

Group 2 Research Proposal

Topic: Young Urban Women's Perceptions of National Pro-Natalist Policies and Fertility Intentions in Shanghai

I. Introduction

Background:

China is facing a severe demographic shift characterized by an aging population, a shrinking labor force, and a trend of declining birth and fertility rates. In response, the Chinese government initiated a major policy pivot in 2021 with the introduction of the national "Third-Child Policy". This was followed by a series of pro-natalist policies from 2021 to date in the form of various financial and social support incentives, including extended maternity leave, subsidized childcare services, cash allowances, lower education costs, and preferential housing policies for families with multiple children.

Existing research shows that this fertility decline is the most severe in urban megacities in comparison to rural regions. Thus, our research focuses specifically on Shanghai, which is known as one of the four Tier 1 cities and the financial hub while also harboring the lowest total fertility rate (TFR) well below the replacement level of 2.1 within mainland China. Despite continuous messaging, media campaigns, and policy rollouts by the state, young women in urban cities continue to delay or forego childbearing and marriage altogether. While state policies aim at lowering the costs of having and raising a child, they often unintentionally conflict with the seemingly ever-increasing living costs and the progressively modern career ambitions of urban women.

Problem statement:

There are three primary gaps —metric, contextual and sensitivity, and methodological—in current academia essential for more effective policies and a healthier society that our research hopes to fill. First, current published research and government evaluations focus heavily on macrolevel quantitative metrics (total birth rate and total fertility rate). There is a lack of research on the complexities behind how pro-natalist policies influence true willingness. Second, there is a lack of research linking the Chinese government's pro-natalist policies and its impact on fertility intention, and none delves into the citizens' critical perceptions and evaluations of those policies due to the "Good Citizen" behavioral framework and political sensitivity within the country. Consequently, there is a lack of attempt to examine the friction between official state goals and individual career preservation and desires. Third, thorough literature research informs us of a dearth of qualitative research, and, thus, discussions on the in-depth thought process occurring within the minds of the respondents that is crucial to understanding precisely how these policies impact fertility intentions through the female decision-making process. Finally, we believe our research could help guide future policies that address workplace gender inequality and youth development anxieties in competitive urban cities, leading to the development of a healthier national structure on a macroscale and support for female young citizens on a microscale.

Research question: Thus, we propose and aim to answer the question: How do young women aged 20–35 in Shanghai perceive the role of 2021–2025 national pro-natalist policies in shaping their fertility intentions?

As this is an exploratory study aimed at understanding subjective perceptions and decision-making processes, no formal hypotheses are formulated.

II. Synthesis of Literature & Identification of Research Gaps

A) Thematic Grouping of Existing Studies & Identification of Gap

1. Thematic Grouping of Existing Studies

Group 1: Micro family and psychological barriers to women's fertility intentions

Two small empirical studies cover two groups: two-child mothers and university students nationwide, with similar results. High childcare fees and lack of public childcare diminish fertility intentions. Worries over childbirth, work-family balance and personal career growth also lower fertility intentions. Most people know little about birth support policies. Those who understand the policies better are more willing to have children. Care from grandparents also shapes women's childbearing decisions. Two-child mothers worry about health risks of late pregnancy, while students fear financial and career pressure.

Group 2: Labor market impacts of relaxed fertility policies

The second study complements the first one. After birth limits are relaxed, companies expect higher costs for female employees of childbearing age. They discriminate against these women, which lowers their chances of getting jobs, promotions and pay rises.

Group 3: Cross-country fertility policy review (OECD)

The third group's OECD report provides an international view and forms a macro-micro contrast with the above domestic studies. All studies agree that simply lifting birth limits cannot raise fertility rates, and supporting policies are the key. Around the world, women's average age for first childbirth keeps rising.

2. Identification of Existing Research Gaps

Existing studies have multiple research gaps: First, there are Contextual gaps. No research specially surveys women aged 20 to 35 in Shanghai. Second, the Metric Gap. Research perspectives are separated. Few studies combine family, workplace and international policy for comprehensive analysis, and they ignore women's subjective evaluations about fertility policies. Besides, these studies have theoretical flaws. Most only use economic or gender theories alone, without an integrated analysis framework combining multiple theories. Third, the Methodological Gap. Most papers rely on quantitative questionnaires. They lack in-depth interviews to explore women's real experience with fertility policies.

B) Literature Analysis Using the Five C Framework

1. Cite: Two domestic empirical papers (Yang et al., 2024; Zhang et al.). One labor market study (Liu et al., 2026). The OECD cross-country report (OECD, 2024).

2. Compare: All sources reach four shared agreements: Simply removing birth caps cannot raise people's fertility intentions; supportive policies are critical; Financial burdens and insufficient childcare resources are universal barriers to having more children; Struggles to balance work and childcare are women's biggest concern; Greater understanding of family policies positively predicts fertility intentions.

3. Contrast: Existing studies show three types of perspective gaps: First, micro, labor market and cross-border studies all ignore women's subjective evaluations. Second, existing samples do not cover all women aged 20 to 35 in Shanghai. Third, foreign childcare systems do not fit Shanghai's local situation.

4. Critique:

- **Strengths of prior literature:** The two domestic empirical papers, as rare examples of integrated designs, combine quantitative questionnaires and qualitative interviews to reliably identify family and psychological barriers for Chinese women. The labor market study adopts rigorous econometric methods to reveal structural workplace penalties. The OECD report offers a global benchmark for designing family support systems.
- **Overall limitations:** Some limitations have been mentioned in the previous section on research gaps. In addition, existing fertility support policies lack targeted measures for first-tier cities and cannot adapt to the situation of Shanghai.

5. Connect: Past studies build a theoretical basis. Micro research analyzes key factors such as childcare costs and fertility anxiety. Labor market studies add the perspective of workplace pressure, and international reports offer macro references. This research aims to fill the above research gaps. It takes Shanghai women aged 20 to 35 as samples, combines family and workplace limits, focuses on their subjective evaluations about recent fertility policies, and explores how fertility policies from 2021 to 2025 affect their willingness to have children.

III. Research design

A) Type of Research Strategy: This proposed study adopts a Convergent Parallel Mixed method design to explore overall young women's fertility intentions guided by the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB). The research question targets Young Urban Women's Perceptions of National Pro-Natalist Policies and Fertility Intentions in Shanghai after adjusting for confounding factors such as Age, Regions, Marital Status. This study selects a 5 Likert-scale quantitative cross-sectional survey method, and qualitative semi-structured interview methods center on open-ended questions to explore participants' personal perceptions of National Pro-Natalist Policies. Pure qualitative interviews cannot quantify the trends through large-scale operations. A convergent parallel mixed method design with multivariable modeling is the most suitable choice to study adjusted correlational relationships.

B) Target Population & Sample Size: The target population is city dwelling young women aged 20-35 in Shanghai, China. All the participants are of reproductive age, covering all unmarried childless women and married women across different parity levels. The

study aims to examine young women's overall fertility attitudes and relevant influencing factors under the three-child policy context.

The intended sample size is 250 for quantitative online surveys, while 20 participants for semi-structured interviews.

C) Sampling Plan and Participants Recruitment: Snowball sampling and purposive sampling are adopted. Urban female residents in Shanghai are network-dependent selected, including private enterprises, state-owned enterprises, and third-sector organizations. This could expand samples organically. Considering the privacy of having children, purposive sampling is targeted and criterion-based, which is suitable for focused interviews through in-depth conversation.

D) Data Collection Instruments and Procedures: The 5-point Likert survey measures attitude, subjective norm and perceived behavioral control. After cleaning invalid, missing and outlier data, this study runs one-way ANOVA for preliminary overall descriptive comparisons and adopts multiple linear regression for multivariable modeling to adjust confounding demographic factors. All closed-ended items yield standardized numerical data to fit for multivariate statistical analysis.

Qualitatively, we adopt NVivo for systematic thematic coding of interview transcripts. We identify themes including policy perceptions, reproductive stress, workplace barriers, and family fertility expectations. Peer cross-coding helps refine TPB-aligned core themes. We first conduct semi-structured interviews with 20 participants and then continue to do as many as possible to try and reach data saturation. One-way ANOVA carries out preliminary overall descriptive comparisons. Multiple linear regression is the main multivariable model to adjust for confounding factors. A joint display table links outputs of both statistical analyses and NVivo qualitative themes to realize structured triangulation.

E) Reliability, Validity, and Methodological Justification: For the quantitative survey, TPB scales use localized 5-point Likert items to ensure content validity. Cronbach's α assesses each dimension's internal reliability before one-way ANOVA and multiple linear regression; data cleaning removes outliers and invalid forms to lower measurement bias. For qualitative work, NVivo enables systematic thematic coding of transcripts, and peer cross-coding boosts inter-coder reliability by unifying conflicting labels. This study triangulates overall ANOVA results with qualitative thematic codes. For qualitative work, NVivo enables systematic thematic coding of transcripts, and peer cross-coding boosts inter-coder reliability by unifying conflicting labels. This study triangulates overall ANOVA results with qualitative thematic codes.

IV. Ethical Consideration:

The overall risk level is evaluated as minimal as data collection is non-invasive involving only adult participants through anonymous online surveys and voluntary, confidential interviews. The research presents no physical, medical, or legal risks, and does not involve vulnerable populations. Accordingly, our primary ethical oversight focuses on protecting participant privacy, mitigating emotional risks, and ensuring autonomy. In the following, we assess our research through the Belmont framework, explaining the ethical concerns relevant under each principle.

First, ethical considerations of informed consent, protection of identities, and respect for human dignity are directly concerned with the principle of respect for persons. All participants are required to sign a consent form individually for either or both the survey and interview that follows the formatting provided by the Institutional Review Board, clearly outlining the study and data's purpose, voluntary nature, and consent for audio recording. English and Chinese versions are provided for consent forms and surveys to ensure full participant comprehension. To protect respondents' identities, the survey will be entirely anonymous—no automatic collection of or include questions on IP addresses, contact information, or names. For the interviews, each participant will be assigned a unique numeric ID and sensitive details that may lead to identification will be generalized; for example, broad job categories like “manager” working in an “investment banking firm” will replace exact title and company names. On respect for human dignity, participation is entirely voluntary, and interviewees are reminded at the start that they have the absolute right, without penalty, to refuse questions or withdraw at any time.

Second, ethical issues of potential harms, confidentiality, and considerations of the specific population involved fall under the principle of beneficence. As our research asks for discussions of politically and socially sensitive topics of fertility decisions, workplace pressure, and government policies, our questions will focus on daily career trade-offs rather than political ideology to minimize the risk of social discomfort, and interviewers will be carefully selected and trained to actively minimize the risk of emotional distress. To ensure strict confidentiality, all raw survey data, audio recordings, and interview transcripts will be stored on password-protected, encrypted cloud drives accessible only to our research team. Any contact information gathered to find further interviewees will be kept in a secure file separate from response data. Combined with our protection of identities, employers and acquaintances will not be able to identify participants, mitigating the possible impact on work and life. While minimizing the risks, our interviews also provide a safe, confidential space for women who otherwise don't have the opportunity to voice their lived experiences, and our research holds potential to inform more gender equitable policies.

Third, ethical concerns of fair participant selection and equity connect to the principle of justice. By strictly adhering to our predetermined criteria—women aged 20 to 35 in Shanghai, this use of purposive sampling helps avoid arbitrary inclusion/exclusion. Additionally, through finding participants through different pathways, we aim to distribute participation across sectors (private, public, third), so no single group takes on all the research burden.

Last but not least, the research team declares no financial, commercial, or institutional conflicts of interest, striving to maintain an objective stance throughout.

V. Significance and Limitations

First is theoretical significance. This study applies the Theory of Planned Behavior to examine how young women in Shanghai perceive two key pro-natalist policies—extended maternity leave and childcare subsidies—and how those perceptions influence their fertility intentions. While TPB has been used to study reproductive decisions in China (Yang et al., 2024), few studies

link it to specific policy instruments to identify which ones resonate with women. Zhang et al. (2022) documented alarmingly low fertility intentions among young people but did not clarify the underlying mechanisms and this is the gap our study addresses. Second is empirical and methodological significance. The study fills a real empirical gap. Liu et al. (2026) offered quantitative evidence of labor-market penalties tied to fertility policies, while Zhang et al. (2022) reported aggregate trends among university students. Neither, however, captured how women subjectively interpret and respond to policy signals in daily life. Our sample includes both married and unmarried women aged 20–35—a group largely overlooked in prior research that focused on students or mothers of two children. Methodologically, we build on Yang et al.'s (2024) convergent parallel mixed-methods design with several enhancements. The quantitative strand surveys 250 women using 5-point Likert-scale TPB items, running one-way ANOVA for preliminary comparisons and multiple linear regression to adjust for confounders like age, marital status, and employment sector. The qualitative strand conducts 20 semi-structured interviews, analyzed thematically in NVivo with peer cross-coding to refine TPB-aligned themes—policy perceptions, reproductive stress, workplace barriers, and family expectations. A joint display table then links statistical outputs with qualitative themes for structured triangulation. This design gives us both breadth and depth, directly addressing the qualitative deficit in current fertility research while strengthening causal inference through multivariable modeling. Third is practical and policy significance. If women perceive extended leave and childcare subsidies as inadequate compensation for career risks, current policies may be producing unintended counter-effects—extending Liu et al.'s (2026) evidence into the domain of subjective perception. Variation across employment sectors—private, state-owned, and third-sector organizations—would point toward more targeted implementation. By centering young women's voices, we promote a more gender-sensitive approach to population policy and contribute to Sustainable Development Goal 5. The findings would benefit academics, policymakers, women and families, employers, and civil society advocates.

First limitation is that the single-city focus on Shanghai limits generalizability to smaller cities, rural areas, or other first-tier cities with distinct economic and policy contexts. Our purposive and snowball sampling via social media introduces self-selection bias—volunteers may hold stronger views than non-participants, and our networks are inevitably somewhat homogenous. Survey findings thus reflect patterns within this sample, not statistically representative estimates. Second limitation is that the cross-sectional design captures only a snapshot: associations, not causality—and cannot track how perceptions shift with policy changes or life transitions. While our qualitative analysis uses dual coding and peer debriefing, we may not be able to conduct enough interviews to capture the full diversity of experiences across employment sectors and marital statuses. Third, social desirability bias is another concern: participants may underreport criticism of state policies, though our interview guide counters this by emphasizing concrete workplace experiences over abstract opinions. Finally, resource constraints make this an exploratory study—geared toward generating hypotheses, not definitive conclusions.

Future research could adopt longitudinal designs, compare multiple cities, broaden policy scope, include male and employer perspectives, and examine on-the-ground implementation—all building on our work to deepen understanding of how state policy, individual perception, and demographic outcomes intersect in urban China today.

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