



Master's Degree in International Relations

Course of **Demography and Social Challenges**

China: the next superpower between political, demographic and economic challenges

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INTRODUCTION

This dissertation covers China's path from being an underdeveloped country to the next superpower, with specific in-depth analyses on crucial topics such as security issues and the demographic transition. The latter are examined from a political, economic and social standpoint in order to provide a comprehensive perspective of their causes and effects. The research questions inspiring the work are: "is China going to be the next superpower? What challenges will it need to overcome to achieve this objective?". Regarding the motivation behind the choice of this topic, it is difficult to reconstruct the profound reasons behind the mainland's incredible rise over the last forty years. Additionally, it can be even harder to locate which obstacles may prevent it from reaching its full potential. Therefore, the final aim of this dissertation is to describe China's main contemporary challenges and suggest in which direction the country should move to keep growing and become the next superpower. However, this is not the only target of the work: since Beijing has consolidated its role as a major global power, many accusations concerning violations of individual freedom and unfair actions by the regime have been advanced. In this sense, the following chapters intend to demonstrate that although there is a high degree of control over the population, the latter places major trust in the authorities. Moreover, protests have often been respected and have led to policy changes, outlining openness towards considering popular necessities.

Advocating for this argument, the first chapter highlights the connection between past events that have shaped China's approach towards the global scenario and the current mentality of the regime. Indeed, the latter has been focused on continuing the country's unique growth process by enhancing the rhetoric of past humiliation from foreign powers, arousing the support of the population. Additionally, the first part of the dissertation illustrates the strategy

embraced by the mainland – recognized as “peaceful rise” – which has fostered its integration within the international system. The second chapter covers the main security issues directly concerning China, while the third provides an in-depth analysis of the fertility transition that began at the end of the 1960s. Here, the investigation focuses on the effects of the One-child policy, explaining how it was influenced by the economy and why it represents the most critical concern for the country. The first two chapters involve numerous comments by academic experts from all parts of the world, while the last also includes tables and graphs to display projections for the proposed research.

I. THE HISTORY OF CHINA: FROM HUMILIATION TO RISING POWER

1.1 Differences between superpowers, great powers and regional powers

Today's world is in constant change, and the different events happening throughout the globe prove that the international scenario in which the geopolitical forces act, may change depending on them. Many areas represent possible turning points for the future balance of power. However, one of them has been considerably emerging in the last thirty years as the true potential watershed in this sense: China's uprising. This phenomenon has inevitably influenced economic, political, demographic and ideological interests. For this reason, the current geopolitical equilibrium may shift. In order to define the latter, States and organizations are often addressed as "superpowers", "great powers" or "regional powers", that can be distinguished through the characteristics identified by Barry Buzan (2004).

To begin with, superpowers have a broad spectrum of capabilities that they exercise across the whole international system. In particular, military and political ones must be developed at a superior level, and a strong economy is needed to support them. Moreover, superpowers must be active players in the secularization and de-secularization process in all regions of the world, meaning that they must exercise a significant level of influence on the power of religion having higher or lower control on the individual's moral life. As may be expected, the demographic aspect also needs to be mentioned, since historically superpowers have presented a large number of inhabitants within their territory, and demonstrated the capacity to hold an appropriate fertility rate. Finally, the last detail corresponds to superpowers being recognized by others as such: a State or organization cannot

proclaim itself being a superpower if it does not fit the cited requirements, nor if the international system believes the contrary. Generally, it is possible to argue that the current scenario is composed by the US as the only superpower, however in the eyes of other experts (Wæver, 2017) China's development may change the situation within 20 to 30 years. Indeed, there are two more possibilities proposed: to some it should already be regarded as a superpower, creating a bipolar system, while a few even believe that the US have partially lost their position and should be regarded as "great power".

However, before analyzing such statements, a clarification on the features of great powers is necessary to fully understand why China's status is not currently that of a superpower, but will be. First, great powers differentiate themselves because they do not need to have capabilities in all sectors, nor to have specialized military and political fields; they preserve the general balance of power by acting as a deterrent to potentially dangerous States - this connects to another function of great powers, namely containing wars and avoiding crises; they respect each other's sphere of influence, otherwise certain actions may be perceived as threatening and cause conflicts or diplomatic obstacles; furthermore, one key element is that they distinguish themselves from lower powers - such as regional ones - because they are responded to by other powers on the basis of system level calculations about the present and near future distribution of power. In fact, the international system may change rather quickly following impactful events like wars or pandemics, as experienced recently. For this reason, when talking about great powers, the reference often regards descendant superpowers - as, in the eyes of some experts, the US - or ascendant powers - like China.

1.2 China's rise

After having discussed the characteristics that define superpowers and great powers, it is necessary to deepen the focus on China. The country is aiming at levelling the US. In the last thirty years it has enjoyed an increase in military, economic, social and diplomatic power. Following such growth rate, it may achieve the status of superpower by 2049, a key date for the regime that represents the centenary of the creation of the People's Republic of China. However, before getting to the point where it stands nowadays, China had to fight for its independence and establish its unique political system (Musu, 2018). Retracing the historical background is fundamental when trying to deeply understand how it may have affected the State's current policy and ambitions, and why the Chinese population is willing to follow the Party despite the difficulties of a strict communist regime.

Starting from the roots, China has suffered because of the undesirable presence of western colonizers since two hundred years ago. This feature has characterized the history of the country for a long time: the Qing Dynasty, which corresponds to the last imperialist period before the creation of the Republic, was in fact marked by invaders, although it had tried to prevent any external influence – considered dangerous for its identity and freedom - by adopting the “Canton system”. The latter consisted in a protectionist policy that arose in 1757, when China tried to control its trade with the West by concentrating it entirely in the port of Canton. However, the system was bypassed by Chinese merchants who sailed to and from Indonesia and Philippines with their products. Moreover, at the start of the 19th century, as the concept of free trade became more popular in the West, the Canton protectionist policy demonstrated its weaknesses.

In fact, at the time one of the most valuable trading products was opium, heavily requested by the British Empire. Despite China imposing a ban on opium trade, the British government insisted on the principles of free trade, causing tensions

until the situation escalated. Between 1839 and 1842 and later between 1856 and 1860 the two Opium Wars between China and the British Empire took place and demonstrated Beijing's gap with western military preparation. The first Opium War ended with the negotiations officially known as Treaty of Nanking, that marks the beginning of Chinese resentment towards western powers, demonstrated by the definition "unequal treaties" used for a series of agreements with nations such as United States, Great Britain, France. In this specific case, China was forced to open trade in multiple ports with foreign merchants, with all trades being subject to fixed tariffs. Furthermore, in 1842 the cession of Hong Kong to the British Empire took place, with the special administrative region being transferred back to the People's Republic of China only in July 1997.

After that, the country had to face two more conflicts in which the result was not much different: in 1894 the first Sino-Japanese war started when Japan invaded China. The following year they stipulated the Shimonoseki Treaty in which defeated China had to recognize Korea as independent and lost Taiwan, which is why today they still consider it as part of their original territory, representing a controversial matter. For this reason, although the conflict was between two Asian powers, major consequences are reflected in contemporary politics regarding the relations with western powers, specifically the US and the position towards the independence of Taiwan.

Only 4 years later began the revolt against foreign influence that is known today as "Boxers Rebellion", named after the fact that Kung Fu schools - identified as "boxers' schools" - were one of the main engines of the protests. At the end of the 19th century, resentment against the western powers reached its peak because of the excessive foreign interference in China's internal affairs. The irritation was mainly caused by the constant violation of Chinese traditions and rules of behavior, and by the invaders' claims consisting in the recognition of rights that should have belonged only to China's leading political figures. Therefore, in 1899 the situation became so tense that the Chinese Empress encouraged the Boxers to threaten the

district of Beijing where the foreign delegations were settled. Consequently, they attacked the headquarters of the international legations and killed whoever was perceived as enemy. When the western powers finally considered their intervention necessary, they sent armies that worked together for the protection of the “Eight-Nation alliance”. The latter represented a military coalition of about 45.000 troops from Italy, Germany, Japan, Russia, Britain, United States, Austria-Hungary and France. Once again, the British Empire was one of the most involved. Even after settling the revolts, the Qing government formally condemned the violent actions but did not prosecute those responsible.

Such events clearly demonstrate the level of control imposed by Western countries on China’s internal affairs, explaining Beijing’s distrustful attitude towards them and the will to be independent. They all happened under the period called “100 years of humiliation”, which is named after the subjugation of the Qing dynasty and the whole country towards western powers and Japan. It went from 1839 to 1949, the date of the creation of the People’s Republic of China by Mao Zedong. Nowadays, this concept still holds major importance, as it is used by the Communist Party to justify part of its actions and objectives, such as “reuniting the motherland” with its previous territories (Sinkkonen, 2021).

The Communist success in 1949 led China to occupy a further position of contrast against the West in the Cold War (Zhang, 1998). Indeed, after 1949 Beijing’s attitude towards the United States was mainly skeptical, resulting in twenty years of alienation under Mao where the West was containing China and its desire to expand, while the latter rejected most of their political and moral values. Nonetheless, the end of global armed conflicts fostered the slow reintegration of economic and diplomatic relations that allowed the People’s Republic of China to obtain a United Nations seat in 1971, finally being recognized the only legitimate representative of the country instead of Chiang-Kai-shek, former nationalist leader that had relocated to Taiwan.

After a brief experience of alienation, the 1970s marked the beginning of the mainland's most prosperous period, that is still ongoing (Legro, 2007). From this point onwards, the main focus has shifted towards reform and opening up of the country, as the Cultural Revolution led by Mao Zedong had failed and brought poverty. A major part of Chinese resistance against integration with the West was abandoned, and the domestic reforms were not anymore induced by external pressures as in the past, but rather included in a greater project with the final aim of joining the United States at superpower level. Without such structural change, China would not have achieved as much success in its economic development. Therefore, the decision to distance from revolutionary approaches demonstrated to the international society that Beijing could be integrated into the system and had the potential to become a profitable ally. Consequently, in the past the latter was not perceived as a true possible rival. However, things have changed, as the United States have to consider China's position on geopolitical matters because of its military, political and economic power.

History allows us to understand how a country has developed its culture and beliefs. In this case, it is clear that China has suffered from western colonization, conflicts and underdevelopment. The country's will to alter the balance of power is reasonable, and the policy followed in the last thirty years by the different governments has proved to be efficient in this sense. China has gone from the status of emerging country to possibly becoming the only competitor of the US internationally. The political system is certainly very strict, however it has demonstrated its validity through solid results, and for this reason Chinese people still largely support it. After having experienced what development means, they are not willing to abandon the prospect of a more desirable future, even if it means being in contrast to the US and changing the balance of power in an unstable area like the Pacific.

1.3 Chinese government's standpoint

Previous Chinese governments have faced very difficult times for the country, including wars, famines, plagues. Although nowadays President Xi Jinping can manage a more favorable situation, his leadership is often questioned, especially from the Western front, for controversial political choices. Clearly, there is a definite distance from a pure form of democracy. However, analyzing various key points of the current governmental policy is crucial in order to understand how China aims to reach the status of superpower.

As stated previously, the past plays a fundamental role in modern China. The expression “100 years of humiliation” symbolizes the widespread discontent among the Chinese population over the pressure of Western powers on the country's internal affairs. More specifically, the feeling of “humiliation” began to be perceived by the population more and more frequently from the 1920s onwards, when the Chinese Communist Party and the Kuomintang, whose literal translation is 'Chinese Nationalist Party', established themselves on the political scene. From the successive decade onwards, following the growing protests in large parts of the country, the expression became commonly used. Despite divergences between the two parties, which led to the outbreak of a civil war in 1927, this popular sentiment would survive to the present day. The idea of opposing Western expansionism and regaining lost territories to reunite China, inevitably marked the future.

This “Never Again” mentality (Tischler, 2020) represents not only a reminder of what the Chinese population experienced, but also a warning for the coming years. In that sense, the difference with the West is significant: Americans would perceive the loss of a conflict as a negative geopolitical event, without fear of being oppressed by foreign nations. This is due to historical reasons, as Western societies have suffered occupations mostly committed by people culturally and ethnically similar to them, such as the British rule over Colonial Americans, or the German occupation of France. On the contrary, China has fought for centuries to gain

independence from powers that tried to impose different cultures and habits. Therefore, the population has identified nationalism as the solution to avoid new oppressions. As a consequence, domestic stability and a firm security policy are seen as priorities. By ignoring the importance of history, it becomes almost impossible to deeply understand the political system of China and why its inhabitants are generally supportive towards the regime. It is in such framework that the analysis on contemporary challenges must be conducted: a low fertility rate corresponds to a weaker nation, meaning higher risk of losing international credibility; losing control of the South China Sea would signal a new possible occupation in the future; abandoning the controversy over lost territories would represent the acceptance of past defeats.

Thus, in 2012 – right after taking office - Chinese President Xi Jinping decided to appear with all members of the Politburo Standing Committee at an exhibition covering the century of humiliation (Sørensen, 2015). The tour was carried out at China's National Museum, and it portrayed the country's transformation into an independent and prosperous modern state. The event - called "Road to National Rejuvenation" - had immediately demonstrated the symbolic importance of the past for the country, and how the Chinese Communist Party would be prepared to focus on the future by revitalizing the nation. In fact, an ambitious young generation is central in Xi Jinping's ideal China, since creating cohesion even in the early stages of life ensures a more united population. As stated by Peters (2022), Beijing is counting on new generations to keep leading the country in the most efficient way. Indeed, education plays a fundamental role in releasing the talents and developing the collective intelligence of society. The Chinese Communist Party needs to represent a firm guide towards the achievement of this national objective by fostering and encouraging the most deserving youth.

During the event, Xi Jinping also mentioned the "Chinese dream", an expression that has acquired such importance to be associated to the party's political ideology (Peters, 2022). The latter consists of two main objectives:

becoming a fully modernized nation, where the term “fully” implies even the territories that represent a controversy because they belonged to China in the past, such as Taiwan; rejuvenation, which corresponds to achieving further economic progress to improve the population’s wealth while maintaining values historically linked to Chinese culture. In this sense, national symbols and glorification of traditions are important as they provide a direct connection between the need to modernize and the roots of the country. Therefore, the “Chinese Dream” is a narrative created through history and cultural identity whose success will depend on the support of the population. Xi Jinping’s goal is to complete these processes by 2049, the 100th anniversary of the founding of the People’s Republic of China. Following this plan, the mainland could potentially present many of the typical characteristics of superpowers by that date.

Another fundamental part of the Chinese governmental policy is the concept of “One Country-Two systems”, a formula used to describe the situation of Hong Kong and Macao. The latter are two special administrative regions, previously under control of British and Portuguese colonizers, that returned to be part of China’s territory respectively in 1997 and 1999. The phrase explains two fundamental concepts: on one hand – “One country” – China officially regains control of these regions, on the other – “Two systems” – they retain their own economic and administrative systems. Nevertheless, according to the Declarations signed, Hong Kong and Macao will be completely integrated into China – “One Country-One system” - by 2049, as the agreements are set to expire in 50 years. Therefore, 2049 demonstrates once again to be a crucial year for Beijing, obtaining complete control over the areas. This solution was approved in order to let citizens of both regions gradually adapt to future changes, yet the transition to a new political system may bring instability within both societies.

The government has also been capable of ensuring continuous progress during the economic rise of the last 30 years. However, after prosperity the threat of a crisis must be considered. To avoid this possibility, Xi Jinping has been promoting

a project that would inevitably change the trading scenario worldwide, and especially in the Eurasian zone: the Belt and Road Initiative, a long-term trans-continental strategic initiative with the aim of developing infrastructure and economic integration between the countries concerned (Musu, 2018). The latter would not only serve as further expanding point for the nation's wealth, but also to ensure that its main driving force – the economy - does not fade away. If that were to happen, China would naturally lose the chance of becoming a superpower, and that is why the regime has placed much importance into this project.

Finally, governmental control even covered the structure of Chinese families through the “One-child policy”. The first phase was introduced by Deng Xiaoping in 1979, penalizing households that gave birth to more than one child (Zhang, 2017). Initially, this idea was judged fundamental for guaranteeing a regular development of the nation, since the Maoist era had been characterized by extremely high fertility rates. Population control was essential to carry out the economic reforms planned by the new government, whose objective was to focus on raising the GDP per capita of the country. In the following years, many rural families started resisting the policy until it reached a stabilization during the 1990s. Although in 2015 the “One-child policy” was abolished, China is currently facing population ageing issues. The latter represents the main obstacle for the nation's dream of becoming a superpower, and for this reason it will be analyzed deeply in the final part of this dissertation.

1.4 China today

As of today, China's path towards achieving the status of superpower has been marked by a complex historical background and unique governmental policy. The country's difficult past encompasses foreign colonization, underdevelopment and conflicts, most of which took place during the period often referred to as the "100 years of humiliation". This historical perspective has deeply influenced China's desire to regain its place in the global scenario and rectify past injustices. Indeed, President Xi Jinping has emphasized the importance of history in shaping the nation's future through the concept of "Chinese Dream" and the goal of national rejuvenation (Sørensen, 2015). Such characteristics reflect the government's ambition to achieve economic progress while maintaining cultural values. In this sense, year 2049 not only marks the centenary of the People's Republic of China, but has been chosen as a symbolic target for the achievement of important results for the nation.

Among the key projects pursued by the government, China's Belt and Road Initiative aims to secure economic growth and global influence by developing infrastructure and fostering economic integration globally. Moreover, Xi has placed great importance on managing security issues, maintaining a firm position on controversial geopolitical areas such as Taiwan, which he claims should return to be part of China's territory. These projects, as well as the eventual full integration of Hong Kong and Macau into the mainland, highlight the significance of Chinese long-term strategic planning. The country's determination to overcome past humiliations, coupled with strategic initiatives and a focus on maintaining its cultural identity, position China as a rival to the United States on the global stage.

Such objectives could not be fulfilled without a stable political leadership. For this reason, Xi Jinping has taken the opportunity to demonstrate his control over the governmental and political spheres during the 20th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, that was held from the 16th to 22nd of October 2022. In

this occasion, Xi was appointed for the third time as General Party Secretary. Although the electoral outcome was predictable, it provided a strong signal towards the solidity of his position within the Party. The most surprising event took place as former PRC President – Hu Jintao – was escorted out of the Party Congress, apparently against his will after being prevented from looking at official documents (Biscop et al., 2022). Although China's official news agency reported on social media that Hu was escorted away due to health problems, the footage was shared worldwide and many observers (Biscop et al., 2022) have identified symbolism behind what happened: Xi Jinping appears to be the man fully in power, surrounded only by loyal companions devoted to his cause. It is not accidental that also Li Keqiang, former PRC Prime Minister, has retired from the Politburo Standing Committee despite being one year below the usual retirement age of 68. The latter had an optimal interpersonal relationship with Hu Jintao, and both had covered the role of First Secretaries within the Communist Youth League of China, a people's organization that has lost power since Xi Jinping's political appearance.

Another key event that demonstrates the evident centralization of political power in the figure of Xi Jinping dates back to 10 March 2023, when he was confirmed President of the People's Republic of China for the third consecutive time in a historical decision (Gan, 2023). Indeed, the Chinese constitution previously stipulated a maximum of two consecutive presidential terms. The reform was introduced by Deng Xiaoping in 1982 to avoid the turmoil experienced under Mao Zedong's life-long ruling. However, in 2018 this limit was removed by the National People's Congress with an almost unanimous vote (Garrick & Bennett, 2018). Such constitutional change was clearly approved to allow Xi Jinping to keep guiding China's prosperous development, but also to align the presidency with the role of Chinese Communist Party General Secretary. In this sense, in just six months Xi has been capable of reinforcing the Party's hold on power and his own figure as President of the Republic, Chairman of the Central Military Commission and General Secretary of the Party. As a result, he has laid

the foundations to remain at the apex of the hierarchy for the rest of his life, becoming China's most powerful leader since Mao Zedong.

Despite taking important decisions on the domestic front, in the past two years Xi Jinping has also been dealing with the most relevant conflictual scenarios on a global scale: the war between Ukraine and Russia that started in February 2022, and the Arab-Israeli conflict, escalated in October 2023. In both cases, the growing influence of China on international affairs as well as its mediator role, especially in situations involving global security, have become evident.

Regarding the first, China's position has been quite clear, as it has abstained from voting in almost every resolution proposed by the United Nations, even if nonbinding. Among the latter, one of the most symbolic was held one year after the beginning of the war with the aim of ending the hostilities and calling for Russia to immediately and unconditionally withdraw from Ukrainian territory (Masih, 2023). Although the majority of countries voted in favor of the resolution, China abstained to reaffirm its neutral position. To be more precise, Beijing's neutrality in this case is only apparent, as it holds close ties with Moscow for several reasons (Greitens, 2022): they both perceive NATO and the United States as rivals; Xi and Putin have openly appreciated each other's work multiple times; numerous documents connect the two powers economically, diplomatically and strategically – namely, the joint statement signed by both leaders on February 4, 2022 confirming the high-level strategic partnership with “no limits”. Moreover, the Chinese Foreign Ministry has repeatedly declared to disagree with the sanctions imposed against Russia, although on the other hand it has also advocated the use of dialogue and negotiation, ultimately avoiding explicit favoritism. The approach adopted by the mainland is clever, as it demonstrates to respect its bond with Russia while keeping an impartial image internationally. Xi Jinping is aware of the importance of his country in any armed conflict, especially if it might escalate into a global affair. For this reason, while he has not directly participated in this war, his visit to Russia in October 2023 has not gone unnoticed (Hawkins

& Kwan, 2023). The leaders renovated their friendship, with Putin underlining the need for continuous cooperation not only economically through the Belt and Road Initiative, but also politically as current times require complete safeguard of international justice.

With respect to the conflictual scenario between Palestine and Israel, China's initial reaction has been neutral once again (Pike, 2023). While US president Joe Biden quickly condemned the attacks of Hamas, defining them terrorists, systemic rival Xi Jinping preferred remaining silent, sharing through the Foreign Ministry an appeal to immediately end the hostilities and prevent any harm to civilians, adding that China holds bonds of friendship with both Israel and Palestine. However, Israeli government officials openly criticized this response as it does not provide a clear position nor does it reflect China's will to become a new key regional player. The reason behind this approach is that the country has supported Palestine for many years, recognizing the latter as a State in 1988. Such behavior has fostered building relations with Arab players in the region, but it is also a way to partly cover the infringement of human rights against Uyghurs, a Muslim minority. Finally, having interest in the Middle East does not take away the Chinese broader plan to avoid direct participation in conflicts. Considering the inevitable involvement of the United States as allies of Israel, Xi Jinping prefers adopting a more cautious approach, offering to play the mediator role between opposing forces. Therefore, the hesitancy to criticize Hamas is coherent with the context still being unstable.

1.5 Peaceful rise

The conflicts analyzed provide a possible response to whether China will demonstrate the ability to grow without creating an armed conflict with other major powers or neighbor countries. In fact, one of the questions regarding the rise of China to superpower in the future is how it will be obtained – more precisely if a “peaceful rise”, as pointed out by Buzan (2010), is possible. To have such outcome, it is necessary that China accepts and integrates itself into the rules and structures of the international system, and the powers composing the latter agree on adapting the same rules and structures to the changes brought by the rising State.

Going more in depth into the analysis of China’s position since the 1970’s, which corresponds to the opening up of the country by Mao Zedong’s successor Deng Xiaoping, Buzan (2010) underlines that the country has clearly transformed its relationship with international society in various fields. On a regional level, it is now seen as a good neighbor by most of the Southeast Asian countries, especially the smaller ones trying to develop because they are being helped through investments, projects and loans. This is a very clever long-term plan, since States such as Sri Lanka have had to pay off their debts by handing over to China the income from important infrastructures (Nath, 2019) – in this case, the Hambantota deep sea port. Moreover, there are important ties with many neighbor countries related to the cultural and social values shared: prioritizing regime security, fostering regional development through strict cooperation and investments, sharing a Confucian-based cultural approach.

On a more global scale, the integration is not as linear. Although key improvements have been made – such as becoming a member of the World Trade Organization, taking active part into the fight against climate change and emerging as one of the first economic world powers – the political and cultural aspects still clash with the Western order that has traditionally represented the common base

through its strong democratic roots. At the moment, this is one of the main challenges that China has to face before being recognized the status of superpower: sharing its cultural and political values, defined by Buzan as “institutional umbrella” (2010), and making sure that they slowly get integrated into the international system. The “soft power” element still appears somewhat weak in this sense, and the global image of China is still that of a strong potential ally that needs to be kept under control.

Nonetheless, if compared to great rising powers of the past like Germany, the Soviet Union or Japan, China still stands out as peace-oriented, because until now the priority has been given to the extreme economic development it has enjoyed. Surprisingly, this approach recalls that of the United States in the past, which concentrated on stabilizing their economic presence worldwide while taking part in the balance of power only as a passive actor or when the events forced them to, like in the Second World War. Surely, a few actors may raise concerns about China’s increasing power, however the latter has demonstrated to have taken a completely different direction from that of nations that have caused global conflicts. It must also be mentioned that Beijing has found a positive international environment (Buzan, 2004), in which two details have fostered its development: on one hand, the collapse of the Soviet Union eased its security position and solidified it in East and South Asia; on the other, the last thirty years have been characterized by a period of overall stability, interconnectedness and prosperity in the world economy that have facilitated the inclusion within international society.

Returning to Buzan’s argument, he analyzes four major factors that demonstrate how the “peaceful rise” approach has been used by the regime to keep a low-profile image in line with the decision to generally remain neutral and ensure the strengthening of the country. First, China itself represents a factor because of the position it holds within the international society. The change from a poor underdeveloped economy to a fundamental part of trade in the world implies that the country should start having a more active role in shaping world politics.

China's actions now have an important weight, as they do not only reflect domestically, but also outside the borders. Therefore, the fundamental concept is that China needs to slowly abandon this initial low-profile approach in politics and start adapting to its current status of great power with the potential of becoming a superpower. In this sense, it should start seeking a more active role by demonstrating to have the tools to become more than a mere mediator.

The second factor is the 2008 financial crisis that led to a period in which the markets dumped immensely, creating unemployment and struggles for the nations and their population. Although the effects were global, China was able to keep rising and during these years it finally solidified as one of the main actors in international economy. The global focus for that period was all on finding solutions to recover from such a harsh crisis, so the actions of China did not get the attention they deserved. Once again, the low-profile strategy has proved to be effective. Nevertheless, nowadays things have changed: by finally understanding the importance of China and its potential to reach the status of superpower in the future, the decisions of the regime are observed carefully by other countries, especially systemic rivals such as the United States.

The third factor corresponds to the environmental crisis, that has been acknowledged as a reality for various years now, although it still does not find much space in the international political agenda. In this case, the issue is not whether China decides to take on the challenge of climate change, but rather if this will have an impact on its 'peaceful rise' approach. In fact, Xi Jinping has already mentioned several times that the country is planning to reach carbon neutrality by 2060 (Stern & Xie, 2022), an objective that today seems very distant, especially considering that China is one of the top polluting nations. However, as ambition has characterized the incredible improvement of the country since the 1970s, this new goal may not be unreachable. When the environmental issue will start to become a priority in the nations' political agenda, decisions will have to be taken and it is not clear if the move will be oriented towards international cooperation or

conflictual relations. Even in this case, China is trying to demonstrate its willingness to act as a “good individual” in the international scenario by setting 2060 as date for carbon neutrality, although the real challenge will be to keep a peaceful behavior if the environmental issue causes conflicts of interest.

The fourth and final factor is related to the United States and their ongoing crisis of leadership in international society. There are various factors causing this: the economic difficulties demonstrated by the Federal Reserve, the previous Trump administration that led to an immense loss of credibility because of the president’s reputation throughout the world, and consequently the decline in the legitimacy of US leadership. These problems are part of the reason why – as mentioned previously – the unipolarity of the system is being questioned. China certainly represents a challenge and even an alternative to the US, however it is not clear if it is ready to respond to such complicated tasks. At the moment, the regime is not willing to openly get in contrast with the US, however if it manages to increase its soft power by spreading its ideology among the international system, China will inevitably take on a more explicit role of leadership.

Among the four factors, Buzan does not include the recent wars mentioned previously due to chronological reasons. However, they connect perfectly with the argument proposed by the expert: Xi Jinping does not yet believe that China is ready to expose itself in the international context, so he is pursuing the ‘peaceful rise’ tactic. In addition, the domestic problems must be addressed as Xi has had to manage them while trying not to publicly expose the country's weaknesses. Among the latter - which will be discussed more in detail in the next chapter - are the protests against the 'Zero-Covid policy', the perplexities inherent to security issues, and the topic of the One-child policy, that will necessarily have to be resolved if China wants to achieve the superpower status.

In conclusion, China’s “peaceful rise” has been a reality for at least thirty years, recovering from the difficulties represented by civil wars, western domination,

Japanese occupations and political revolutions. After Mao's death and the shift in leadership in favor of Deng Xiaoping, the country has changed its approach towards the international system and managed to concretize an incredible comeback thanks to a precise economic development strategy. From the analysis proposed, what clearly emerges is that by the end of 2049 Beijing's role will certainly change, regardless of its decision to still seek a 'peaceful rise' or not. China will need to succeed in finding a balance between the tensions that will inevitably emerge and the idea of avoiding armed conflicts. Pressure is something that Xi Jinping has already dealt with during his presidency, but in the future he will have to control the relationship with United States so that their rivalry does not escalate. Although in some cases, as will be discussed later in the dissertation, his decisions have caused protests - albeit promptly silenced - it is clear that China has chosen to rely on the centralization of power around a strong leader in order to continue its unique growth process. However, as in any long-term path, there are obstacles and challenges, both internal and external, that need to be addressed. In this sense, "peaceful rise" requires a deep understanding of what society China wants to be, and what kind of model it seeks to promote within the international system. As long as the mainland keeps demonstrating to be a disciplined and reasonable actor with which setting up economic win-win situations, its place will be among the superpowers.

II. SECURITY ISSUES

2.1 Taiwan

Although Xi Jinping's leadership has demonstrated to be centered around the idea of "peaceful rise", China's path to superpower status inevitably presents challenges. Globally, the current scenario requires precise and cautious political choices. Internally, Chinese population ageing resulting from the One-child policy and demographic trends pose a significant hurdle to the nation's aspirations. Moreover, disputes regarding the path to reuniting the motherland are still a reality. The government must address these issues to ensure a sustainable progress, and overcoming demographic challenges will be essential to secure a place as superpower in the coming decades. However, while the latter problem needs to be resolved through domestic policies that will demonstrate their effectiveness in the future, security issues represent a more immediate concern.

As mentioned previously, Beijing has demonstrated in various occasions to prefer avoiding conflicts. Indeed, an aggressive behavior could cause the country more difficulties when trying to spread its values and ideology in the international system. Creating conflictual relations would only hurt China's image worldwide, and consequently decelerate the process of becoming a superpower. Therefore, diplomacy currently seems the preferable choice. Nevertheless, there are various areas in which China has demonstrated interest, and others that need to be addressed because of potential implications in terms of security. More specifically, on one hand the current entanglement caused by China's geographical position is perceived as a priority by the regime; on the other, direct rivals such as United States or Japan are worried about a possible territorial expansion, that would have inevitable geopolitical repercussions.

The first controversial matter regards Taiwan, an island whose political status has raised disputes that have increased in recent years. The argument lies over three possibilities for this territory: returning to the People's Republic of China like before the Shimonoseki Treaty in 1895; remaining part of the Republic of China (ROC), that relocated its government to Taiwan in 1949; declaring its independence and finally constituting the Republic of Taiwan.

To be more precise, the People's Republic of China has been claiming sovereignty over Taiwan for years, following the objective of reuniting the motherland mentioned previously. In fact, Beijing still believes the island should be annexed to its territory as before Japan's invasion (Chen, 2022). On the other hand, Taiwan today operates as a separate political entity with its own government and is officially known as Republic of China, which held control of all of China before the Civil War that ended in 1949 and forced it to retreat to Taiwan. In recent years, the prevailing sentiment of Taiwanese people has been gradually moving away from the idea of "one-China" as an ultimate goal, and this trend is accelerating (Chen, 2022). Despite the differing views between Kuomintang and Democratic Progressive Party – the two main political forces of the island - they share a common stance on Taiwan's sovereignty, stating that the Republic of China is an independent and democratic sovereign state. This perspective, accompanied by an overall appreciation for freedom and democracy, is becoming increasingly accepted in Taiwan, presenting a challenge to Beijing's objective.

Although consensus is evolving towards independence, another factor that must be considered is that the current constitution still incorporates aspects of the "one-China" concept. According to experts (Chen, 2022) the advancing consensus in Taiwan diminishes the significance of such elements, representing a doubt on their practical relevance. Therefore, the debate arises as to whether the Republic of China should undergo constitutional amendments to eliminate these features and officially declare Taiwan as *de jure* independent. However, this pathway appears extremely tortuous. Amending the constitution, especially on matters of

sovereignty, would be immensely challenging due to China's threat of using military force against Taiwan. Furthermore, considering the prevailing sentiment among Taiwanese people viewing the nation as already independent, democratic, and sovereign under the ROC name, there appears to be little practical incentive to pursue such complex changes for the explicit purpose of establishing Taiwan as a separate entity.

Nevertheless, Taiwan is recognized as a State only by twelve members of the United Nations, none of which are permanent members of the UN Security Council. This is due to the fact that since 1971 the People's Republic of China has been recognized as the only official representative of China, excluding the ROC from any possibility of holding a seat at the United Nations.

As a result, China has been applying pressure on international society to avoid direct contacts with Taiwan and refer to the People's Republic of China for diplomatic relations. However, the island informally communicates and conducts trade with many nations. In the latter regard, a sector of specialization is represented by semiconductors - essential components of digital products, devices and infrastructures such as smartphones, cars, healthcare and military equipment. In fact, Taiwan is the world's main producer of these chips (Korez-Vide et al., 2023) because of the difficulties related to costs and production processes that any other nation would face. Consequently, it is responsible for supplying major companies such as Apple or Nvidia, and a sudden stop - as has been demonstrated during the Covid-19 pandemic - would cause a global slowdown in the creation of all kinds of digital products.

While Taiwan's near-monopoly in the semiconductor production could foster its safety, tensions with China are a reality, and any military engagement would have huge repercussions. Beijing understands the importance of this market niche, to the point that it has become one of the reasons to insist on sovereignty claims over Taiwan. Becoming a leader in one of the market sectors with the greatest

scarcity of design and manufacturing would represent a demonstration of power to the entire world - in particular the United States. China would acquire significant influence over the digital production chain, potentially putting in trouble even the biggest US companies. For this reason, the competition between China and Taiwan over the semiconductor industry has catalyzed a dynamic interplay of investments, technological advancements and market share gains that inevitably draw the attention of the United States, and raise further debates regarding the position of the mainland as future superpower.

Apart from the trading aspect, which undoubtedly corresponds to one of the multiple reasons why China is interested in Taiwan, the latter also holds a key geostrategic position. In fact, obtaining sovereignty over the island would allow China to have direct access to the sea, while at the moment the mainland still feels entangled due to its location and the influence of the United States in the area. As stated by Zhang (2006), reducing this security issue to a mere problem of sovereignty would not be sufficient. Losing all influence on Taiwan would mean losing other islands nearby, endangering the space needed for a safe political and economic environment. For this reason, nowadays Beijing perceives the island both as a barrier protecting the coast, and as a potential threat to the nation if it were to fall into enemy hands. Considering the close ties between Taiwan and the United States, China is clearly concerned that a maritime coalition could obstruct its access to the seas in a conflict. Therefore, gaining control of the area would be fundamental to transform it from a barrier into a portal to the Pacific, asserting dominance over maritime surroundings.

Analyzing China-Taiwan relations from a political, geographical and economic point of view, what clearly emerges is that the area represents a major security issue. Indeed, the island is contended between the Republic of China and People's Republic of China, but the United States are also involved as they are trying to avoid any possible Chinese reinforcement. Currently, there are no signs of progress in the cross-Strait rapprochements, which according to experts (Lin, 2022)

constitute the real challenge due to profound mistrust. From Taiwan's perspective, opening talks poses the risk of assuming that China is willing to accept the current status quo over the long term, while Beijing's true intent remains to end Taiwan's *de facto* independence on its own terms. There is a concern that, in such situation, China might take advantage of the resulting power asymmetry, potentially coercing Taiwan into accepting unfavorable terms. Conversely, China is wary that Taiwan could leverage the broader international space created by rapprochement to obtain formal independence.

This scenario highlights a distrustful attitude from both sides, revealing that high expectations of conflict incentivize the parties to be preoccupied about potential negative implications. As Kastner and Rector (2008) pointed out, China and Taiwan fear that trusting their counterpart and allowing them to benefit from concessions might trigger greediness and be interpreted as a sign of weakness. Making credible commitments in negotiations regarding unification can be difficult, especially when both sides are not actively seeking a solution to their "one-China" disagreement. As a result, since China and Taiwan are still concerned about the effects of proposing a rapprochement, there have been no major practical stances in recent years. Since neither of the two is prepared to withdraw its claims in the dispute, rapprochement serves merely as a temporary suspension of confrontation to buy time for a reconciliation.

Another obstacle towards finding a solution is the opposed conception of "parity" promoted by both parties, as they emphasize different aspects according to their beliefs (Lin, 2022). In fact, Taiwan requests parity before beginning the negotiations to safeguard its autonomy, while China seeks common adherence to Beijing's "one-China" principle as starting point of any agreement. Finding a deal on the latter concept would be fundamental, since China and Taiwan are reluctant to make one-sided concessions due to possible effects on the perceived international validity of their causes. To be more specific, Taiwan fears that compromising with China could inadvertently promote international recognition

of Beijing's sovereignty claims over the island, potentially reducing political costs for coercive actions. On the other hand, the mainland worries that its concessions could strengthen Taiwan's status as an independent state, negatively highlighting a hypothetical use of force.

The involvement of the United States further complicates the context, as their desire for cross-Strait stability has led to multiple and sometimes inconsistent approaches towards Taiwan's international status. This ambiguity fuels suspicion on both sides, with the island worrying about a fading support, and Beijing raising doubts regarding Washington's real intentions. This element contributes to defining a complex scenario where the balance of power can easily change. The resulting situation is interesting, as China and Taiwan are blocking each other from obtaining positive results, but at the same time they are not willing to open up in order to find a solution.

Undoubtedly, gaining sovereignty over Taiwan would be a great demonstration of power for the Chinese Communist regime, internally and to the international system. The rhetoric of arising from a "century of humiliation" would be enhanced, and the population would trust Xi Jinping and the Party even more. However, if China wants to reach the status of superpower, it is crucial to demonstrate to the international society that the values promoted are in line with those recognized on a global scale, especially the refusal of armed conflicts to resolve disputes. Thus, in order to prevail over rivals, the mainland must ensure that the situation does not escalate and continue with the "peaceful rise" tactic mentioned earlier. In fact, this is the only way to achieve the desired objectives without using military force, which would result in losing all positive relations built up with international society over decades. Moreover, creating an armed conflict with Taiwan would disrupt trade, which is crucial for the production of semiconductors - chips that constantly contribute to the technological progress that has driven Chinese growth in recent years. For this reason, the regime must continue to impose its influence in the area without violating international norms: as Romberg (2003) pointed out,

the real difficulty for Beijing is not achieving unification, but establishing sovereignty over Taiwan. That way, reunification would be handled as an internal matter, altering the perception of an external intervention and demonstrating that China is ready to embrace the superpower status. Conversely, forcing the Taiwanese people to accept a political system totally different from that experienced by the last generations would create discontent and unrest. What is needed is a gradual adaptation that is not perceived as an imposition, just as in the case of Hong Kong, which will be analyzed hereafter.

2.2 Hong Kong and “One Country, Two Systems”

Another security issue concerns the city and special administrative region of Hong Kong. The latter was a colony of the British Empire, ceded by the Qing dynasty after the loss in the First Opium War of 1842. However, to be more precise, the separation from China underwent two stages (So, 2011). In fact, 1842 was only the beginning. Due to its colonial status, the city started to be exploited by the British as a trading post with China and investment hub, but still remained closely linked to Beijing socially and economically. In fact, the majority of its population was originally from South China, and the absence of a formal border facilitated the free movement of mainland Chinese driven by trade opportunities and the city's stability during times of conflict. Nevertheless, migrants kept viewing Hong Kong only as a transient place, rather than a permanent home. The Chinese Communist Revolution in 1949 completely changed the situation, heavily transforming the integration process. Over a million Chinese refugees - unable to return to the mainland - entered Hong Kong, and this forced the colonial state to implement measures controlling their influx. Consequently, the separation

between the city and Beijing deepened politically, economically, socially, and culturally. China had to wait almost 50 years before reobtaining Hong Kong.

Thus, in 1997 the area was transferred back to the People's Republic of China from the United Kingdom, formalizing the annexation to Chinese territory. However, since the population of the city was not ready for such sudden change - considering the period of more than a hundred years under direct Western influence - it was given the possibility to keep a separate political and economic system from the mainland, following the principle of "One Country, Two Systems" (So, 2011). With this policy, China ensured that Hong Kong would function as a Special Administrative Region (SAR) keeping its capitalist system detached from the mainland's communist one. Moreover, the governors of the city could only be natives or long-term residents - enjoying a substantial degree of autonomy - elected by inhabitants, and this status quo was promised to remain unchanged for the following 50 years. Finally, Hong Kong was guaranteed to manage its economic, cultural and political matters, retaining control over its police and armed forces, currency, social practices and institutions. It would establish and enforce its own laws through an independent legal system, and interference in the region's affairs by Beijing and other local governments was limited to foreign diplomacy. In the initial years of Hong Kong's SAR history, the Chinese government respected the "One Country, Two Systems" policy, adopting a non-interference approach by avoiding any involvement in internal matters.

Nevertheless, while this innovative compromise seemed to be working smoothly, an upcoming crisis was about to bring important changes. Indeed, in 2003 the outbreak of a SARS epidemic heavily impacted Hong Kong's trading system and discouraged tourists from visiting the region, creating widespread economic difficulties. Moreover, the government decided to enact Article 23, whose aim was to avoid subversive acts from Beijing. However, since it inherently had negative implications for professionals and civil liberties, an estimated 500.000 people demonstrated because worried for their rights and freedom. This

series of protests was one of the largest in the history of the city, and inevitably led to a new integration phase with the mainland.

As a consequence, Beijing decided to take the initiative to resolve the situation. Shortly thereafter, a formal process was initiated to accelerate Hong Kong's integration with China, entailing the signing of formal agreements between the two governments: the first was called “Individual Traveller’s Scheme”, and it allowed residents from nine Chinese provinces to visit Hong Kong, simplifying the previous process and revitalizing the tourist industry; then, the “Closer Economic Participation Arrangement” (CEPA) initially opened the mainland market to certain manufacturing products, and later added various types of services including higher education (So, 2011). These measures proved Beijing's determined effort to increase its influence, highlighting a shift away from the emphasis on “Two Systems” and back towards the direction of “One Country”.

Although protests in the initial years of Chinese sovereignty over Hong Kong could be expected due to transitional uncertainties, the area remained unstable even afterwards. The policy of “One Country, Two Systems” still represented the base for controversies as its conception was intended differently: Hong Kong kept highlighting the importance of freedom and democracy, while China slowly began to impose decisions on the region. The latter scenario led to another uprising in 2014 - often referred to as the Umbrella Revolution – that took place following intense discussions on the electoral reform of the city’s Chief Executive election. The National People’s Congress (NPC) ruling in 2007 allowed the potential introduction of universal suffrage for the 2017 Chief Executive election (Yuen, 2015). However, the candidates had to be selected by a nominating committee to avoid facing any forces opposing the central government. Therefore, concerns emerged over the nomination process due to fears of a prepared candidate list favoring Beijing's preferences. The NPC's decision in August 2014, mandating the formation of the nominating committee, confirmed these preoccupations and

intensified tensions. Subsequently, spontaneous events led to an improvised mass protest and a 79-day occupation of various public sites.

The events described show that the principle of “One Country, Two Systems” hid a series of problems. According to Yuen (2015), the mainland views Hong Kong matters - including elections - through a broad conception of national security interest, potentially redefined to suit central government needs. In contrast, Hong Kongers perceive the policy as a guarantee of high autonomy, allowing them to run local affairs independently. Since the approach is so uncompromising and the Chinese regime firmly holds its position when confronted on this type of topics, street demonstrations remain the most direct option to express dissent. Despite the Umbrella Revolution not being able to resolve underlying problems, the 79-day occupation transformed Hong Kong politics by showing the younger generation its capacity to become more politically active, employing original and radical means of protest to demand universal suffrage and broader autonomy.

Disputes did not end after 2014. Indeed, five years later more demonstrations took place, this time against the proposed amendment of the law on extradition of fugitives to countries with which Hong Kong has no extradition agreements, such as the mainland and Taiwan. The protests arose out of fears that such legislation would violate the dividing line between the juridical systems of China and Hong Kong – namely the “One Country, Two Systems” policy - subjecting the residents of the latter and those passing through the city to the *de facto* jurisdiction of courts controlled by the Chinese Communist Party (Purbrick, 2019). In particular, the Democratic Party pointed out that changing the law might result in the facilitation of returning political dissidents to the mainland. The main concern revolved exactly around this issue, and the prevailing skepticism regarded the assurance of a fair trial. This matter brought together individuals from various backgrounds, including democrats, business figures, and in general the majority of Hong Kongers.

A protracted sequence of widespread public demonstrations emerged before the Bill's presentation in the Legislative Council on 12 June. The protests started with approximately 10,000 participants at the end of March and peaked officially at hundreds of thousands – although the organizers registered more than a million people – by 9 June, just three days before the tabling of the amendment. On the latter day, Legislative Council officials declared a postponement of the Bill reading to a later date because protestants had surrounded the government complex and blocked the access for legislators and staff. Despite the success obtained, a faction of a few hundred violent individuals broke into the Legislative Council compound. This led to a resolute response from the police, who aimed to disperse the crowd. While doing that, the police engaged with peaceful protestants, distinct from the faction attempting to breach the Legislative Council. The use of force against the entire crowd, encompassing tens of thousands and not just the few hundred violent individuals, left many in Hong Kong deeply unsettled. The government's attempts to de-escalate the crisis proved unsuccessful, culminating in the announcement on 14 June that the Bill would be indefinitely postponed. Nonetheless, the frequency of violent incidents continued to rise each week. Moreover, public confidence in the sincerity of the Chief Executive and her key officials kept eroding due to their refusal to withdraw the Bill.

While the latter represented the trigger for protests, underlying issues in Hong Kong were the true base of public unrest (Purbrick, 2019). Economic inequality had worsened, with a growing low-income segment not reaping the benefits of the city's economic growth. Additionally, society demanded respect for the "One Country, Two Systems" framework, due to the widespread belief that China's economic development was not matched by the necessary protection of individual rights. This discrepancy fueled skepticism and mistrust toward the PRC government. Therefore, the prospect of extraditing Hong Kong residents to the mainland, where the legal system does not provide the same checks and balances guaranteed in the region, intensified these fears.

Interpreting China's position, reaching national unification is the priority – even when the risk of creating instability is high (Wong & Xiao, 2018). Clearly, agreements and policies must be respected, otherwise the population would completely lose trust in the institutions. However, as stated previously, the regime has never lost the focus on its main objectives and has been evidently intensifying political control while fostering economic dependence to completely assimilate Hong Kong into China. For this reason, over the past two decades the city has been shaken by the multiple rounds of protests reported, with people worried for the solidity of the “One Country, Two Systems” policy. Nevertheless, the mainland is still including Hong Kong in regional projects and pushing for an active participation in the Belt and Road Initiative as significant international financial actor.

As reported by Wong and Xiao (2018), findings demonstrate that China has successfully led Hong Kong to a condition of economic dependence from the beginning of the 1990s until at least 2016, with 77% of Hong Kong tourists coming from the mainland and significant proportions of imports, exports, and outward direct investments tied to Beijing. Consequently, any major policy change in China would impact the region, meaning that the promised independence is very weak. This vulnerability has intensified as Hong Kong's share in China's economy has decreased from 20% in 1997 to less than 3% in 2016. Considering that the southern economic region of the mainland presents optimal economic growth rates, the gap with Hong Kong may become so narrow that maintaining the political boundaries delineating “One Country, Two Systems” might become worthless, other than impractical. Despite the policy lasting another 30 years, once this economic convergence is achieved, the original mission of the Special Administrative Region - such as serving as a model for Taiwan and a global watershed - may be considered accomplished by the central government.

While representing a turning point, this scenario would not be surprising, as the original intent of the “One Country, Two Systems” policy was to restore Chinese

sovereignty over former European colonies while guaranteeing their prosperity. Given China's sustained and notable economic growth, the only uncertainty lies in the timeline required for full integration, which may be obtained even before 2047. Additionally, uncertainties persist regarding the potential political and institutional transformation of Hong Kong. The population of the city – as proved by the numerous protests analyzed – is worried for the safeguard of civil liberties. In this sense, the mainland has a very difficult task: proving that complete control by the regime will not lead to negative changes, but rather to a win-win situation for both sides.

As of today, Beijing is playing an important role in the area by proposing numerous infrastructure initiatives to enhance Hong Kong's role as a crucial logistics hub for southern China, fostering employment opportunities in multiple sectors. Simultaneously, there is a noticeable transformation in the region's identity. Influenced by patriotic campaigns from pro-Beijing groups and increasing socio-economic integration, a growing number of people now identify themselves as "Chinese" rather than "Hong Kong Chinese". This shift is also reflected in the media, with a more favorable portrayal of the mainland and a significant reduction in criticisms directed at the communist regime compared to the first years after 1997.

Therefore, after going through so many crises, it seems that the “One Country” position is gaining momentum as Hong Kong is moving closer to a symmetrical integration. Of course, there will still be obstacles ahead, but the social, economic and political foundations appear firmly laid down, to the point that this trend is unlikely to reverse. The success of the unification is critical because the “One Country, Two Systems” policy could then be used as a model to attract Taiwan to the negotiation table. In addition, Hong Kong's proximity to the mainland means it cannot survive by being completely cut off. This has considerably simplified the unification issue because, unlike Taiwan, any independence movement begins from a position of disadvantage.

Finally, the framework of “One Country, Two Systems” has provided a firm institutional foundation for the integration process. The main controversies arose when Hong Kong clearly started to move closer to the pole of “One Country” and diverge from “Two Systems”, but despite periods of crisis China has always managed to keep control of any circumstance within its special administrative region. Therefore, in the future it will have to handle potential similar situations in the best possible way, avoiding rushed decisions that are not in line with previous agreements. If it succeeds in doing so, it could even achieve complete integration of Hong Kong before the planned timetable. Obtaining such positive result would be a demonstration to the international system that China is a strong country, capable of completing even the most difficult projects, and that it is still expanding. In addition, the integration of Hong Kong could lead the majority of Taiwan's population to trust the “One Country, Two Systems” policy, representing a crucial turning point for the reunification of the mainland and a major success against the United States. Thus, the achievement of superpower status would be even closer.

2.3 Zero-Covid policy

One of the most recent security issues that have shaken China is related to the Covid-19 pandemic. Indeed, the first cases of infection were discovered in the mainland and the virus has posed various challenges for the country. First, during the early phases, transmission across borders was very difficult to contain due to China being a major global economic hub with extensive international connectivity. The persistent trades, tourism and travel networks further facilitated this process, causing polemics against the Chinese authorities for their apparent negligence. Moreover, the mainland's high population density, particularly in urban centers, exacerbated the impact of the virus. Urban areas – often combined with poor hygiene conditions - provided an environment conducive to its rapid spread, requesting stringent measures of control that were not taken immediately.

The initial stages of the pandemic were also marked by challenges related to information flow and transparency. Early on, there were concerns about the accuracy and honesty of numbers shared by Chinese governmental spheres, for example about the true ratio between infections and deaths. This lack of transparency hindered global efforts to comprehend and respond effectively to the evolving situation, although the following period of extreme difficulty partly deflected the attention from such negative behavior.

Finally, the Covid-19 pandemic triggered disruptions in China's economic activities, ranging from manufacturing slowdowns to global supply chains (Dhar, 2020). Indeed, lockdowns and quarantine measures led to forced closures of factories and limitations on production capacities. These caused a pronounced decline in output that impacted various sectors. Among the latter, the tourist one was severely affected due to restrictions on travelling and public gatherings. Consequently, many industries related to multiple job categories experienced substantial contractions, leading to a wave of unemployment and reduced income that inevitably increased social and economic inequalities.

Although the first months of 2020 were the period in which Chinese authorities struggled the most to find solutions to the country's numerous health, economic and social complications, the following years were also very challenging. Indeed, in response to the pandemic, the mainland government decided to adopt a public health policy called “Zero-Covid” with the aim of eliminating local transmission of the virus. More specifically, it provided the implementation of measures including vaccination, contact tracing, automatic quarantine after returning from abroad, large-scale testing and lockdowns (An et al., 2021). The primary objective of this approach was to return to a state of zero new infections, enabling the resumption of regular economic and social activities. Furthermore, the Zero-Covid strategy comprised two essential stages: an initial suppression phase aimed at locally eliminating the virus through rigorous limitations and public health actions, followed by a prolonged period of containment. During the latter, economic and social activities would resume, accompanied by ongoing prevention measures to suppress any emerging outbreaks before they could spread extensively.

Many experts have analyzed the different approaches the government may have taken, and the majority of them concluded that relying on “elimination” of the virus was the most fitting choice for China (Oliu-Barton et al., 2021). According to their studies, adopting extreme measures to immediately control and stop the pandemic from spreading generally represents the most effective method. This is mainly due to the fact that heavily sacrificing social interactions for a certain period of time ensures a sharper recovery of the healthcare system, and the economy is able to return to optimal levels more rapidly. In this regard, scientists also provide a counter argument against criticism of the restrictions of civil liberties. In fact, the Zero-Covid approach requires a solid effort by the population, which is generally deprived of the right to go outside and interact until the situation has improved. Whereas it may appear excessive, this measure ensures a quicker and more stable recovery, meaning that in the future people will not have to withstand the same sacrifices again. Therefore, the “elimination” framework

evidently relies on the long-term idea of returning to a normal social and economic environment, while trying to limit the number of deaths.

An interesting factor to analyze is the clear difference that emerges between Beijing and the Western countries even in this instance. In fact, China and many neighboring areas - including Hong Kong and Taiwan - have preferred the approach described, that was very strict especially from a social point of view, with the population often having to give up its freedom to prioritize the common good and protection of individuals. On the other hand, the majority of Western countries preferred adopting a “mitigation” strategy, aimed at controlling the escalation of the epidemic and preventing the overload of the healthcare system, while acknowledging a certain degree of ongoing viral transmission within the population (Oliu-Barton et al., 2021). What stands out from the decision to adopt contrasting strategies is, once again, the different culture and mentality of two opposing areas of the world: on one side, the need to preserve - as far as possible - individual freedom, even to the detriment of the safety of those mostly at risk; on the other, the desire to demonstrate that even in case of unpredictable events, the government is ready to implement any measure in order to maintain control and return, after an initial period of sacrifices from the community, to a situation of normal social and economic activity. In the end, however, the results are very clear, proving that the Zero-Covid policy has been able to guarantee extremely low death rates (Oliu-Barton et al., 2021).

Although the latter procedure had proved effective, the presence of virus variants - such as those known under the names “Omicron” and “Delta” – caused new enormous difficulties in early 2022. While about 80 million people in China were locked down due to the chance of a new major outbreak, the autonomous region of Hong Kong saw a huge rise in the ratio of deaths for population size, leading critics to define the Zero-Covid strategy a failure (Taylor, 2022). However, each case must be analyzed in its particularities, and with Hong Kong the main obstacle was low adherence to the vaccination program. Indeed, since the vaccines

were almost all produced in the mainland, various sections of the city's population refused inoculation due to mistrust. This clarification is important, as it shows that in reality the Zero-Covid policy had not been followed completely, since according to studies 40% of the inhabitants of the autonomous region were still not fully vaccinated in March 2022 (Taylor, 2022). Thus, the initial analysis stating that China rightfully chose the most effective approach to counter the pandemic is confirmed. On the contrary, the weak points that Beijing needs to address are the mistrust showed by Hong Kong citizens and making sure that mainland inhabitants do not get overwhelmed by the strict social measures.

In chronological terms, the latter is probably the most recent security issue directly concerning China. In fact, whereas the Zero-Covid policy in 2022 provided many benefits regarding the country's recovery, it also led to a large wave of social protests demanding the regime to relax restrictive measures (Nordin, 2023). From the last days of November 2022, dissent against controls rapidly expanded, evolving into broader expressions of public discontent including opposition to censorship. Authorities intensified efforts to soften and disincentive demonstrations, deploying numerous police units to stop and detain protestants. Despite the gradual dispersal of protests, governmental officials soon announced a clear shift in pandemic measures. Therefore, in the final days of December, restrictions were already decreased in numerous major cities and new guidelines were distributed. These introduced more detailed risk categories to minimize the number of people under lockdown, reducing quarantine periods and infection tracing. Moreover, while reaffirming commitment to "Zero-Covid", the new guidelines cautioned against excessive policy measures that could hinder economic and social development, indirectly recognizing that an extremely strict approach was not sustainable anymore.

This particularly intense wave of protests represented a dangerous moment for China's security. The country was already weakened morally and economically by the pandemic, so the presence of this new obstacle was a serious threat for the

regime. Analysts have addressed the demonstrations as unprecedented for their synchronized nature across various cities, devoting major attention to the issue (Davidson, 2022). Moreover, differently from previous similar cases, people also manifested against censorship of their resentment. Indeed, the population was not only forced to accept the restrictive measures imposed by the authorities, but even restrained from expressing its discontent for the current situation on online platforms. At one point, however, the formidable efficacy of Beijing's online moderation encountered the limits of public tolerance. Citizens began to employ creative methods to share videos and posts related to protests, complaining against the decisions of the regime. They advocated for the reinstatement of cinema freedom, unrestricted expression and the return of media and journalism. Concerns also regarded the efficiency of vaccines directly produced in the mainland in comparison to foreign alternatives that the government refrained from importing. As a consequence, more and more people took to the streets to demonstrate, even at the cost of being arrested.

Strictly focusing on the Zero-Covid policy, it may be argued that such strategy is too severe to be protracted for long periods of time. Although the measures demonstrated to have a positive impact on the economy and the healthcare system, they also carried negative consequences impacting mental health. As pointed out previously, this is due to the fact that the Zero-Covid strategy, differently from approaches such as mitigation, aims for total virus elimination. Therefore, while coexistence with the pandemic implies a certain degree of outbreaks tolerance, Zero-Covid does not. Thus, the main limit demonstrated by the policy was sustainability, since the considerable success in the initial phases was questioned by the challenges that arose due to newer variants. Even after that, however, China was able to adapt to the situation and recognize the need to embrace a new plan, which turned out to be efficient once again.

To conclude, the pandemic was a difficult time for the mainland. Firstly, the regime repeatedly risked losing credibility both domestically - with the protests

against the Zero-Covid policy - and internationally - with the numerous criticisms due to alleged falsification and lack of official data. In addition, the virus caused a large number of deaths and temporarily slowed down China's economic growth, which had been going on for more than twenty years. After having overcome initial difficulties, the spread of the "Omicron" variant brought new turmoil within the country, casting doubts on the positive results achieved until that point. Nevertheless, China has been able to take difficult decisions - at times even contrasting with its initial choices - which have reinforced its establishment as one of the most solid and resilient nations in the world. Thus, from originally representing a security issue, in the end the pandemic has contributed to portraying a strong image of the mainland globally, further supporting its move towards achieving superpower status.

III. ONE-CHILD POLICY

3.1 The origins of the policy

In recent decades, China has undergone unprecedented socio-economic transformations, initially presenting itself to the global stage as an emerging economic power with very few possibilities of becoming what it is today. In fact, the country has enjoyed an incredible rise that has gone beyond the mere trading aspect. Nowadays, Beijing is one of the most technologically advanced countries in the world, with a stable political system and numerous infrastructure projects still under development. The mainland also has a deeply rooted culture that is considered among the most fascinating globally. However, despite the remarkable growth and positive results, the demographic challenge casts a shadow on the nation's path towards superpower status. The issues of low fertility rates and population ageing have unfolded as a critical concern, raising questions about the sustainability of China's future and their potential impact on the country's long-term geopolitical, economic and social standing.

More specifically, the demographic problem is heavily related to an initiative that was implemented by Beijing in 1979, namely the “One-Child” policy. The latter was introduced to reduce the country’s population growth and consisted in limiting the majority of families to having a single child. The restrictions were changed to two children in 2015 and three in 2021, however the regime realized their negative impact and decided to completely remove them in the same year. As of today, low fertility rates are perceived domestically and internationally as the biggest obstacle towards China’s achievement of the superpower status.

Nonetheless, due to its incredibly detrimental implications on the mainland, the One-Child policy continues to stand out as one of the most enigmatic initiatives

undertaken by the post-Mao Party-state. Despite extensive attention to its demographic consequences, the origins of this distinctive project remain difficult to locate. However, experts such as Greenhalgh (2005) have been able to reconstruct its history. This is crucial to identify the errors committed and thus enable a more precise analysis of the data that have caused the current low fertility issue. In this sense, a pivotal role was played by a series of population projections formulated by the control theorist Song Jian. Indeed, in western publications he took credit for being the true author of the policy.

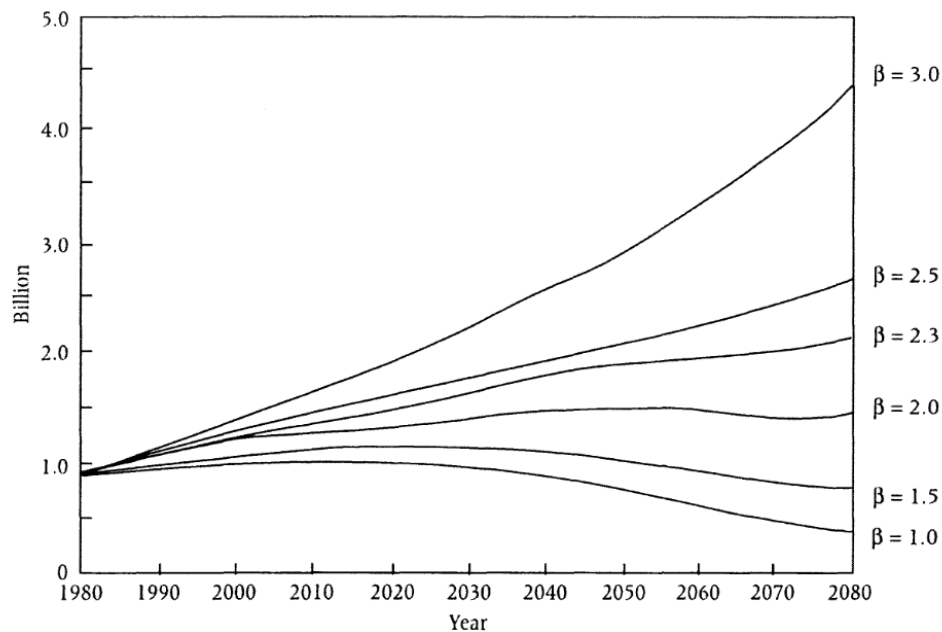
One of the first governors to acknowledge the overpopulation problem was Deng Xiaoping. During 1977-78, he redirected investments away from military research and development to focus on the nation's economic challenges, which represented an immediate concern due to the difficulties created by Mao's Cultural Revolution. Following the latter's death in 1976, governmental authorities began to recognize that the swift growth of a predominantly rural population would interfere with the country's modernization project. Thus, in March 1978 constitutional obligations were established for state-controlled births, while Deng Xiaoping kept insisting on the need to change the situation. However, the pivotal question centered on determining the adequate level of population control.

From the last months of 1973, the "wanxishao" policy had already been producing significant demographic effects following the slogan "one is not few, two are just right, three are too many" (Greenhalgh, 2005). Indeed, it managed to induce a decrease of the total fertility rate from just under six to just under three children per woman during the 1970s. However, data revealed in 1978 indicated an impending baby boom due to large cohorts born during the 1960s. Therefore, the existing limit of two children per couple needed to be restricted even further to curb the growth of China's nearly 1 billion population. Consequently, the new guideline approved by the Central Committee stated "one is best, two at most" (Greenhalgh, 2005). This marked the first official endorsement of one-child families and urged scientists to outline a detailed policy.

However, in late 1950s population studies were abolished, and prominent advocates were silenced and persecuted. Despite the rapid recovery of social scientists' ability to conduct population research, two decades of intellectual isolation and political intimidation left them at a disadvantage in defining a policy for China's population. Either way, the leading group of specialists chosen by the authorities completed the analysis of the available information and confirmed that uncontrolled population growth would continue to push back Beijing's modernization objective. Moreover, they suggested a moderate approach consisting in the elimination of third births and gradual increase of the proportion of first births. According to their perspective - which was supported by the authorities during 1979 - by the end of 1990s the first births in cities should have reached 50%, and only 25% in the villages. Concurrently, Song Jian pursued a divergent approach based on foreign models and the physical science of cybernetics, which was his original area of expertise. His group of scientists redefined China's demographic issue under completely new terms. The results outlined a more urgent problem, a more radical solution, and a more direct counterstrategy compared to previous considerations.

Beijing's demographers initially recognized the potential worrisome nature of future population growth, but the specific details remained unknown. The involvement of Jian's team in the discourse, however, significantly reframed the issue by providing precise numerical projections for the 100-year period from 1980 to 2080, highlighting the rapid and substantial increase in Chinese population numbers. Despite succeeding in the provision of specific information, the problem with Jian's analysis rested on the accuracy of his work. Indeed, it lacked reliability due to the absence of official data on the Chinese population at the time. Moreover, the period covered by his predictions was too broad, since population growth in the distant future can be affected by various unpredictable events. Nonetheless, the scientists were aware of these uncertainties but dismissed them as minor technical problems.

Figure 1: **Future Projected Trends of Population Control**



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The results pointed out by Jian and depicted in Figure 1 (Greenhalgh, 2005) indicated that under the 1975 total fertility rate of 3 children per woman, Chinese population would exceed 4 billion by 2080. A small decrease in numbers would be obtained through the 1978 total fertility rate of 2.3 children per woman, but the trend of continuous growth would persist. The only acceptable total fertility rates were 1.5 and 1.0, as they would lead to stabilization and even decline in population numbers.

These projections particularly concerned Jian's team for the detrimental impact on China's natural resources and environment. The imminent growth of inhabitants was portrayed as an internal threat with implications on the country's ecosystem,

¹ Source: Greenhalgh, S. (2005). Missile Science, Population Science: The Origins of China's One-Child Policy. *The China Quarterly*, 182, 253–276.

Note: β = Total fertility rate.

potentially leading to resource depletion and pollution. The scientists argued that safeguarding nature was fundamental to ensure economic progress. One of the points in favor of a strict demographic policy even posited that being the world's most populous country, the mainland was the main contributor to the global population growth crisis, threatening human survival due to environmental destruction. By controlling population numbers, China would contribute to mitigating a global crisis, positioning itself as a responsible global actor, other than an economic powerhouse.

Thus, in contrast to the social scientific framing of demography proposed by the first group of experts, Jian's militaristic approach portrayed overpopulation as a threat to national security which needed to be faced immediately, even if it required individual interests to be subordinated in favor of common good. His final goal for the project was to determine the fertility trajectory that would best suit China's interests. In order to do that, he employed mathematical models which were virtually identical to those used in missile trajectory calculations. In fact, this was his specific area of specialization, therefore he replicated the notions he already knew and adapted them to demographics, adding economic and ecological assumptions as variables. The application of these techniques led to a target population of 650 to 700 million in 2080, considered ideal by the Jian group. Despite being based on a set of approximations and adjustments between different study fields, this target suggested that China had already reached overpopulation, needing sub-replacement fertility for economic and ecosystem sustainability. Calculations showed that the fertility trajectory should have followed the three crucial steps of rapidly reducing total fertility rate to one child by 1985, maintaining it at that level for several decades, and then gradually raising it to replacement level of 2.1 children per woman.

As mentioned previously, Jian's group of experts heavily relied on foreign models to compare and adjust the parameters used for their own work on the mainland's population. However, in adapting research to the Chinese context, they

made significant modifications. Indeed, the scientists disregarded social acceptability, assuming that Chinese households would surely accept a one child limit. Moreover, they proposed an extremely short period for lowering fertility to its optimal level. Clearly, a decrease of more than 50% of total fertility rate in just 5 years is excessive and may trigger other negative implications.

The implementation of the One-child policy inherently presumed deploying a significant top-down approach, meaning that decisions taken by the authorities would have strongly affected the population. Indeed, by late 1970s, China's policymakers recognized the impracticality of imposing a one-child norm in rural areas. According to Greenhalgh (2005), prior research already highlighted the significance of having at least two children and one son for the survival of peasants, given the organizational structure of rural socioeconomic life. Therefore, recognizing the substantial distance between state directives and peasant necessities, reaching the target of one child per couple would have required a considerable push by the government. The latter needed to be completely committed in order to achieve the objective, organizing an extensive mobilization of resources. However, the One-child policy represented an escalation of such strategy. More specifically, its methods were clearly bound to disregard mass views, create numerous obstacles for the lower classes and turn to coercion, quietly accepted in the interests of common good.

Thus, seeking support from the top, Jian and his team began to actively share their findings until they managed to capture the attention of high-ranking authorities, leading to a series of public and private meetings which obtained significant popular attention. During consultations with government officials – which were kept secret – Jian specifically explained his calculations and even mentioned the potential negative consequences. Although the projections showed that a total fertility rate of 1.5 or even 1.75 children per woman could keep the population below the discussed limit of 1.2 billion Chinese, the final decision was in favor of a 1.0 child policy, as it was assumed that peasants would ask for an

exception of two or more. The short and long-term implications of the policy were also discussed, including societal and economic distortions, coercion and the potential abandonment of newborn girls by parents urgently in need of a son.

This series of meetings, held in an atmosphere of worrying threat to China's future, resulted in a collective agreement on the necessity of a universal One-child policy. Despite awareness of the associated costs, the prevailing majority view considered these concerns secondary when compared to a complete disaster. The Secretariat of the Central Committee endorsed the policy on the 26th of June, and on 25 September, it was publicly announced in an open letter from the Central Committee to all members of the Party and Communist Youth League. According to the final project, the objective was to keep the population at 1.2 billion individuals by the end of the century applying a limit of one child per household. The only exception was for families in situations of considerable struggle, who were allowed a maximum of two children.

Regarding Song Jian, his influence on the adoption of the One-child policy is evident. Although it may be argued that the demographic issue was already a reality before the publication of his work, he played a crucial role in its rapid spread. Through his projections, Jian gave practical demonstration of the problem's urgency and proposed a new approach to demography, turning an apparently complicated matter into something that could be understood by the majority of individuals. Thanks to this peculiar characteristic, the authorities were able to explain the situation to the public and avoid excessive turmoil. Despite his calculations being mainly based on incorrect assumptions, it must also be noted that available data was extremely limited due to Mao's Cultural Revolution and major lack of knowledge concerning the field of demography within the country. Moreover, his experience in the area of military and cybernetics inevitably shaped the policy towards being extremely strict, which is arguably its most evident and important feature when considering how it has evolved until today. Finally, the presence of Song Jian represented a turning point towards decision-making. After

years of uncertainty on the demographic issue, he provided China's leaders with the practical foundation needed for choosing a specific policy direction. This breakthrough offered a solution that relied on the authority of modern science, enabling significant action to control population growth.

On the other hand, the engagement of a scientist from the defense sector in social policymaking posed inherent risks. Jian's confidence in his own methods led him to constructing a scientific policy framework on fragile empirical foundations. Furthermore, his assertiveness resulted in a form of scientific imperialism, where he ventured into an unfamiliar social domain applying models from physical science that, while technically efficient, neglected many socio-cultural and political-economic variables.

Within democratic systems, technicist policies are checked by the political process, allowing a range of social and ethical values to influence decision-making. However, late 1970s China lacked the procedural checks and balances necessary for such considerations. Despite the warnings from Chinese social scientists - who lacked the necessary technical abilities and prestige to exert influence - authorities were unable to comprehend the intricacies of science or question its authoritative authors. Consequently, a charismatic policy professional with highly advanced technological skills and knowledge was able to exert an incredible influence over China's population.

In just ten years, the policy's inappropriateness became evident. Indeed, during 1983 policy makers resorted to mass sterilizations and abortions in order to accelerate the process and witness the first results. Enforced with coercion, the big-push solution provided record demographic achievements but inflicted considerable social suffering. The numbers reported 21 million sterilizations and 14 million abortions, while rural life became generally violent and numerous girls of young age were abandoned or killed (Greenhalgh, 2005). Consequent sociopolitical instability and damage to the reputation of the regime prompted a

shift away from the strict approach in 1984 – allowing rural households with a girl to give birth to another individual - while still embracing one-child limit. Finally, during the 1990s, policy effects stood out through reaching historic lows in total fertility rates, which settled between 1.55 and 1.8 children per woman.

In conclusion, while the era of the big push ended shortly thereafter, the belief instilled by Jian and his group of scientists - that population growth represents a concrete threat to the nation's development and global ascent, requiring prevention at almost any cost – still influenced the vision of the authorities for a long period of time. Surprisingly, the main obstacle towards China's contemporary achievement of the superpower status originated more than fifty years ago and was shaped by the theories of a scientist who was not specialized in demography. Despite enforcing a strict approach, the One-child policy did not provide efficient results nor stability. However, by tracing its origins it is possible to locate what mistakes were committed and understand what methods may be implemented by the regime to fix the situation.

3.2 The determinants of China's fertility transition

Before the establishment of the People's Republic of China, precise fertility rates at the provincial level were not made public and therefore remain indeterminate. Nonetheless, an approximate total fertility rate of 5.4 children per woman during the 1940s was estimated based on China's fertility survey data from 1982 (Xizhe, 1989). The following decade even witnessed a further increase - peaking in 1957 - which was primarily attributed to favorable social conditions, improved healthcare, and the ongoing modernization of the country. The period from 1958 to 1963 marked a general fluctuation in fertility within the mainland, directly influenced by the events of the Great Leap Forward. It strongly

declined in the initial stages of the Leap, and then recovered with a compensatory baby boom observed in nearly every province. Thus, in response to such considerable fertility rebound of the early 1960s and the great famine, the Chinese Government initiated a birth control program which demonstrated to be efficient and led to a rapid reduction in urban fertility within a few years.

Nevertheless, since the early 1970s, more robust and effective family-planning measures were implemented against overpopulation, which – as stated previously – had already begun to be perceived as a major issue, until the arrival of the One-child policy. The discourse surrounding the true impact of family-planning programs remains a topic of considerable debate. Indeed, while the majority of experts (Mauldin, 1982) contend that such initiatives exert a significant and independent influence on fertility rates, others such as Handwerker (1986) counterargue that family-planning alone is not enough. Undeniably, taking into consideration the importance placed by Chinese authorities on the One-child policy, the latter stands out as the country's main contributor to the demographic decline.

On the other hand, in order to become effective, population control requires a shift in people's traditional attitudes, transcending mere administrative mandates and economic sanctions. In this sense, Chinese culture emphasizes family and collectivity over individualism, demanding a different approach to fertility transition from that of Western civilizations. This cultural backdrop renders the process more arduous, since personal aspirations often clash with national and societal interests. As a consequence, the government understood the need to assume a leading role in executing the policy and provided intricate incentive and disincentive packages implemented nationwide, coupled with increasing attention on the development of the education system. Despite potential constraints on personal freedom and occasional discontent arising from strict measures, the idea that a smaller population would ultimately benefit the entire nation in the long term was prioritized.

In order to deeply understand the main determinants of China's fertility transition, it is crucial to analyze the impact of elements contributing to the One-child policy. In fact, the latter was able to succeed in its final objective of reducing fertility rates not only due to its strictness, but also because of factors such as institutional changes, cultural shifts and socio-economic conditions. Three key variables – level of education, type of residence and province location - were examined in a fertility survey in 1982, and the results detailed in Table 1 (Xizhe, 1989).

Following Xizhe's reconstruction (1989), women with no education are taken as reference because they present the highest rates, therefore the results are based on their comparison with other groups. After controlling for residence and provincial location, the impact of education on the average total births is evident, as the number of children per woman in all age groups consistently decreases with higher education levels. While there is a small difference between illiterate women and those who received primary education, the gap extends as education rises. Consequently, the "higher" group tends to have less children than others. Data further demonstrate that relative differences between educational groups decrease as women become younger. For instance, the rates of women aged more than 50 who attended junior middle-school education are estimated to be 20 percent lower than those of illiterate women, while the difference between higher education and illiterate rises to 38 percentage points. However, taking into consideration a younger group – namely women aged 40 – these values reduce respectively to 16 and 28 percent. Similar trends are also observed in other age groups. The main cause for this tendency probably lies in the development of family-planning programs in China such as the One-child policy. Indeed, according to a large-scale study of the United Nations reported by Xizhe (1989), the presence of an effective program fosters lower educational differentials since it provides stricter birth control to lower population strata. Therefore, the reason for the observed lower

educational differentials is probably related to family-planning policies, rather than changes in education itself.

In the following group concerning rural and urban types of residence, women living in rural areas represent the basis to compare data, since they account for the highest rates. Here - once again controlling for education and province location - the number of children born to urban women is evidently lower. Moreover, the time trend diverges from that observed for the education variable: while the latter presented smaller gaps the younger the women, rural-urban difference widens, indicating a stronger impact on fertility compared to the effects of education, particularly in younger demographic cohorts. This can be easily demonstrated by considering urban women aged 50+, who are estimated to have 16 percent fewer children than their rural counterparts, while women included in the 35 age group reach 30 percent.

The last variable covers province location, corresponding to the region of China in which women live. As indicated in Table 1, the reference designated are municipalities, the part where – given identical levels of education and place of residence - women tend to exhibit the smallest family size. Here, the values presented refer to five areas of the country, among which East Coast presents the best rates, followed by South and North that share similar situations. Finally, South-west and North-west have the highest number of children per woman. According to these findings, women aged 50 and over show minor differences, the most substantial being 13 percent with southwestern provinces. However, regional discrepancies notably expand as their age decreases. For instance, women's number of children in northwestern provinces within the 35 age group is 71 percent higher than that of women residing in municipalities.

From the results obtained, it can be affirmed that education is a determinant of fertility behavior, albeit with diminishing impact over time. Concurrently, rural-urban disparities and regional distinctions intensified after the implementation of

family-planning programs, proving their enduring significance in shaping fertility patterns.

TABLE 1. Ratios of number of children per woman, considering women with different education, type of residence and province location to reference².

| <i>Variables</i> | <i>Age Groups</i> | | | |
|---|-------------------|-----------|-----------|------------|
| | <i>35</i> | <i>40</i> | <i>45</i> | <i>50+</i> |
| Education: Illiterate as reference | | | | |
| Primary School | 0.95 | 0.93 | 0.91 | 0.92 |
| Junior Middle School | 0.87 | 0.84 | 0.80 | 0.80 |
| Higher | 0.71 | 0.72 | 0.64 | 0.62 |
| Type of Residence: Rural as reference | | | | |
| Urban | 0.70 | 0.72 | 0.75 | 0.84 |
| Province Location: Municipalities as reference | | | | |
| East Coast | 1.17 | 1.14 | 1.10 | 1.02 |
| South | 1.44 | 1.37 | 1.28 | 1.12 |
| North | 1.46 | 1.42 | 1.32 | 1.11 |
| South-west | 1.65 | 1.53 | 1.44 | 1.13 |
| North-west | 1.71 | 1.48 | 1.40 | 1.03 |

Another interesting analysis investigates the effects of occupation by swapping it with the education variable (Xizhe, 1989). Notably, the correlation between occupation and type of residence is more closely aligned than that with education since peasant women reside in rural areas, whereas women with other occupations

² Source: China's 1982 One-Per-Thousand Fertility Survey, contained in: Xizhe, P. (1989). Major Determinants of China's Fertility Transition. *The China Quarterly*, 117, 1-37.

may live both in rural or urban environments. As reported in Table 2 (Xizhe, 1989), the categories used in this specific case are worker, cadre and housewife, while the reference for comparison are peasant women because they clearly have more children than the rest. Surprisingly, the fertility patterns of housewives are generally in line with peasants. In fact, differences remain below 5 percent across all age groups. Workers, on the other hand, approximately have a number of children per woman 10 percent lower than those of peasants, whereas Chinese cadres consistently have the smallest families. Examining temporal trends, it is noteworthy that - when controlling for residence and provincial location - cadres are projected to have 37 percent fewer children than peasants in the 45 age group, but this gap diminishes to 26 percent for the 35 age group. Conversely, differences between workers, housewives and peasants remain relatively constant across cohorts.

Regarding rural-urban and regional differences, the findings already noted in education models present considerable similarities, such as the references taken. Moreover, urban women consistently have fewer children, and the values observed for province location are almost identical. In fact, considering the same occupation and place of residence, women in municipalities and East Coast areas still tend to have fewer children than those residing in other regions of China. Furthermore, women in the northern and southern parts exhibit similar fertility patterns, while the two western groups consistently have higher rates. The time trend dynamics of the residential and locational variables also reveal analogies with data observed in the education model. As occupational differences decrease over time, rural-urban and provincial disparities in fertility increase, highlighting the persistent influence of family-planning programs on fertility patterns.

TABLE 2. Ratios of number of children per woman, considering women with different occupation, type of residence and province location to reference³.

| <i>Variables</i> | <i>Age Groups</i> | | | |
|---|-------------------|-----------|-----------|------------|
| | <i>35</i> | <i>40</i> | <i>45</i> | <i>50+</i> |
| Occupation: Peasant as reference | | | | |
| Worker | 0.89 | 0.88 | 0.86 | 0.89 |
| Cadre | 0.74 | 0.72 | 0.63 | 0.67 |
| Housewife | 1.03 | 0.96 | 1.00 | 0.98 |
| Type of Place: Rural as reference | | | | |
| Urban | 0.71 | 0.76 | 0.80 | 0.84 |
| Province Location: Municipalities as reference | | | | |
| East Coast | 1.21 | 1.14 | 1.13 | 1.03 |
| South | 1.48 | 1.37 | 1.32 | 1.13 |
| North | 1.48 | 1.40 | 1.35 | 1.12 |
| South-west | 1.71 | 1.54 | 1.50 | 1.14 |
| North-west | 1.78 | 1.49 | 1.45 | 1.04 |

Both in case of education and occupation, a section of women – respectively illiterates and peasants – were taken as point of reference. However, considerable efforts have been directed towards the spread of mass education over the past few decades, coinciding with a notable rise in the participation of women in economic activities. In Table 3 (Xizhe, 1989), the analysis is expanded in order to include the categories mentioned – illiterates and peasants. Clearly, the first difference standing out from observing age cohorts is the significant improvement of educational attainment. In fact, illiteracy is firmly reduced among the 35 age group, where only 39 percent of women are reportedly illiterate compared to 87

³ Source: China's 1982 One-Per-Thousand Fertility Survey, contained in: Xizhe, P. (1989). Major Determinants of China's Fertility Transition. *The China Quarterly*, 117, 1-37.

percent in the 50+ cohort. Furthermore, women who received primary school education have increased from 9 percent in the 50+ group to 43 percent in the 35 cohort, marking a substantial achievement in the promotion of mass education.

Conversely, changes in occupational distribution are less pronounced. The proportion of housewives has decreased from 8 percent in the 50+ group to 1 percent in the 35 age cohort, while all other occupations experienced an increase, although extremely limited. Peasants retained their status of largest occupational group, constituting over 80 percent of the total female population and managing even to grow of a few percentage points.

TABLE 3. Percentage of women with different education and occupation levels, type of residence and province location to reference. Illiterates and peasants are included⁴.

| | <i>Age Cohorts</i> | | | |
|----------------------|--------------------|-------|-------|-------|
| | 35 | 40 | 45 | 50+ |
| Educational: | | | | |
| Illiteracy | 39.2 | 54.5 | 71.2 | 87.9 |
| Primary School | 43.6 | 30.1 | 21.4 | 9.5 |
| Junior middle school | 12.9 | 10.1 | 4.3 | 1.5 |
| Higher | 4.3 | 5.3 | 3.1 | 1.1 |
| Total: | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 |
| Occupational: | | | | |
| Peasant | 83.0 | 80.0 | 78.2 | 80.3 |
| Worker | 12.1 | 12.7 | 14.0 | 9.4 |
| Cadre | 3.7 | 5.2 | 4.2 | 1.8 |
| Housewife | 1.2 | 2.1 | 3.6 | 8.5 |
| Total: | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 |

⁴ Source: China's 1982 One-Per-Thousand Fertility Survey, contained in: Xizhe, P. (1989). Major Determinants of China's Fertility Transition. *The China Quarterly*, 117, 1-37.

As demonstrated, in an approximate span of time of 15 years – from 50+ to 35 – the general educational situation had improved. The same cannot be affirmed for occupation, where progress was still minimal. By regarding the 50+ cohort as reference, in Table 4 (Xizhe, 1989) these alterations in educational distribution across China turn out to reduce overall fertility by 7.3 percent for the 35 cohort, which represents the most substantial achievement. Interestingly, these figures appear relatively small when compared to the massive fertility decline that took place in the mainland. The reason for this is that the main improvement in women's education regarded primary schooling. As outlined in Table 1, the difference in number of children per woman between those who attended primary education and those who did not, accounts for less than 10 percentage points. Therefore, this improvement is not as impactful as it may appear in the first stance. Considering regional differences, the influence of distributional change is most significant in municipalities, where progress in education alone leads to a 12 percent reduction in overall fertility. On the other hand, improvements in the South-west result in only a 4 percent decline, while in the North and North-west parts of China they are relatively greater than in the South, which accounts for 5 percent.

The analysis further indicates that changing occupational distribution had minimal impact on reducing overall fertility, potentially due to strict government control not enabling major variations in this sense. The only areas presenting values that exceed 1 percent decreases are municipalities and North-west, that respectively show 3 and 5 percent reductions.

TABLE 4. Impact of the observed changes in population composition on the number of children per woman⁵.

| | <i>Educational</i> | | | <i>Occupational</i> | | |
|----------------|--------------------|-----------|-----------|---------------------|-----------|-----------|
| | <i>35</i> | <i>40</i> | <i>45</i> | <i>35</i> | <i>40</i> | <i>45</i> |
| Municipalities | 12.4 | 13.2 | 7.9 | 3.4 | 5.8 | 4.3 |
| East Coast | 6.3 | 5.4 | 2.0 | 1.2 | 1.2 | 1.3 |
| South | 5.1 | 3.6 | 1.5 | 0.3 | 0.6 | 0.3 |
| North | 7.6 | 7.3 | 3.6 | 0.9 | 2.7 | 2.7 |
| South-west | 4.4 | 3.0 | 0.5 | 0.7 | 0.7 | 0.4 |
| North-west | 7.8 | 7.1 | 2.3 | 4.9 | 4.8 | 2.5 |
| China Total: | 7.3 | 6.6 | 3.0 | 1.6 | 2.3 | 1.8 |

To summarize, while educational and occupational differences play a role in comprehending the fertility behavior of Chinese women, their direct impact on reducing fertility levels appears to be moderate. The strong decline in China's fertility is unlikely to be primarily attributed to mass education or occupational mobility, but rather stems from broader shifts in society and overarching economic attitudes that were connected to the implementation of programs such as the One-child policy.

Having pointed out these crucial elements, it is also important to mention other factors which contributed significantly to higher fertility rates in rural areas and among peasants. Indeed, in order to explain fertility differentials across diverse social strata, exploring the reasons for childbearing is essential. Chinese cultural

⁵ Source: China's 1982 One-Per-Thousand Fertility Survey, contained in: Xizhe, P. (1989). Major Determinants of China's Fertility Transition. *The China Quarterly*, 117, 1-37.

Note: The 50+ cohort is taken as the standard.

values embedded in traditions, such as early marriage and large families, are intricately linked to concepts such as family roles, self-fulfillment, fortune and fate. Because of the latter, in the past having multiple sons symbolized being blessed and a sort of reward for good moral conduct. On the contrary, having no son was perceived as a form of punishment. Another traditional motive was having a son in hopes that he would increase familiar wealth and honor. Despite the government's efforts since 1949, these beliefs persisted, especially among peasants. Clearly, these are ancient practices which slowly disappeared with modernization, although at the time they exerted substantial influence in rural areas and among households with low educational levels.

Nevertheless, it is crucial to note that peasants were not inclined to have more children solely due to traditions or ignorance. Considering more pragmatic aspects, Xizhe (1989) reports that the estimated cost of raising a child to working age was about 7000 yuan in cities and 1600 in rural areas. Residential disparities are evident. In addition, childbearing in rural areas with minimal demands could amount to even lower total costs, since the individual would probably contribute to alleviating family expenses already at a young age. Conversely, urban households generally invested more time, energy and earnings on education for their children. More specifically, the latter habit may be a consequence of the One-child policy, as it posed attention on fewer but better children, fostering high spending. Moreover, as mentioned previously, children in rural areas became economically productive at an early age, offsetting the economic burden. Total labor force continued to play a pivotal role in determining family income, particularly with the economic reforms of late 1970s. Surprisingly, the economic benefits of having a child in rural areas probably exceeded costs – whereas in urban areas financial support from sons began only after graduating from school. Finally, concerns about old age further motivated fertility, particularly in less developed countries such as China at the time. According to a survey carried out in Hubei in 1982 and analyzed by Xizhe (1989), more than 50 percent of interviewees decided

to give birth to sons to be supported when growing old. This happened especially in rural areas, where social welfare and retirement schemes were not fully developed, and individuals had to rely on their adult children.

In conclusion, the results obtained by China's fertility transition were possible not only thanks to the One-child policy, but also through multiple determinants such as socio-economic conditions and institutional changes. Despite clear difficulties in modifying living standards and cultural traditions, the country has managed to alter public attitudes towards marriage and childbearing, achieving a significant reduction in population growth. Family-planning programs such as the One-child policy were strongly supported by Chinese leaders, in fact they stand out as crucial drivers of the rapid decline in fertility rates. However, diminishing the traditional weight of family and kinship on economic processes, education and individual life played a key role in nationwide implantation of the policies. Women have experienced considerable emancipation, actively participating in socio-political affairs, and notable progress has been made in reducing mortality, creating an environment conducive to the success of the objectives proposed. The fertility differentials and variables examined have demonstrated that education and occupation have had a moderate impact on reducing fertility levels, whereas broader changes in society and economy were fundamental for an efficient spread of the policies. Indeed, the dismissal of crucial determinants – such as ancient traditions and beliefs - mentioned in this analysis supported the fundamental effort displayed by Chinese authorities through the One-child policy. Therefore, economic development reshaped the habits concerning family and childbearing, with implications that were demonstrated mostly in the long-term. On the other hand, the One-child policy influenced the fertility behavior of Chinese women especially in the beginning, when a considerable push by the government was needed to revolutionize the stagnating situation of the country.

3.3 The role of the economy on China's fertility transition: a comparison with other countries

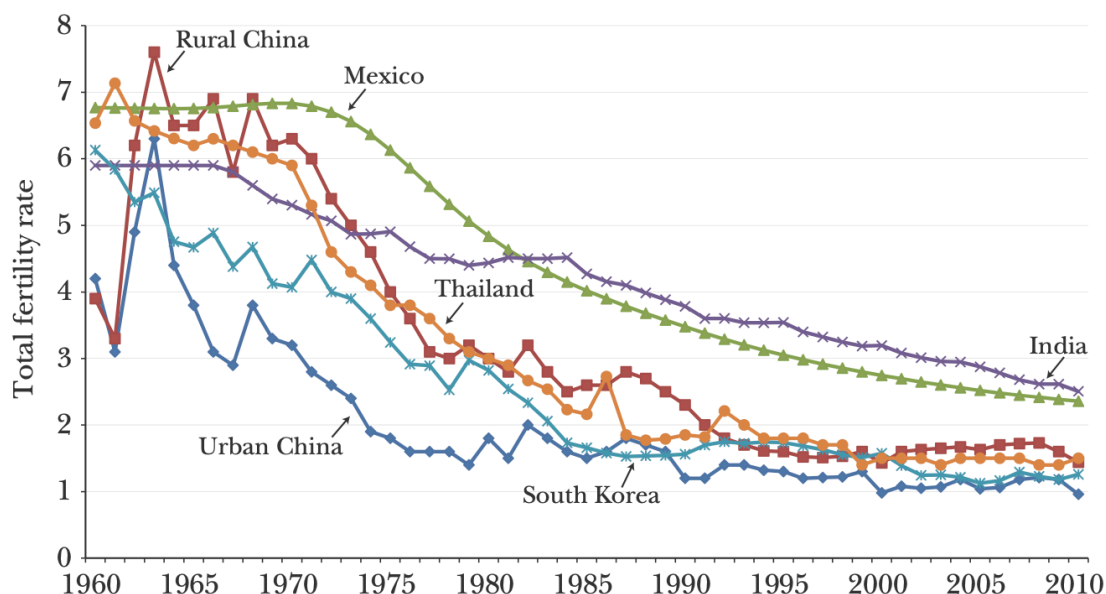
After having pointed out how and to what extent the One-child policy has really impacted China's fertility transition, it is possible to compare the latter with other developing countries which also witnessed high fertility rates during the 1960s. This investigation, carried out by Zhang (2017) results useful to provide further valuable insights into the timing and pace of this phenomenon. As shown in Figure 2 (Zhang, 2017), total fertility rates from 1960 to 2010 are presented for rural China, urban China, and a comparative group comprehending Mexico, South Korea, Thailand and India. Despite not implementing a compulsory population control program of the same level as China's One-child policy, all these nations experienced rapid declines in fertility post-1970.

More specifically, South Korea and Thailand enjoyed sustained economic growth rates after 1970 and introduced voluntary family planning programs. They also exhibited slower declines in fertility rates during the 1960s and 1970s compared to urban China, but reached similarly low levels by 2010. Notably, Thailand shared fertility and GDP per capita levels close to China's by 2010. Even Mexico, despite a less strict family planning campaign, came across low fertility rates by the same year. Combining these values with the determinants observed previously, economic development evidently emerges as a pivotal driving factor of fertility decline.

In the case of India, in 1978 its level of progress was similar to that of China, although it did not embrace family planning programs comparable to the mainland's. Moreover, its economy was still behind South Korea's and Thailand. However, the graph shows that even India underwent a decline in fertility, even if slower than the majority of other Asian countries.

It is not a surprise that rural and urban China are divided in Figure 2. Indeed, the areas are very different not only in the rates displayed, but also in their economic and cultural paths, which were discussed before. One feature in common is their total fertility rate in 1960, that is extremely low compared to the other nations analyzed. This feature can be attributed to the Great Famine occurred in that period of time. The terrible living conditions of those years inevitably impacted the possibility to procreate, but also posed the premises for the fertility rebound that followed. After a decade of extremely high fertility rates – peaking at 7.5 children per woman in rural China in 1964 – they began to constantly decrease in both areas of the mainland, reaching 1.55 and 2.97 respectively in urban and rural China. The issuing of the One-child policy in 1979 exacerbated this decline, although since the early 1990s total fertility rates finally stabilized under replacement level. Once again, this element proves that the policy had a stronger effect in the short term.

FIGURE 2. Total fertility rates for Rural and Urban China and four selected countries (1960-2010)⁶.

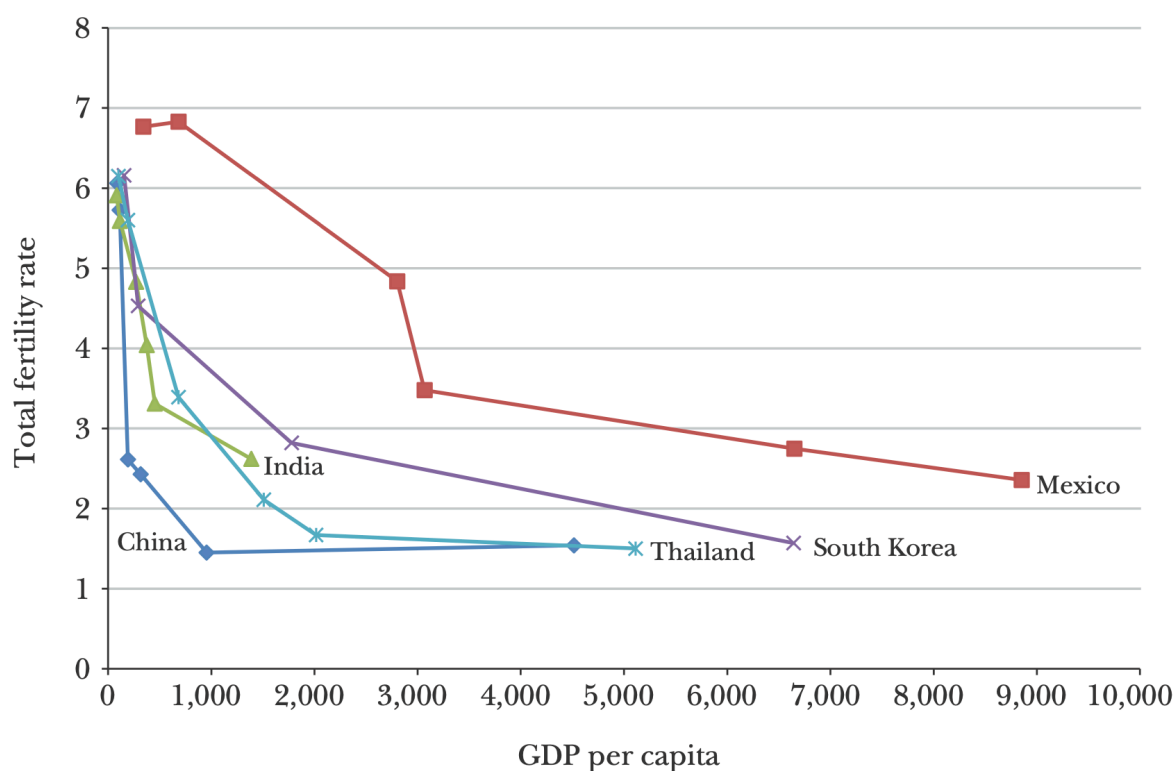


Additionally, economic growth is confirmed to play an important role on fertility decline, as already suggested in previous paragraphs. Figure 3 (Zhang, 2017) demonstrates this by combining each country's total fertility rate with GDP per capita, keeping 1960-2010 as reference period and displaying decadal results. Clearly, there is a negative correlation between total fertility rates and GDP per capita, with fertility rates of China, India, Thailand and South Korea declining before GDP per capita would be able to reach 3,000. Mauldin's theory (1982), according to which family planning programs mainly had the role of decreasing fertility rates before the countries developed a firm economic base, is validated by these data. Mexico represents a more particular case because it required more time

⁶ Source: Zhang, J. (2017). The evolution of China's One-child policy and its effects on family outcomes. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 31(1), 141-160.

to develop the same levels of fertility decline, however it did not implement the same strict programs of the other countries.

FIGURE 3. Total fertility rates and GDP per capita for China and four selected countries (1960-2010)⁷.



⁷ Source: Zhang, J. (2017). The evolution of China's One-child policy and its effects on family outcomes. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 31(1), 141-160.

Note: The figure plots each country's total fertility rate against its real GDP per capita, showing decadal points from 1960 to 2010. Each point represents, from left to right, the total fertility rate and GDP per capita of each country in 1960 (for China 1962 was chosen instead of 1960 to avoid the unusual famine effect in China), 1970, 1980, 1990, 2000, and 2010.

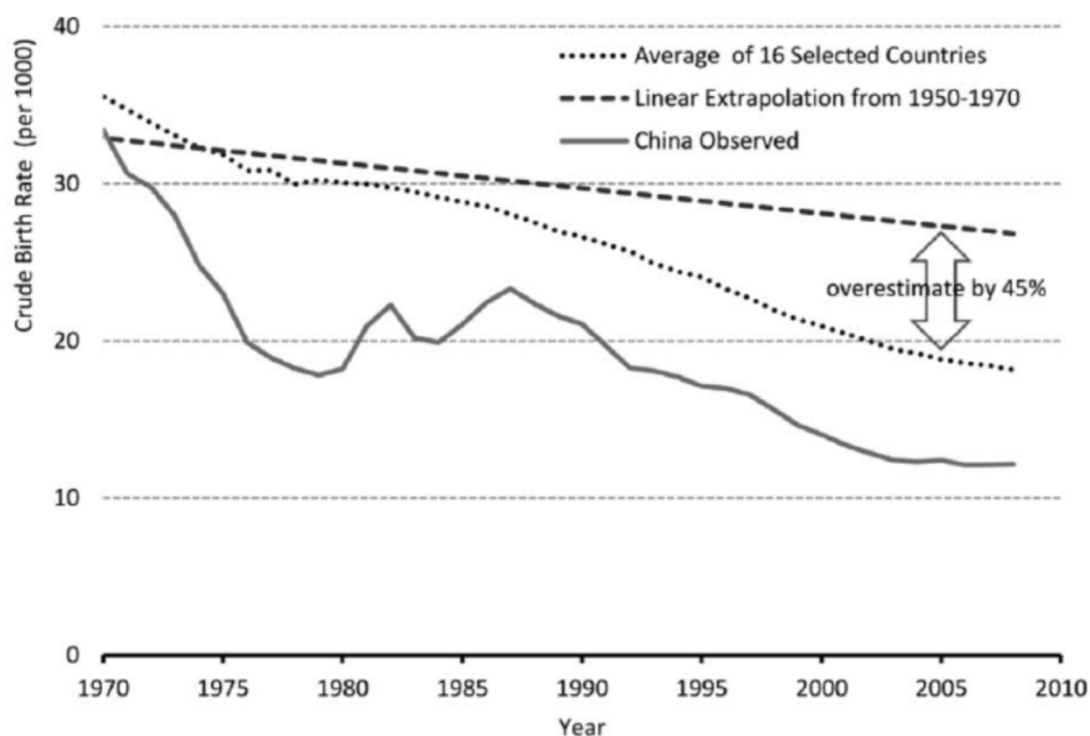
In conclusion, these graphs demonstrate that the One-child policy, often denounced as an extremely intrusive campaign which caused today's complicated situation of low fertility, in reality only contributed to a scenario which was already worrying. Surely, it obstructed any possibility to change the negative trend, but the numbers point out that the most intense decline in fertility took place during the 1970s, before its introduction. Therefore, economic development is confirmed as a crucial factor for the demographic development of the country. On the contrary, the real difficulty concerning the One-child policy is that it fostered the decrease from 2.8 to 1.8 children per woman, pushing the rates below replacement level. Without the implementation of such strict program, nowadays the mainland could be in a more favorable condition.

Another interesting analysis drawing attention on the role of economic development is proposed by Whyte et al. (2015). According to their study, the myth spread by the Chinese government that the One-child policy prevented about 400 million births solely because of its strictness is false. Indeed, economy was an important factor that contributed to the endorsement of the project and its progress over time. As already demonstrated in Figure 2, total fertility rates had experienced a significant reduction in the 1970s, therefore the embracement of the One-child policy in 1979 may appear controversial at first. However, the urgency perceived by Chinese authorities to increase per capita economic growth rates led the regime to launch an even more restrictive birth control program than that of the previous decade. Thus, the economic conditions of the country constituted one of the driving factors of the policy, and also influenced its development throughout the years.

Nonetheless, Chinese officials supported the program by publicly claiming the latter's crucial role in preventing overpopulation and contributing to global well-being. However, the basis for these statements originated from the results of an incorrect study, depicted in Figure 4 (Whyte et al., 2015). Essentially, the problem with the graph relies in the use of a straight line based on adjusted crude birth rates

to display the fertility trend between 1950 and 1970. In fact, this line was extended forward into later years to predict China's fertility in the absence of birth planning policies. According to the projection, the mainland's crude birth rate under no demographic campaign would have been 29.7 in 1990, and 28.4 in 1998. On the contrary, the birth rates registered officially for these years were much lower, as demonstrated by the bottom line in the graph. The authors of the work concluded that the difference between the first and second line consisted in the number of births prevented thanks to the One-child policy. Following their estimates, it amounted to 338 million individuals. The latter approximation was subsequently inflated to 400 million children to highlight the importance of fertility programs even more.

FIGURE 4. Calculations leading to the false belief of 400 million births prevented⁸.



This approach combines three key mistakes that the Chinese government overlooked. The first is portraying a hypothetical scenario contradicting the scientific principle of reporting facts objectively, which is particularly crucial in the demographic field. Moreover, the decline in fertility that would have taken place in absence of birth planning policies is underestimated. In fact, economic development would have inevitably impacted crude birth rates, even with no specific campaign. Therefore, the trajectory of the top line in Figure 4 is undoubtedly wrong. This graph also provides a comparison with other countries –

⁸ Source: Whyte, M. K., Feng, W., & Cai, Y. (2015). Challenging myths about China's One-Child policy. *The China Journal*, 74, 144–159.

Note: The 16 countries are Albania, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Jamaica, North Korea, South Korea, Lebanon, Malaysia, Panama, Paraguay, South Africa, Thailand, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Venezuela.

singularly reported in Table 5 (Feng, 2012) - having similar birth rates in the 1970s, represented by the middle line. Precisely sixteen nations shared crude birth rates very close to China, with an average 35.6 live births per thousand people in 1970. This value decreased to 26.6 in 1990 and later 22.0 in 1998, clearly below the predictions advanced for China, which were indeed wrong. The proportion of the mistake can be highlighted even more through a rapid analysis of the mainland's predicted birth rates: 17 percent higher than the average of the other countries in 1990, 29 percent in 1998 and 45 in 2005. Consequently, the estimates for total births prevented – amounting to 400 million – is a clear overstatement.

TABLE 5. Comparison of birth rates among sixteen selected countries (1970-1990-1998)⁹.

| Country | Births per 1,000 population | | |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------------|------|------|
| | 1970 | 1990 | 1998 |
| South Korea | 31.2 | 15.4 | 13.8 |
| Costa Rica | 32.8 | 27.0 | 21.2 |
| Albania | 33.0 | 24.3 | 18.6 |
| Lebanon | 33.0 | 25.7 | 21.9 |
| Jamaica | 34.4 | 25.2 | 22.2 |
| North Korea | 34.6 | 20.6 | 17.9 |
| Brazil | 35.0 | 24.2 | 21.4 |
| Uzbekistan | 36.5 | 33.7 | 23.4 |
| Malaysia | 36.6 | 30.4 | 24.3 |
| Thailand | 37.0 | 19.7 | 16.4 |
| Venezuela | 37.1 | 28.6 | 23.9 |
| Turkmenistan | 37.2 | 34.7 | 24.6 |
| Paraguay | 37.4 | 33.5 | 29.0 |
| Panama | 37.5 | 26.1 | 24.0 |
| Colombia | 37.6 | 27.2 | 23.8 |
| South Africa | 37.8 | 29.3 | 25.1 |
| Average of 16 countries | 35.6 | 26.6 | 22.0 |
| Government projection for China | 32.9 | 29.7 | 28.4 |
| China observed | 33.4 | 21.1 | 15.6 |

⁹ Source: Feng, W., Cai, Y., & Gu, B. (2012). Population, Policy, and Politics: How Will History Judge China's One-Child Policy? *Population and Development Review*, 38, 115–129.

The second mistake committed in the work is ignoring that the fertility decrease unfolded mainly during the 1970s, when the One-child policy was not even enacted. Therefore, the considerable decline of those years should not have entered calculations attributed to the One-child policy, although it did. This leads to the third error, which is not acknowledging the impact of economic developments and only focusing on the more evident presence of birth planning programs. Economy is the most common cause of demographic downturns, and China's case provides evidence in this sense. The mainland experienced a significant economic expansion after 1978 which fostered rising incomes, improved education levels and a general relocation from rural to urban residential locations. Since these profound changes took place more rapidly than in the countries chosen for comparison in Figure 4, the line portraying China's estimated crude birth rates in absence of the One-child policy should have been even lower than that representing other nations.

To conclude, the claim that Beijing's One-child policy prevented 400 million births is unfounded. The decision to implement this strict campaign was driven mainly by political motives and flawed studies rather than necessity or thoughtful demographic choices. Birth control measures have undoubtedly contributed to China's decline in fertility rates, although adopting a less coercive approach would have avoided human suffering, especially throughout the rural population. Moreover, attributing the prevention of 400 million extra births solely to the One-child policy constitutes a two-faceted error: on one hand, because this number is based on a study containing multiple calculation mistakes; on the other, the economy played a fundamental role that must be considered as well. In fact, China's rapid economic development since 1980 was crucial for the reduction in birth rates observed.

3.4 Economic and social consequences of the policy

From previous analysis, it has been clear that the economy exerts great influence on fertility. However, on the other hand it must also be noted that this trend can be reversed, since birth planning policies actively play a role in shaping countries' economic scenarios. When the One-child policy was publicly introduced in China, experts were aware of possible downturns such as sub-replacement fertility or undesirable changes in familiar structure. Unforeseen consequences emerged as well, including sex-selective abortions, unbalance between the number of newborn male and female children, and more recent problems regarding economic slowdowns due to labor shortages (Feng, 2011).

One of the main concerns, which then turned into reality, was faster population ageing. Authorities were not initially worried by the latter, as the presence of a predominantly youthful population structure continues to ensure more births than deaths even in spite of fertility rates below replacement levels, resulting in net population growth. However, due to population ageing, this initial safety expired. As sustained by Feng (2011), the mainland needs to increase total fertility rates, otherwise the demographic issue could keep obstructing its commitment to become the next superpower. In fact, the country would suffer a loss of credibility even towards the global stage, since the repercussions of a potential economic slowdown would be felt by foreign trading partners as well.

China's outstanding growth over the past 40 years has benefited the population by improving living standards. This has been possible thanks to multiple factors, among which the ability to become the world leader in manufacturing production, and being able to provide foreign consumer demand to the point that the global supply chain would not operate smoothly without Beijing. While various factors such as technological primacy have contributed to China's economic boom over the past four decades, another fundamental driver has been its young and productive labor force. In fact, the cohorts born in the 1960s and 1970s reached

peak productive ages coinciding with the beginning of the economic expansion. However, due to the low fertility rates registered especially from the 1980s, young labor has become less common. Along with the latter, domestic demand has also weakened due to lack of young individuals, who are the most active consumers.

China's demographic scenario surely appears controversial, and as of today low fertility represents the country's main setback. Unless the government adopts ad hoc measures to invert the negative trend, more difficulties could arise in the future. However, according to Marois et al. (2021), the perception of such threat does not completely reflect reality. These experts believe that the unfavorable projections are based on an overly simplistic understanding of age dependency which considers individuals over the age of 65 as an economic burden, and those within the working age range as equally productive assets. Following the World Bank data (2022), the age dependency ratio in contemporary China stands at approximately 45, indicating 45 "dependents" – people older than 64 or younger than 15 per 100 individuals in working-age. Inevitably, this ratio is expected to rise in future decades due to population ageing within the country. Nevertheless, Marois et al. (2021) contend that this value inadequately reflects the economic implications of ageing, as it overlooks dynamic shifts in health, longevity, labor force participation, education and productivity. Applying different measures of ageing to Beijing's situation, the crisis narrative portrayed by traditional metrics changes.

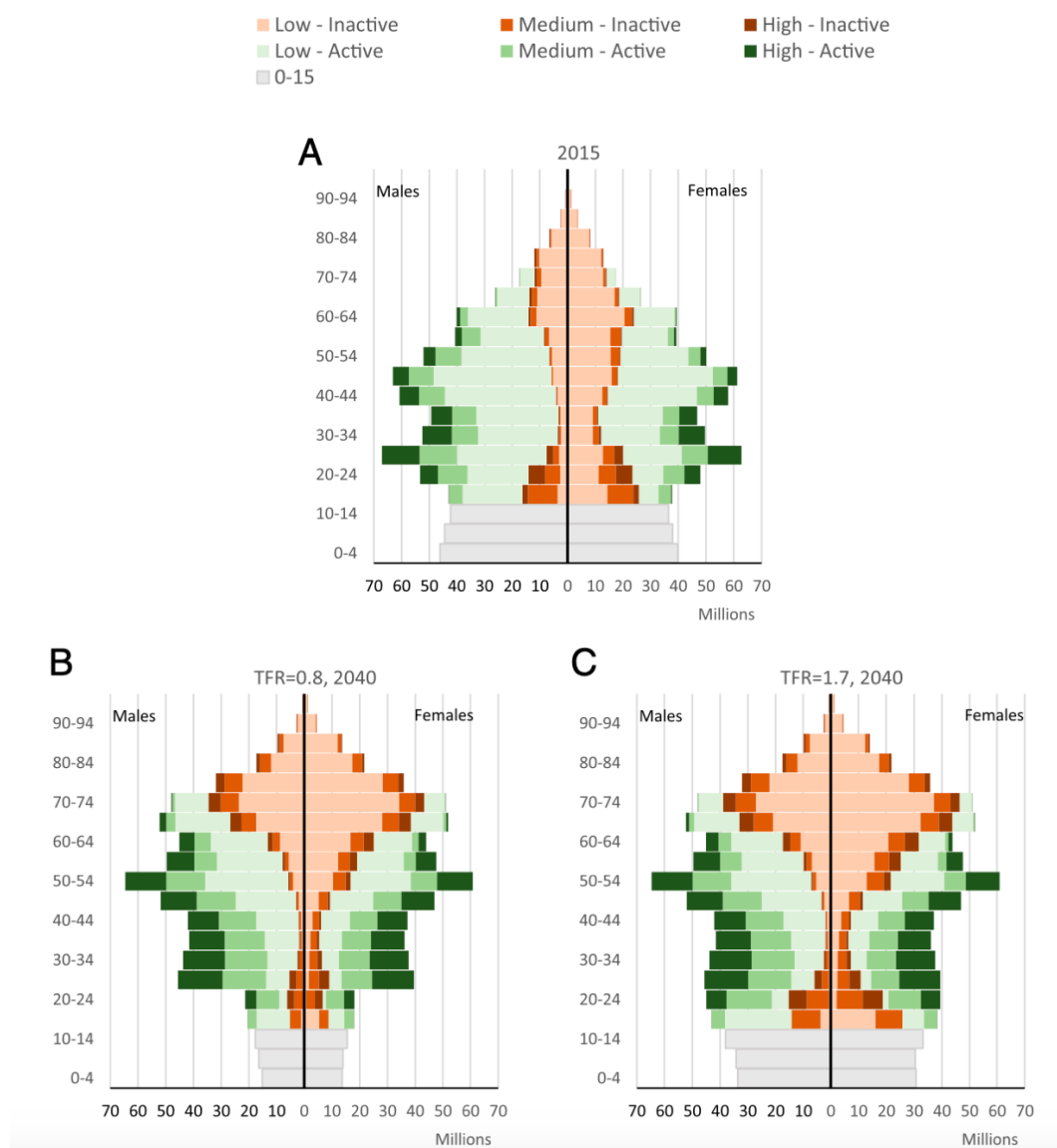
Furthermore, the experts argue that demography should extend beyond age structures to analyze broader societal characteristics, including educational attainment and labor force participation by gender. Through a multidimensional study, the future of China appears markedly different, particularly when considering the substantial enhancement of human capital experienced from the 1980s. Notably, the contemporary younger generation exhibits significantly higher levels of education compared to preceding cohorts, a trend expected to persist

thanks to the constant advancement of technology and increasing governmental attention to instruction.

Adapting the multidimensional approach to China is possible, and Marois et al. (2021) have done this by stratifying the population and applying metrics different from the age dependency ratio, namely the “labor force dependency ratio” (LFDR) – comparing economically active and inactive individuals across all ages – and the “productivity-weighted labor force dependency ratio” (PWLFDR) - which approximates differences in productivity through wage differentials associated with varying educational attainment. However, when implementing the latter measures to project the future demographic landscape of the mainland, considerable uncertainty arises. Indeed, values for total fertility rates are necessary to display the model, and in this sense two divergent upcoming scenarios are conceivable: first, a trajectory comparable to South Korea's, declining to approximately 0.8; secondly, a recovery to around 1.7. Rather than taking a definitive stance, the analysis examines both cases.

Positing a constant total fertility rate of either 0.8 or 1.7 children per woman from the year 2015 onward, Figure 5 (Marois et al., 2021) illustrates the multifaceted demographic shifts anticipated by the scientists for the forthcoming decades, delineating changes by age, gender, education and labor force participation. Notably, the figure shows that by the year 2040, both fertility scenarios provide identical structures for the adult population aged 25 and above, as the older cohorts have already been born. However, because of the reduced number of children, the 0.8 fertility rate scenario results in diminished age dependency ratio over the following decades. This is demonstrated in Figure 6 (Marois et al., 2021), where the age dependency ratio of the lower fertility scenario surpasses that of the higher fertility scenario only around the year 2055. Consequently - even without employing LFDR and PWLFDR - lower fertility rates might constitute an economic advantage to China in the next two decades, rather than an economic burden.

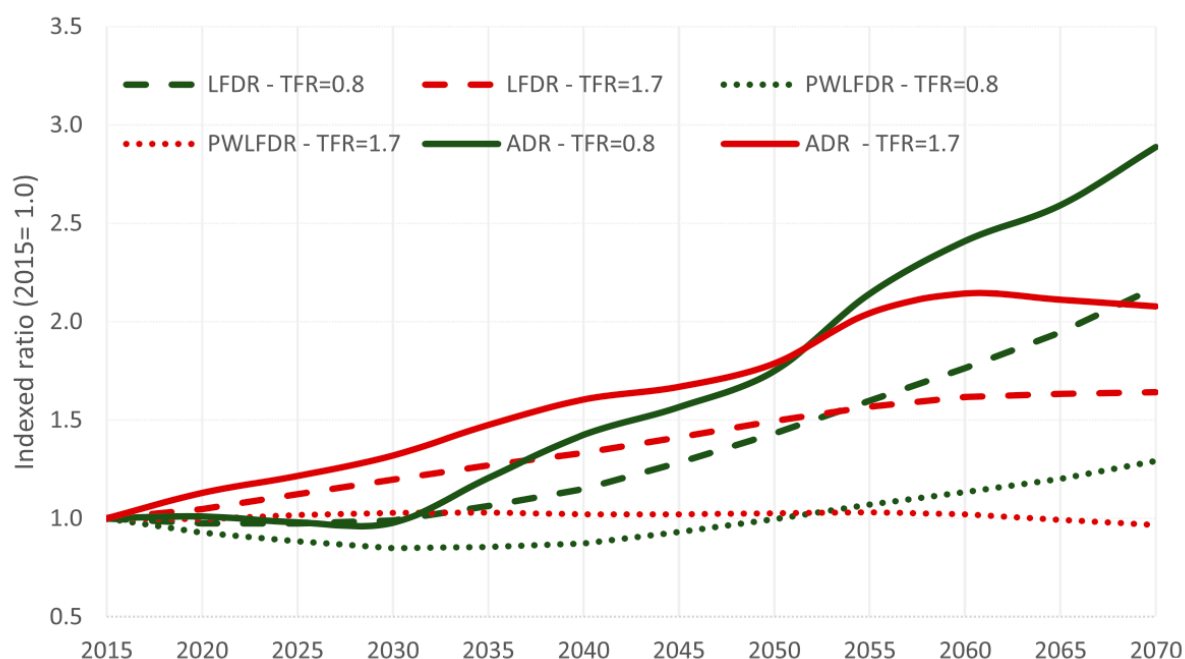
FIGURE 5. Age pyramid by education and labor force status for China¹⁰.



¹⁰ Source: Marois, G., Gietel-Basten, S., & Lutz, W. (2021). China's low fertility may not hinder future prosperity. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 118(40).

Note: Low education= lower than secondary; Medium= upper secondary; High= postsecondary. Labor force status= active or inactive. Scenario A corresponds to China in 2015, scenario B to China in 2040 under 0.8 total fertility rate, scenario C to China in 2040 under 1.7 total fertility rate.

FIGURE 6. Projected dependency ratios for China according to two different total fertility rates (2015-2070)¹¹.



Comparing the values for age dependency ratio with the projected trends of labor force dependency ratio, it becomes clear that the latter's pace and extent of ageing are more moderate. This phenomenon primarily stems from the rise in educational attainment among future adult cohorts of women, which is expected to foster their participation in labor force. Furthermore, the envisaged expansion of high-level instruction within future adults will significantly enhance the human

¹¹ Source: Marois, G., Gietel-Basten, S., & Lutz, W. (2021). China's low fertility may not hinder future prosperity. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 118(40).

Note: The graph projects dependency ratios for China in the period from 2015 to 2070 (2015= 1). Age dependency ratio = (population <15 and population 65+) / population 15-64. Labor force dependency ratio = inactive/active. Productivity-weighted labor force dependency ratio = inactive/active weighted by productivity.

capital of the working-age individuals. As depicted in Figure 5, both scenarios should enjoy an increase in the proportion of highly educated workers by 2040, since younger and better educated cohorts will grow old in that span of time. When transferring this dynamic in Figure 6 towards the framework of the productivity-weighted labor force dependency ratio, no particular escalation in projected dependency emerges until 2070, even under the low fertility scenario. Although total workers will begin to decrease before 2025, the number of individuals possessing high levels of education will continue expanding as the new, more educated cohorts appearing into the labor market will substitute their retiring predecessors.

The simulations reported highlight how dependency indicators considering additional population features - such as education and productivity - reveal a more optimistic direction for China, even under extremely low total fertility rates. Nonetheless, it must be acknowledged that the demographic transition will need to be managed more carefully by the regime, and trying to reach the replacement fertility rate is still a necessity. The remarkable results obtained in education expansion also undeniably contribute to a positive economic development. However, it is imperative for China to ensure that these advancements translate into increased labor force participation and productivity per worker. Achieving this requires societal and economic structures equipped with the needed tools and skills able to unleash the potential of all individuals. Additionally, under conditions of significantly low fertility, the acceleration of overall population decline - particularly among younger age cohorts - will urge reconfigurations in education provision.

Despite these concerns, the outcomes presented in the graphs underscore the limits of the conventional age dependency ratio, which relies on a one-dimensional demographic approach primarily focused on age. In contrast, a multidimensional perspective openly considering labor force participation and skills, which are more directly linked to economic performance, offers a more comprehensive

understanding. By selecting more relevant indicators, different long-term economic and geopolitical considerations unfold. The choice of appropriate metrics is critical to develop adequate policies, therefore the regime should start examining broader variables.

In conclusion, China's One-child policy played a fundamental role in preventing an excessive number of births from the 1980s onwards, but it was not the only cause of reduction in fertility rates. In fact, economic growth was the initial driver of the mainland's demographic transition, and the following programs adopted by the government only contributed to its already substantial influence. Nevertheless, the One-child policy is generally recognized as one of the worst mistakes committed by the Party. Such criticism stems from a multitude of factors beyond demographic implications.

From a social viewpoint, it is perceived as a poorly projected program that deprived Chinese individuals and families of their freedom to determine the desired number of children. It also forced the partial abandonment of ancient familiar traditions and reshaped the latter's structure, contributing to an imbalanced sex ratio and negatively impacting future generations. Thus, on one hand the effect of the policy on demography has been excessively amplified, on the other societal implications have often been underestimated, particularly when taking into consideration those couples that were coerced into having only one child. The incredible number of single-child families represents one of the enduring consequences that clearly altered the natural development of events. Although declining fertility may have led some of them to opt for a single child voluntarily, the current prevalence of such households in China likely surpasses what would have occurred without governmental imposition. Moreover, despite low mortality rates in the country, some Chinese parents confront the prospect of outliving their children, leading to concerns about ageing alone without support.

Embracing a more economic standpoint, this analysis has shown that the One-child policy has strongly affected the country. However, China's economy may not suffer in the short-term as much as commonly believed. Adopting indicators that are different from the age dependency ratio – such as labor force dependency ratio and productivity-weighted labor force dependency ratio - depicts a less critical situation than expected, although it is still undeniable that the future of the labor force is unstable. In this sense, authorities should cautiously acknowledge long-term effects of population ageing and low fertility rates, two of the harshest consequences deriving from the One-child policy. The economy has been Beijing's driving force during the past 40 years, and a slowdown would impact the country's global image. The latter component is fundamental to maintain the phenomenal economic growth rates displayed from the 1970s, therefore China needs to foster its successful development to fulfil the desire of becoming the next superpower. To do that, the mainland should act directly on the demographic transition and induce an increase of total fertility rates which will convert into preferable economic projections.

CONCLUSIONS

This dissertation stems from the idea of delving into China's political, demographic and economic system, following the research questions "is China going to be the next superpower? What challenges will it need to overcome to achieve this objective?". During the discussion, it has been necessary to choose topics and events from the many possibilities provided by the broadness of China's history. In this sense, the criteria used have been consequentiality and temporal proximity, meaning that the research has been based on reporting crucial events that have affected the mainland's contemporary vision and objectives.

In order to answer the research questions, the work has been divided into three chapters: in the first one, the analysis has been focused on reconstructing China's recent path - characterized by humiliations from Western countries - and pointing out its connection with the present sentiment of resilience that the regime recalls to guide the population. The discussion continues examining contemporary issues that may represent a threat to China's growth, suggesting a "peaceful rise" approach when facing them. Finally, the third one provides an in-depth study concerning the demographic transition that has been taking place in the mainland since the end of the 1960s, proposing graphs and tables to deepen the analysis and directly portray the findings. Following what has been pointed out, the crucial debate of the dissertation has undoubtedly been answered in the three aforementioned chapters. China is going to be the next superpower, but it needs to ensure constant economic development, securing global supremacy over the trading market by focusing on labor force and education. Moreover, the country should keep following the "peaceful rise" approach, thus portraying a positive, inoffensive image to the international scenario, and being perceived as a reliable actor. Additionally, the fertility issue should be prioritized by the regime, as it currently represents the main concern for the nation's progress. In fact, low fertility rates and population ageing are a reality and although they may not cause extreme

difficulties within the near future, in a few decades their implications could be fatal for the economic development of the country.

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