

# Gender Ideology Meets Child-Rearing Motivation: Links to Fertility Ideals in China

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China's fertility has stayed below replacement despite policy changes from the two-child reform in 2016 to the three-child policy in 2021, which raised second births in 2017 but did not offset the decline in first births (Li, 2018). Theoretical work links gender equality to higher fertility via more equal sharing of care, yet empirical evidence is mixed and some studies find lower fertility intentions among more egalitarian individuals (Hellstrand et al., 2021; Begall & Hiekel, 2024; Li et al., 2020). A likely missing piece is the role of motivations for having children.

Research on parenthood motivations highlights instrumental, emotional, identity, and lineage considerations that may connect gender ideology to fertility ideals (Miller, 1994; Trommsdorff et al., 2005; Nauck, 2014; Miller, 2012). China is a revealing case, where traditional family-security and lineage motives coexist with a generational shift toward more egalitarian attitudes and a weakening of son preference (Shu & Zhu, 2012). This context allows tests of whether child-rearing motivations differ by gender ideology and whether these motivations help account for differences in fertility ideals.

This study addresses three questions in the Chinese context:

1. Do child-rearing motivations differ across gender-ideology groups, and do gender ideology and child-rearing motivations together form a multidimensional typology in China?
2. How do multidimensional gender-ideology groupings relate to the ideal number of children in China?
3. To what extent do child-rearing motivations account for differences in fertility ideals between gender-ideology groups?

## Theoretical Focus

### Multidimensional Gender Ideology and Ideal Number of Children

Existing literature often averages gender ideologies to distinguish between egalitarian and non-egalitarian dimensions, then explores fertility attitudes accordingly. However, due to political shifts such as the Cultural Revolution and the Reform and Opening-Up, gender ideologies in China have become more complex (Qian & Li, 2020). A multidimensional approach captures perspectives beyond egalitarianism (Grunow et al., 2018; Scarborough et al., 2019), and recent studies confirm the existence of other ideological clusters (Koo, 2020; Yang, 2023). From 2010 to 2017, gender essentialism dominated, split into egalitarian essentialism (supporting women's labor rights and

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caregiving roles) and familial essentialism (emphasizing women's roles in family and marriage), while male supremacism remained accepted by the largest groups (Yang, 2023).

This study examines fertility attitudes based on gender ideology clusters, shedding light on the views of groups with previously overlooked perspectives at the micro level. Women with conflicting public and private sphere views are especially important, as they balance career and family choices. Nordic country analysis shows that groups with such contradictions have higher first-child intentions than egalitarian groups, akin to non-egalitarian groups (Begall & Hiekel, 2024). The study uses the ideal number of children, which better reflects social norms and future fertility trends compared to fertility intentions (Zheng, 2014; Trent, 1980).

### **The Relationship Between Gender Ideology Child-Rearing Purpose**

The extended focus of the study is the intersection between gender ideologies and child-rearing purposes within the context of Chinese culture. Whether the widespread non-egalitarian gender ideologies have changed in contemporary China has been a key concern of previous research (Yang et al., 2014; Koo et al., 2020). These non-egalitarian gender ideologies, which emphasize women's reproductive function and reject their participation in the public sphere, are supported by the patriarchal system. Patriarchal system demands the continuation of the male lineage and surname (Hu & Scott, 2014). On one hand, the patriarchal system emphasizes that women's purpose is to marry and continue the lineage; on the other hand, it devalues women's roles outside this system. As reflected in the Chinese saying, "a married daughter is like water thrown away". This suggests that daughters have no value to their birth family, influencing women's self-perception and fertility attitudes.

Since the 21st century, Chinese people have continued to cite child-rearing purposes rooted in women's familial roles, such as "to carry on the family line" and "to have someone to rely on in old age" (Feng, 2018; Sheng & Li, 2023). Women in traditional gender cultures tend to have more children, especially sons, to secure family status and affirm reproductive value (Ji & Zheng, 2018). This reflects how the patriarchal system, which assigns women status through reproduction, links gender ideologies, child-rearing purposes, and fertility behaviors. In Taiwan, where continuing the male lineage remains salient, younger generations with more traditional gender ideologies are also more likely to stress diverse child-rearing purposes, both emotional and instrumental (Chen & Yi, 2021). Building on this, an extended focus of this study is how gender ideologies and child-rearing purposes cluster together, shedding light on their contemporary interrelations.

### **Ideal Number of Children and Multidimensional Gender Ideology and Child-rearing Purpose**

Cross-cultural research suggests that psychological factors have become central to understanding fertility behaviors (Nauck, 2010). Child-rearing purposes are initial drivers of fertility behavior, with individualistic motivations leading to lower fertility intentions and family-oriented motivations encouraging higher fertility intentions (Miller, 1995; Chen & Hu, 2020).

This study applies SDT theory to examine how the rise of individualism has driven shifts in women's social roles and family perspectives. According to SDT, the focus has shifted from "children first" to "spouses first" (Lesthaeghe, 2010). In the Chinese context, traditional and economic fertility motivations have gradually weakened, shifting toward emotional motivations, while gender ideologies have generally shifted towards egalitarianism (Jia, 2009; Jiang, 2022). However, raising children remains the primary function of the family, with out-of-wedlock births and voluntary childlessness remaining relatively rare (Yu & Xie, 2019).

Additionally, this study draws on gender revolution theory, which suggests that equitable gender attitudes, along with a satisfying division of labor in the private sphere, can increase fertility rates (Goldscheider, 2015). Specifically, this study examines whether child-rearing purposes play a role similar to satisfaction with the division of labor in the private sphere, particularly in the relationship between attitudes and fertility intentions beyond the non-egalitarian clusters.

## Data

This study uses data from the China Family Panel Studies (CFPS) conducted in 2010, 2012, 2014, 2018, and 2020, which focus on social, economic, and demographic changes. The survey was carried out by Peking University using probability sampling, with administrative divisions and socioeconomic levels as the primary stratification variables, covering 25 provinces/municipalities/autonomous regions in China. Ideal fertility numbers were available only in 2014 and 2018, while gender ideologies were available in 2014 and 2020. After listwise deletion of missing values based on the scope of these key variables, the analysis samples for 2014, 2018, and 2020 consisted of 38387, 36754, and 32749 respondents, respectively.

The dependent variable is measured by ideal fertility number, based on the 2014 question "If the policy allows, how many children would you like to have?" and the 2018 question "What's your ideal number of children?" Responses ranged from 0 to 10. Responses of 3 and above were recoded as 3.

The first predictor is gender ideology, measured by four items (1) men focus on career, women on family; (2) marrying well is more important for women than doing well; (3) women should have at least one child; (4) men should do half of the housework. Responses were on a 1–5 scale from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree," then recoded to binaries (egalitarian vs. non-egalitarian). The second predictor is the purpose of raising children, captured by nine items: (1) help me in old age, (2) continue the family line, (3) help the family economically, (4) enjoy raising a child, (5) enjoy a child's companionship, (6) enjoy having a baby, (7) make family more central in my life, (8) increase my sense of responsibility, (9) strengthen ties with relatives. Responses were categorized into five options: "strongly disagree," "disagree," "agree," "strongly agree," and "neither agree nor disagree," coded from 1 to 5. They were recoded into binary variables: 1, 2, and 5 = 0 (disagreement), 3 and 4 = 1 (agreement).

The regression model, based on prior research on fertility intentions and fertility numbers, included relevant socio-demographic control variables: respondent's gender, age (in years), highest educational attainment (eight categories), place of residence (rural or urban), employment status

(unemployed, employed, or out of the labor force), income (wage income in the past year), marital status (never married, married, cohabiting, divorced, or widowed), whether they have children, number of children (recoded as 3 for 3 or more), and number of siblings (recoded as 3 for 3 or more).

## **Research Methods**

In the analysis, we first applied Latent Class Analysis (LCA) to identify associations among the four indicators and estimate individuals' probabilities of belonging to different classes, thereby distinguishing clusters of gender ideologies and child-rearing purposes. To explore how these dimensions relate to ideal fertility numbers, we estimated up to five clusters for gender ideologies, ten for child-rearing purposes, and ten for their combination. Cluster selection was based on SSA-BIC, BLRT, parsimony, and conceptual relevance.

The analysis includes three main models: (1) a multivariate regression of gender ideology clusters, (2) an extension including child-rearing purposes as covariates to test their conditional effect, and (3) a regression of combined clusters to examine their joint association with fertility ideals. After selecting the most suitable classifications, we used the BCH method to construct multivariate models. BCH is well-suited for predicting distal outcomes, as it avoids class shifts during regression and accounts for uncertainty in class membership by weighting auxiliary variables. Missing data were handled using full-information maximum likelihood. All analyses were conducted in STATA and MPlus.

## **Preliminary Findings**

Drawing on LCA and BCH models, this study shows clear, patterned heterogeneity in both gender ideologies and child-rearing motivations and how these jointly relate to ideal fertility numbers. First, traditionalist classes consistently report higher fertility ideals, while egalitarians are internally diverse: one subgroup holds relatively higher ideals, and two subgroups hold lower ones, which lowers the egalitarian average overall. Second, holding gender ideology constant, child-rearing motivations help account for differences in fertility ideals across classes. Emphasis on family-security motivations is positively associated with higher fertility ideals, especially among egalitarians, while emotional-value motivations are negatively associated with ideals in The Motherhood-Focused class, and adult-identity motivations show no clear association. Third, in the joint typology, All-Round Child-Endorsing Traditionalists have the highest predicted ideals and Emotion- and Identity-Driven Egalitarians the lowest, with the ordering stable across 2014 and 2018, and the gap between All-Round Child-Endorsing Egalitarians and their traditionalist counterparts narrows by 2018, indicating convergence in those all-round endorsing groups. Robustness checks using alternative recodes of indicators do not change the optimal number of classes or their substantive interpretation, and complementary analyses of short-term fertility intentions align broadly with the ideal-number patterns, though differences are small and not statistically significant.

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