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Study on the Realistic and Social Problems Arising from Only Child

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Abstract: As China undergoes comprehensive socioeconomic reform, notions of childbearing have shifted markedly. According to the Seventh National Population Census, China's total fertility rate fell to 1.3 in 2020, below the 1.5 warning line, with the birth rate at 8.52‰ and natural population growth at its lowest since 1978. Despite pro-natalist policy adjustments, the only-child phenomenon remains prevalent. This study examines how the contemporary only-child phenomenon affects China's development by investigating fertility policy evolution, fertility intentions, the influence of the only-child upbringing environment on children's socialization, and impacts on population structure. The research analyzes real-world social problems engendered by this phenomenon and proposes strategies to promote population quality and rational population structure development.

Keywords: Only-child; Population Structure; Elderly Care Predicament; Social Development

1. Introduction

China's population is shrinking. Not slowly the decline has real momentum now. Economic growth and social change have reshaped how people think about having kids. The old assumption that more children meant more happiness? It's gone. Fertility rules have lurched from one regime to the next: the one-child policy held for decades, then came the universal two-child shift in 2016, a three-child framework with supports in 2021, and lately a round of cash incentives for births. Thirty years of the one-child rule carved a deep groove in China's demographic profile, and that groove is still there. The country is now in what scholars call the post-one-child era[1]. Only children end up with concentrated economic and human capital - and that fact ripples outward. It touches individual life paths, yes, but also feeds into population aging, falling birth rates, the squeeze on elder care, and who lives with whom after marriage.

The numbers from the Seventh National Population Census are blunt[2]: the total fertility rate sat at 1.3 in 2020. That's below the 1.5 warning threshold. The government keeps rolling out pro-natalist measures, but the only-child pattern hasn't broken. This paper leans on two theoretical frames resource dilution and social capital[3] - to get at a basic tension. Only children soak up concentrated family resources. At the same time, they move through the world with thinner social ties. No siblings. That matters. Growing up without brothers or sisters shapes how a person socializes, what they value, and whether they want children of their own questions worth taking seriously. Meanwhile, the first wave of only-child parents is now entering deep old age. The weight of caregiving, the scramble for resources, the renegotiation of who lives with whom these pressures are building.

Two generations. Nearly 200 million only children and their parents. Almost four decades. Their life trajectories have split in ways no one predicted when the policy began. China's economy has soared, but the wealth hasn't arrived fast enough to handle all the aftershocks. That's the ground this paper stands on. It works through the history of fertility policy, then digs into a handful of core issues: whether only children want children, how the family setting shapes their social selves, and where resources end up. The point is to map the social fallout from the only-child era and offer some practical suggestions how to boost population quality, how to nudge the population structure toward balance. Figure 1 sketches the overall research design.

2. Literature Review

Researchers have circled around two big questions. One group looks at only children through the lens of fertility policy how rules

shaped outcomes. The other group studies what happened to the first generation: where they live after marriage, who takes care of aging parents. The methods vary. The angles do too economic choices, mental health, elder care bottlenecks, relations between generations, where people stand on the social ladder. But across all this work, a consistent finding pops up: only children really do look different from their peers with siblings, and those differences connect to bigger patterns in the social structure[4].

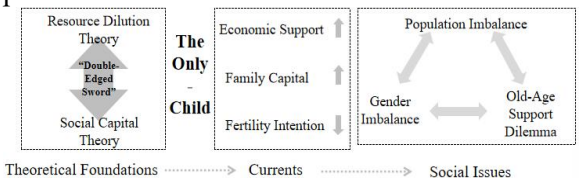

Figure 1. Research Framework Diagram

Take money first. Only-child families buy commercial insurance less often than other families do. It's not about financial know-how or risk tolerance. The real story is thinner social engagement fewer interactions, less trust in people outside the family circle. Entrepreneurship flips the script. Only children launch businesses at rates well above average. Family money and human capital give them a runway. But the shortage of social ties - no sibling networks to lean on acts as a brake. So you get this push-pull pattern: resource-rich but network-poor. And it plays out differently depending on whether the family is urban or rural and what the parents do for a living.

Mental health is a messier picture. Some studies the kind that use propensity score matching find that only children actually report less depression, less anxiety, and less stress than kids with siblings. Maybe concentrated family resources and tight parent-child bonds explain it. But other researchers see variation across regions and subgroups. Clinicians do run into emotional and behavioral problems among only children often enough to take note. Part of the disagreement comes down to methods how old the samples are, which scales got used, what statistical tests were run. A bigger problem: the literature has plenty to say about emotions and behavior but not nearly enough about personality and cognitive development.

Elder care is where the pressure lands hardest. The parents of the first only-child cohort are old now, and their grown kids face a bind provide care from far away, or give up career ground to be closer. The price tag on institutional care and medical insurance bites hard. Time is short. A parent's health status directly shapes whether an only child can work: healthy parents can help out with grandchildren, freeing their child's labor; frail parents add hours of care work. Where people live is shifting too. The old pattern that married couples living with the husband's parents is weakening. Both sides of the family now matter about equally. Only daughters are more likely to stay close to their own parents after marriage, and the share of couples living with the wife's family has climbed steadily for cohorts born after the reforms began.

Family structure and gender relations have both been rewired by the one-child policy. Only children don't negotiate intergenerational obligations inside the old moral framework they make choices based on emotional needs and practical trade-offs. That's produced genuinely new ways of living: the 'lineal group family,' where multiple generations stay connected but not necessarily under one roof, and the 'dual-residence arrangement,' splitting time between parental homes. Women have gained ground. The childbearing load got lighter. Only daughters received family resources and opportunities that would once have been locked up for sons. Their standing in school, at work, and in politics has risen. The old bias toward sons has softened. Gender equality isn't just rhetoric, it's moved forward in measurable ways.

3. The Evolution of China's Fertility Policy

The one-child policy didn't just nudge Chinese families. It reshaped them. And the effects are more visible now than they were during the policy's active years[5]. Families are getting smaller and smaller. In this environment, whether only children start businesses isn't a niche question - it matters for economic energy and for where population policy goes next.

The policy kicked in during 1979, at a moment of acute strain. Population was surging. Resources were stretched. Hertzler's The Crisis in World Population[6] had planted the idea of a population bomb, and the development racing against resource limits. China's population had already blown past 900 million. The logic in Beijing was straightforward: cap births, slow growth, ease the resource pinch, and open some room for the economy to breathe.

Some things got better. Per capita population quality rose. Poor families had fewer mouths to feed. Prenatal and postnatal care spread. But over a generation, the costs stacked up: an aging

society, gaps in elder care, and sex ratios that didn't balance. The state started patching things up with new rules.

Population pressure came down fast. Resource shortages eased. But fresh problems demographic lopsidedness, aging, distorted sex ratios didn't take long to show up. In 2016, the government switched to a universal two-child policy. Births jumped to 17.86 million that year 11 percent above 2015. They held at 17.23 million in 2017, and second children made up 8.83 million of those, a rise of 1.62 million. The early returns looked solid. But the bounce didn't last. The numbers softened in 2018. By 2020, births had slumped to 12 million and the fertility rate touched 1.3. The slide kept going through 2023. Forecasters now talk about fewer than 8 million births in 2025. Figure 2 tracks the decade's birth data.

May 31, 2021: the CPC Central Committee's Political Bureau met and fired the starting gun on what some analysts call China's third fertility revolution. The centerpiece, a three-child policy[7], came packaged with supporting measures[8], and that was the real difference this time. Childcare subsidies, pro-natalist supports, these weren't afterthoughts. As China's conditions and development priorities have shifted, so has the fertility rulebook: one-child for population containment, two-child under a sustainability banner, three-child as a direct response to aging. China is now unambiguously in the post-one-child era[9].

One-child to two-child to three-child that's the arc. Family planning has always been a live wire for developing countries. The one-child policy did what it was designed to do: it reshaped the population structure and made sense in its historical moment. Today the problem is reversed. The task now is building machinery that encourages people to have children, takes pressure off an aging society, and supports population quality and structure developing in a sensible direction.

Figure 2. Number of New Births in the past Decade

4. Analysis of Real-World Social Problems of Only Children

4.1 Theoretical Foundation

Resource Dilution Theory starts with a simple idea from Blake: family resources aren't infinite[10]. More kids means each one gets a smaller slice, and the competition for what's there heats up. Downey later nailed down the specifics finite resources, shrinking shares as sibling count goes up, measurable hits to how far kids go in school. Resources here means three things: money and assets, human capital like education and skills, and parents' time. Money is the category most squeezed by family size, and it matters most when household budgets are already tight. This paper uses the theory to explain something straightforward: only children start with more family resources behind them, and that shapes the choices they face as they grow up.

Social Capital Theory[11] traces back to Pierre Bourdieu. He first laid it out in a 1980 essay, 'Le capital social,' then sharpened the definition in 1986: social capital is the sum of resources actual and potential that come from belonging to a durable network of relationships, ones that carry some level of mutual recognition. He put it on the same shelf as economic and cultural capital. Coleman and Putnam built on the idea later. Coleman drew attention to the structural side information networks as a key form of social capital. For scholars studying only children, the theory opens a way to think about what's missing when siblings disappear from the picture. This paper identifies three gaps. First, only children have no siblings or cousin networks as ready-to-hand social capital. Second, they lack those cheap information channels that brothers and sisters provide. Third, they don't have kinship-based backup in everyday situations. These are not individual failings. They're built into the transformation of family structure itself. And they produce real costs.

4.2 Current Situation of Only-Child Families

As China has grown richer and attitudes have changed, families pay more attention to quality of life and to raising well-rounded kids. Education levels are up. But the desire to have children keeps dropping. Only-child families are now common across many countries, not just China, though the specifics depend on regional

and cultural settings[12].

Blake's theory makes a clear prediction: only-child families can throw more resources and attention at each child. That stock of economic and human capital gives them a platform. They tend to show strengths in how their character forms, how they handle stress, in cognitive measures, and in access to learning. Some research finds they pull in more resources for starting businesses[13], though heavier family duties come with the package. But social capital theory cuts the other way. Only children grow up sibling-free[14]. They miss the everyday back-and-forth that brothers and sisters provide, and that absence leaves a mark on how they socialize and fit into broader networks. In the post-one-child world, they will hit problems earlier generations didn't and elder care and family obligations top the list. Parenting style adds another layer. Overindulgence, overprotection - these can stunt growth and foster dependency. And only children really do lean more on others than kids who grew up with siblings.

The reality on the ground is neither all good nor all bad. Resource Dilution Theory captures the upside: don't spread resources thin across multiple kids, and you can pour more into each one's education and development. But the very same family structure wipes out peer support networks - and that's the social capital piece. For only-child families, these two theories together describe a baked-in trade-off. It's not a clean win. It's not a pure loss. It's a structural condition.

4.3 Analysis of the Social Problems of Only - Child

When only-child families make up a big chunk of society, the effects spread across many domains. What exactly goes wrong or right it depends on how society changes and how the government responds. Three areas are especially worth watching: elder care, how families raise and socialize children, and what the population will look like in twenty or thirty years.

Fertility has dropped far enough to push China into negative population growth. That's not a blip. Ahead lie higher rates of non-marriage, later marriage, divorce and a sex ratio imbalance that works against any hope of healthy demographic development[15]. But the first thing everyone will notice is population aging. China already has more old people than any other country. Negative growth, deep aging, rock-bottom fertility the combination is straining the pension and social security apparatus. Here's a key fact: in daily life, children still do most of the hands-on elder care. That makes state policy indispensable. The government can raise welfare and living standards for the old and build up care infrastructure. Families can shore up the mental health of only children cultural activities, recreation and take some of the weight off their shoulders.

Character is forged in families. For only children, the home is especially formative but it's also a source of wider ripples: aging, lopsided population structure, strains in how education gets delivered. The entrepreneurship numbers tell part of the story. Only children start businesses a lot more than people with siblings. The reason isn't mysterious: concentrated family resources give them real advantages in both economic and human capital. The probability of launching a business rises by 21.17 percent over non-only children[16]. Other studies have traced how birth order connects to educational attainment, showing that resources inside families get carved up unequally[17]. On both money and emotional support, only children have solid ground under them. Only-child families hold up better when shocks hit.

But the rise of only-child families isn't just a fertility story. It's a structure story. As the desire for children weakens, the sex composition of the population will warp first at birth, then across the whole of society. A badly skewed male-to-female ratio brings dangers that go beyond demographics: anti-social behavior, instability. These aren't abstractions.

There is another side to this. A smaller population means less pressure on housing. Living environments could loosen up. Job markets might get less brutal. Education levels could rise. Economic growth might even speed up without the drag of too many people chasing too few slots. Old feudal hangovers 'son preference' most stubbornly that could finally break apart. Women would probably gain status. Social life might get more egalitarian. Fewer humans also means lighter demand on resources, energy, and ecosystems. That's a real plus for the environment.

But people aren't just statistics. Marx was right about this much: human beings are the subjects of social practice, not objects. A shrinking population means only children will shoulder elder care, family duties, property questions, and plain loneliness all at once. Jobs and daily

demands will keep many from seeing their parents regularly. The old will go without enough care, in daily life and emotionally. Fertility intentions keep dropping, the 'one is enough' mindset keeps spreading, and the sex ratio won't fix itself. Some projections have the male-to-female ratio reaching seven to three. At that point, you're talking about trafficking, prostitution, a spike in male violence. These aren't distant hypotheticals. They're what's already on the horizon.

5. Conclusion

Fertility policy keeps shifting because the stakes are high. Family planning and population management these are urgent for every developing country, and they don't get solved and stay solved[18]. Population isn't one thing. It's quantity tangled up with quality, geography, age structure, and gender ratios. Change one and the others move. This study used Resource Dilution Theory and Social Capital Theory to map what two generations of only-child families actually have, what economic edges only children hold over peers with siblings, and what problems are coming down the road.

Socialization begins in the family. What happens there is education, the atmosphere leaves marks on ideas, mental habits, and behavior that can last a whole life. Quiet marks, but deep ones. Looking ahead, China's continued economic and social advance, more open attitudes, thinner population density, and easier employment conditions should make society feel friendlier. But serious problems elder care, population imbalance are also on the way, and they'll test the country's development in real ways.

Long lives and low births: that's the era we're in. The state has already pushed back the retirement age and expanded university enrollment to get ahead of the aging wave. Elder care will press down on only-child families and multi-child families alike. The state can tune the old-age security system get subsidies to the people who actually need them, take pressure off households, and keep family life supported over the long haul.

Every study has blind spots. How many children only children want, where they live after marrying, how they care for aging parents, what model of old-age support they'll use all of this needs work from both rural and urban perspectives, with more empirical data and interviews, not just aggregate numbers. Fei Xiaotong's differential mode of association tells us that personal ties work differently in villages than in cities. Future research should put only-child and multi-child families side by side compare economic loads, resource splits, and whether people prefer institutional or family care in old age and tie those comparisons back to whether they want children at all.

Population is the foundation a nation builds on. It's a strategic asset. The fact that China has rewritten its fertility rules so many times tells you how serious the demographic problem really is. The state has to watch population shifts closely, push for balanced and sustainable development, meet the aging challenge directly, and keep population, economy, and society moving in the same direction. The three-child policy, by itself, won't be enough to raise fertility over the long term. What's needed is a stronger floor under family formation real fertility security, a different culture around having children, a society that's genuinely friendly to families, and more open policies. Economic growth has to be broad enough that people actually feel better off and can imagine having kids. And the specific knots that trap women of childbearing age the cost of raising a child, the head-on crash between career and motherhood have to be loosened. Wanting children and having children are two different things. Policy has to close that gap.

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