a fine to the state until the child reached eighteen years of age. There were also professional penalties, since childbirth had to be authorized by production units. Within this logic, an unplanned and unauthorized pregnancy was impossible without the ‘Certificate of Glory of the One Child’.

The position adopted here is that, in order to understand the policy in all its complexity, it is necessary to consider analyses by authors who have already addressed the topic and who have the merit of denouncing its negative effects, while also identifying still underexplored elements present in research conducted by Chinese authors, which enrich the debate.

As Hesketh and Xing (1997) point out, China’s population grew from 540 million in 1950 to more than 850 million in 1970. This rapid increase led the Chinese government, in the early 1970s—still during the Maoist period—to adopt a policy known as “Later, Longer, Fewer” (LLF).

According to the authors, this policy, which constituted a conventional family planning program, sought to encourage the population to have children at a later age, to increase the spacing between births, and to reduce the total number of children (Hesketh; Xing, 1997).

Based on data presented by Hesketh, Lu, and Xing (2005), China’s birth rate, measured in children per woman, fell from 5.9 in 1970 to 2.9 in 1979. Meanwhile, between 1979 and 2004, a period chosen by the authors because it marked the 25th

anniversary of the one-child policy, the rate declined from 2.9 to 1.7. Thus, as the authors note, the greatest reduction in China's fertility rate occurred prior to the implementation of the one-child policy (Hesketh; Lu; Xing, 2005).

Fong (2002) also provides relevant data and testimonies for a deeper understanding of the one-child policy, since she established long-term relationships with 31 Chinese families, participated in their social lives, leisure activities, and daily routines. In addition, the author conducted a survey with 2,273 students from a high school in the city of Dalian, in the southern part of Liaoning Province, in the late 1990s.

Before the one-child policy, it was quite common in Chinese society for parents to expect their sons to earn higher wages, obtain better jobs, and perform fewer domestic tasks than their wives, while being financially capable of supporting their parents in old age. Daughters, by contrast, were expected to move in with their husbands and bear primary responsibility for household care. As a result, parents preferred to have sons and, when they had children of both sexes, invested more heavily in boys (Fong, 2002).

As Proczinski (2017) notes, due to the overvaluing of males, female infanticide was common, especially in cases where a family already had a daughter. However, as the author also reminds us, this was a practice that persisted during dynasties prior to the establishment of the PRC and did not originate with the one-child policy.

It is important to emphasize that the one-child policy was relatively flexible, providing exemptions in several cases. According to Hesketh and Xing (1997), in Zhejiang Province, for example, a couple was exempt under the following conditions: (1) if the first child had a disability (with admissible disabilities specifically defined); (2) in the case of remarriage, if one spouse had no children from a previous marriage; (3) if the couple worked in certain high-risk occupations, such as mining; and (4) if both partners came from one-child families.

Hesketh, Lu, and Xing (2005) argue that, despite its name, the one-child rule applied only to a minority of the population. In rural areas, a second child was permitted after five years, although in some provinces this provision applied only if the first child was female. In addition, a third child was allowed for certain ethnic minorities or in remote and sparsely populated areas.

Hesketh and Xing (1997) point out that the penalties for noncompliance varied from one province to another and ranged from the loss of benefits for the first child, fines, loss of employment, confiscation of property, or, depending on the discretion of local authorities, the absence of any penalty.

The policy also provided a series of incentives to families in order to encourage compliance. Hesketh and Xing (1997) note that in urban areas couples received benefits such as a monthly allowance of approximately 5% of the average worker's salary until the child reached the age of 14; preferential treatment in housing applications; extended maternity leave; higher priority in education and health care for the child; and supplementary pensions to address the lack of support in old age. In rural areas, families received larger shares of agricultural land.

A fundamental aspect for understanding the one-child policy, which has not been adequately addressed in critical articles such as those by Proczinski (2017) and Menin and Billig (2022), was the widespread access to contraceptive methods provided by the Chinese government.

Hesketh and Xing (1997) state that in urban centers the preferred contraceptive methods were intrauterine devices and oral contraceptives, which were routinely distributed to married women in many work units. In rural areas, most women used intrauterine devices, which, according to the authors, were routinely inserted during the six-week postpartum check-up (Hesketh; Xing, 1997).

The data presented by Hesketh, Lu, and Xing (2005, p. 1171) are particularly illuminating regarding the scope of contraceptive access:

The policy depends on virtually universal access to contraception and abortion. A total of 87 percent of all married women use contraception; this statistic compares with about one third in most developing countries. There is heavy reliance on long term contraception, with intrauterine devices and sterilizations together accounting for more than 90 percent of contraceptive methods used since the mid-1980s. The number of sterilizations has declined since the peak in the early 1990s.

The use of contraceptive methods in China reached levels far above the average observed in other countries. Considering that “the proportion of women of reproductive age using modern contraceptive methods increased from 28% in 1970 to 48% in 2019” (Rocha, 2022), it can be stated that Chinese rates were high even by current international standards.

According to Hesketh, Lu, and Xing (2005, p. 1172), the long-term use of these methods kept abortion rates relatively low, “with 25 percent of women of reproductive age having had at least one abortion”.

Thus, considering that the one-child policy disseminated the use of long-term contraceptive methods, it is difficult to sustain that this policy was responsible for an increase in abortions or female infanticide. On the contrary, as will be discussed below, it is possible to observe that one of the policy’s effects, at least in the long term, was an increase in the number of families who wished to have a female child.

Regarding the curtailment of families’ freedom to choose the number of children—which could characterize the policy as draconian or authoritarian—it is important to recall that, prior to its implementation, the Chinese government spent an entire decade developing awareness-raising initiatives and incentives to reduce fertility rates.

According to Hesketh and Xing (1997), an in-depth fertility study conducted in 1985, covering three rural areas with different socioeconomic levels, found that the average number of children young couples intended to have was 1.8 in the affluent rural hinterland of Shanghai, 2.7 in the middle-income region of Hebei, and 2.87 in Shaanxi, one of the poorest provinces.

Given the various situations in which having two or even three children was permitted, it can be argued that the one-child policy did not impose requirements far removed from the aspirations of families in urban centers. It should also be noted that the policy contained specific exceptions for rural areas and ethnic minorities. This does not mean that the policy was not experienced as authoritarian by many families, especially in rural areas. Nevertheless, it contributed to a significant change in the mindset of the Chinese population, as will be discussed in the following section.

Gender Inequality in Chinese Society

As discussed earlier, academic works—especially those written in Portuguese—that address how the one-child policy contributed to reducing gender inequality in Chinese society remain scarce.

Among Brazilian authors who, in some way, relate the one-child policy to the status of women in Chinese society, Prozczinski (2017, p. 9, our translation) argues that the policy “represented a setback with regard to gender issues in China,” and that “government efforts to mitigate the desire for male children clashed with a strong culture of son preference”. However, the author does not present data to support this claim.

Menin and Billig (2022, p. 621, our translation) argue that the policy “became a victim of its own success,” insofar as it drastically reduced fertility over the years and increased the number of elderly people, thereby generating higher public expenditures. They conclude their article by stating that “the hypothesis of having only one child led families to prefer male babies, resulting in the abandonment and infanticide of female infants” (Menin; Billig, 2022, p. 622, our translation).

These authors likewise fail to provide objective evidence to support their claim that the policy reinforced a preference for male children, in addition to ignoring the fact that the period of greatest decline in China’s fertility rate occurred prior to the implementation of the one-child policy.

Along the same lines, Alves (2019, our translation) goes so far as to claim that the policy in question was “the most draconian population control initiative in the history of humanity.” In his text, the author reproduces various deeply rooted stereotypes about the Chinese government and demonstrates a lack of familiarity with important aspects of the policy he set out to analyze, such as the many cases in which Chinese families were allowed to have two or even three children.

What follows is a discussion of the perspectives of Chinese authors who conducted research in different provinces of their country and who present an understanding that differs markedly from that of the Brazilian authors cited above.

Fong (2002) lived with Chinese families and administered questionnaires to high school students as well as to their family members. According to the author, the grandparents of her students reported that, during their youth, girls were not allowed to live with their parents after marriage and therefore did not provide nursing care or economic support to elderly parents. Thus, “a significant obstacle to equality between daughters and sons in previous generations was the assumption that daughters would not be able to support their parents in old age. Because of this assumption, parents avoided investing family resources in daughters” (Fong, 2002, p. 1101).

This aspect, which—as discussed earlier—was deeply rooted in China’s millennia-old culture, underwent significant changes because of the implementation of the one-child policy.

According to Fong (2002), although the primary objective of the one-child policy was not to reduce gender inequality, the idea of emancipating women from the burdens of high fertility was prominent in campaigns promoting contraceptive methods during the 1950s and 1960s, still under Mao Zedong’s government. In addition, government propaganda promoting the one-child policy, initiated in 1979, mentioned women’s empowerment as an ancillary benefit of the policy.

Motivated both by feminist ideals and by the desire to mobilize women's labor for national development, Mao's government began providing women with employment opportunities shortly after taking control of China in 1949. However, the author reports: "many of my students' grandmothers told me that they were too busy bearing and rearing children to take advantage of these opportunities" (Fong, 2002, p. 1101).

This aspect – which, as previously discussed, was deeply rooted in China's millenary culture – underwent significant changes as a result of the implementation of the one-child policy. According to the analysis, this is precisely where one of the main contributions of the one-child policy to reducing gender inequality in China can be identified, since daughters – especially those from urban families, who found employment more easily – experienced a new social reality.

In the patrilineal system that characterized most of Chinese society, parents had little incentive to invest in their daughters. With the advent of the one-child policy and the emergence of families with only daughters, these girls began to enjoy unprecedented parental support, because they no longer had to compete with brothers—who had been highly valued—for parental investment (Fong, 2002).

According to the author, the mothers of her students, unlike their own grandmothers, were able to experience a transformation of their society's kinship system, from a unilateral patrilineal system to a bilinear one. This was due, at least in part, to paid employment, which their low fertility made possible. As a result, "paid work enabled women to provide their own parents with financial support in old age and, thus, prove that daughters could be as filial as sons" (Fong, 2002, p. 1101).

Regarding the statements of parents of young people in the city of Dalian concerning the obligation to have only one child, even if female, Fong (2002, p. 1101) states:

Most Dalian parents I knew told me that it was acceptable to have just one child, even if that child was female, and some even told me they were glad they had daughters instead of sons. They knew from their own experience that daughters could fulfill the filial obligations once reserved for sons.

In response to the questionnaires administered by the author, both male and female respondents stated that they expected the division of domestic labor in their own marriages to be more egalitarian than in their parents' marriages.

In one question regarding how much housework they intended to do after marriage, boys indicated an intention to perform more domestic tasks than their wives. When asked about the reason for this response, some stated that they "would have to do a lot of housework to win and keep wives, since they are not likely to get good jobs or neolocal housing in time for their marriages" (Fong, 2002, p. 1105). Meanwhile, in the same study, respondents who were in relationships emphasized that their girlfriends would not want to perform many domestic tasks after marriage.

The author concludes that "girls born after China's one-child policy began in 1979, however, have more power to challenge detrimental gender norms and use helpful ones than ever before, thanks to the decline of patriliney and the absence of brothers for their parents to favor" (Fong, 2002, p. 1098).

Fung (2014) also examined the relationship between the one-child policy and gender inequality in Chinese society, presenting the results of interviews with male and female students at Beijing Language and Culture University (BLCU).

It is noteworthy that the author's research, conducted in Beijing, produced results very similar to those described by Fong (2002) in the context of Dalian. Fung (2014) likewise argues that the one-child policy allowed parents to concentrate their attention and support on their only children, enabling many women to receive the best opportunities their parents could offer.

One interviewed student stated that many children are enrolled in different extracurricular activities to cultivate skills that allow them to gain admission to some of the most renowned secondary schools in their respective regions (Fung, 2014). According to her account, "herself, had a private tutor who taught her how to draw and as a result she went to the best secondary school in her hometown, Qinhuandao (Christina Zhang Interview)" (Fung, 2014, p. 3).

Another student stated in her testimony that, somewhat authoritatively, her parents wanted her to attend university in Beijing, initially against her will. However, she concluded her interview by saying that "she is actually very happy with the decision and that it was the correct choice in the long run (Shi Yi Ge Interview)" (Fung, 2014, p. 3).

After analyzing different cases, the author states:

Through these stories, it can be seen that in many ways, the culture of China has changed enough over the last couple of decades to allow women to become more prominent figures in Chinese society. Although this is not entirely true throughout the country, especially in rural regions, in urban areas the traditional belief that boys are more important than girls is no longer predominant. During my interviews, I asked each of my participants whether it was better to be a boy or girl in modern Chinese society. To my surprise, the unanimous answer amongst the male and female students was that being "a girl" was more advantageous. This is because although women are able to share many of the same opportunities with men, they do not have to experience the same pressures and burdens (Fung, 2014, p. 3).

The burdens mentioned by the author refer to new expectations placed on Chinese men. According to her, men today not only face greater difficulty in finding a wife but also struggle to meet the growing demands of their prospective partners.

One interviewee stated that "today, women expect that their future husband is equipped with 'a house and car' prior to getting married (Shi Yi Ge Interview)" (Fung, 2014, p. 4). Another student agreed, stating that although this is not a universal desire among women, "it is a definitive thought that crosses many women's minds (Jian Xiang Interview)" (Fung, 2014, p. 4).

The author makes it clear that she is not claiming that all these changes in Chinese society are due exclusively to the implementation of the policy analyzed here. Rather, her position is that "the rise of women was due to a combination of factors including industrialization, the expansion of education, and the installation of the One Child Policy" (Fung, 2014, p. 4). This point is fundamental, as it clarifies that the policy was linked to the development of material productive forces taking place in Chinese society.

Wu, Ye, and He (2012) conducted an extensive analysis of data from two national surveys, seeking to elucidate, through official data, how fertility decline is related to the reduction of gender inequality in China.

In order to examine the impact of fertility on the status of married Chinese women within their families, the authors used data from the Women's Status Survey, a national survey conducted jointly by the All-China Women's Federation and the National Bureau of Statistics of China in 2000, containing information provided by 19,449 individuals aged 18 to 64, including men and women. The authors restricted their analysis to the 8,531 married women who participated in the survey, which "includes questions on fertility, gender roles, marriage, the household division of labor and labor market activities" (Wu; Ye; He, 2012, p. 16).

To investigate how fertility decline affects gender equality in education and occupational attainment in the subsequent generation, the authors relied on data from the China General Social Survey, which is "an annual survey involving a nationally representative sample of the adult population – those aged 18 or above – both rural and urban China except for Tibet" (Wu; Ye; He, 2012, p. 16). Conducted in 2006, the survey included 10,151 interviews with adults and contained information on various aspects such as sibling composition, years of schooling, and first-job status for women compared with men. In this case, the scope of the analysis covered those "born between 1949 and 1988, i.e. men and women aged between 18 and 57 at the time of the survey" (Wu; Ye; He, 2012, p. 17).

In the conclusion of their study, the authors state:

Results from two national representative surveys conducted in 2000 and 2006 show that women with lower fertility perform less housework and also tend to be more satisfied with their status within the family than women with higher fertility. Such effects are more pronounced for women in more recent marital cohorts. Across generations, lower fertility implies fewer siblings for the next generation and daughters tend to benefit more in terms of years of schooling and subsequently the status of their first occupations. (Wu; Ye; He, 2012, p. 30-31).

It is worth emphasizing how the results obtained by these authors through national surveys closely resemble those found by Fong (2002) and Fung (2014), who conducted research in specific provinces without intending to generalize their findings to the national level – though this does not mean that localities may not present significant differences.

In addition to the authors discussed here, others have also developed studies that, in some way, identify contributions of the one-child policy to reducing gender inequality in Chinese society. Examples include the works of Jiang (2020), Huang, Lei, and Sun (2021), and Fang and Guo (2024).

Thus, based on the research conducted by the aforementioned authors, grounded in official data as well as in the results of their fieldwork with Chinese youth and adults, it is possible to affirm that, without disregarding its negative aspects, the one-child policy made a substantial contribution to reducing gender inequality in Chinese society, altering the mindset according to which women were expected to be homemakers while men were responsible for providing for the household.

This does not mean that full gender equality exists in contemporary China, but rather that the policy adopted in 1979 and in force until 2015 achieved one of its secondary objectives: reducing the pronounced subordination of women to men that had characterized Chinese society for centuries.

Final Considerations

The present study does not aim to exhaust the topic addressed; on the contrary, it seeks to encourage further research that takes into account the contributions of authors who provide objective data for a more comprehensive understanding of the issue.

The evidence analyzed demonstrates that the one-child policy has a multifaceted legacy that cannot be reduced to a unilateral narrative. While, on the one hand, its implementation involved measures that produced contestable demographic impacts, on the other hand, the information gathered in the field studies discussed here reveals a paradoxical and significant effect: the policy functioned as a catalyst for the transformation of women's social roles in China.

This is not to absolve the one-child policy of all forms of authoritarianism, which may have varied according to the discretion of local authorities across China's diverse provinces. Nevertheless, it is necessary to take into account academic works that point to the policy's role in reducing gender inequality in Chinese society.

Beyond the already consolidated analyses, which have made important contributions to understanding the phenomenon, it is imperative to maintain ongoing dialogue with well-grounded research that addresses still underexplored aspects of this famous and controversial policy.

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Uninformed.

Statement on the Use of Generative Artificial Intelligence

The authors declare that no generative artificial intelligence tools were used in the preparation of this article.