Market Reform and Gender Norms: How the End of China's One-Child Policy Reshaped Women's Employment in State and Private Sectors*

Si Wu †

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Abstract

State interventions often lead to unintended consequences, especially when aspects of the policy remain illegible to policymakers. In 1979, the People's Republic of China announced its one-child policy to curb its rapid population growth. Although not intended, the one-child policy reshaped gender norms by reducing fertility rates, allowing women to step outside their traditional reproductive roles, and allowing for greater focus on singleton daughters. The one-child policy was rescinded in 2016, with important implications for gender equality. This paper examines whether policy regulations can reinforce patriarchal gender norms and contribute to greater job insecurities for women. With a focus on marketization since China's economic reforms, this research explores the divergence between China's state and private sectors. Differences-in-differences analysis on survey data and in-depth qualitative interviews with employees across sectors show that as the central party emphasizes a return to traditional family roles for women, firms respond in varied ways due to (1) different institutional logics and (2) varying degrees of labor law enforcement. The state sector both safeguard and constrain their employees' participation in the workforce, where paternalism limits women's career advancement and leads to segregated, gendered roles. On the other hand, private sector provides women more equality and access to broader range of roles beyond the gender-specific positions, but it also exposes them to heightened job insecurities, particularly after the end of the one-child policy. This study contributes to our understanding of the scope and limits of state interventions through the lens of gender.

*Job Market Paper, Department of Political Science, Boston University.

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1 Introduction

Political institutions profoundly shape the trajectory of marketization and political economy transformation, often with unintended consequences for inequality. Among cases of economic development across the world, China's marketization presents a dramatic political economy transformation, which began with leader Deng Xiaoping's promise of economic reforms in the late 1970s. The change in China's economy has been drastic; it is now the world's second largest economy. Since 1978, its GDP growth has averaged over 9 percent a year, and almost 800 million people have been lifted out of poverty (The World Bank 2024). Like other forms of economic development, economic development in China has created inequalities – including gender inequalities, making certain groups benefit more so than others.

Scholars have sought to explain China's economic transformation by focusing on the politics of its property rights, actions of its entrepreneurial and private sector actors, its regulatory state, and its sectoral attributes (Tsai 2007; Huang 2008; Hsueh 2011; Rithmire 2015; Hsueh 2022). In addition to the literature on China's economic transformation, scholars have also examined gender equality throughout the reform era, focusing on how rapidly shifting labor market structures and hiring practices shaped women's roles and opportunities (Honig and Hershatter 1988; Lee 1998; Judd 1994).

China's economic reforms coincided with one of the most impactful state interventions in the history of the country – the one-child policy. Initiated in 1979 under Deng Xiaoping's leadership, the one-child policy was a "fundamental national policy" (*jiben guoce*, 基本国策) that restricted all families to having only one child. Prior to the launch of the one-child policy, population planning in China was heavily influenced by Chairman Mao Zedong and his idea of "more people, more power" (*renduo liliangda*, 人多力量大). Between 1950 and 1970, population in China increased from 540 million to more than 800 million (Zeng and Hesketh 2016). In response, the government implemented the voluntary "Later, Longer, Fewer" (*wanxishao*, 晚稀少) policy in the 1970s, which encouraged later marriage and childbearing, longer spacing between births, and having fewer children. This policy

reduced the total fertility rate, dropping from an estimated 5.9 births per woman in 1970 to 2.9 by 1979 (Zeng and Hesketh 2016). Despite this decline in fertility rate, concerns over overpopulation remained, eventually leading to the introduction of the one-child policy.

Scholars have documented the crucial role of population planning in China's rise, emphasizing the significance of population science and the resulting "scientific" interventions in managing China's population (Greenhalgh 2008; Greenhalgh 2010). These twin interventions, one on population planning and the other on economic reforms, highlight the scope and limits of "seeing like a state" (Scott 1998). Specifically, the one-child policy was implemented in a context where male bureaucrats held significant political power. In these cases, unintended, gendered consequences of such policy interventions are found to be quite common (Brulé 2020).

The one-child policy was one of the most gendered policies implemented since the founding of the People's Republic of China. Although unintended, the policy facilitated women's entry into the workforce through two mechanisms. First, through the credible commitment mechanism, by restricting childbirth, the one-child policy mitigated employers' concerns about women taking long leaves from work or leaving the workforce to have more than one child (Zeng and Hesketh 2016). Women were considered "safe" as they were not likely to take additional maternity leave after having one child, allowing them to fully focus on their careers. Second, through the structural mechanism, the policy led to a significant increase in the number of Chinese families with singleton daughters (Fong 2002). With only one child to support, parents fully dedicated their resources and efforts to their daughters' education, which further empowered women to pursue better professional opportunities than they otherwise would have had.

Reproductive politics in China has undergone significant changes in recent years. As concerns over the economic consequences of a declining population grew, the Chinese government began easing its regulations. In October 2015, China officially replaced its decades-long one-child policy with a universal two-child policy, allowing all couples to have two children starting from January 1, 2016. While the one-child policy had inadvertently facilitated women's entry into the workforce by miti-

gating employers' concerns about maternity leave and encouraging greater educational investment in singleton daughters, its end in 2016 had the opposite effect, leading to a negative impact on women's employment prospects. This article employs a differences-in-differences analysis using data from the China Family Panel Studies (CFPS), a biennial, national survey conducted by Peking University. Overall findings show that, in general, men are more likely to be employed than women, and the end of the one-child policy in 2016 has widened this gender gap in employment.

The end of the one-child policy has negatively impacted women's employment, due to the increased economic vulnerabilities brought about by marketization. The degree of vulnerability, however, varies across China's private and state sectors. Importantly, this article argues that, compared to China's private sector, its state sector exhibits different dynamics compared to the private sector through two key dimensions: state paternalism and stronger law enforcement[1]. Within the state sector, paternalism means governing "like a strict parent, a paternalistic state can use its autonomous capacity for good or ill – in social science parlance, it can be either predatory or developmental" (Ding 2022). Regarding labor law enforcement, Gallagher (2017) has documented the role of legality in sustaining authoritarian legitimacy in China, which carries implications for the findings of this study given the stronger enforcement of labor laws within the state sector.

The end of the one-child policy is one of the most gendered policies enacted since the founding of the People's Republic of China – like a strict parent making reproductive decisions on behalf of their children. After the end of the one-child policy, state-owned enterprises (SOEs) protected women from the negative impacts associated with the policy shift. This protection, however, comes at a cost. Paternalism within the state sector limited women's career advancement – demonstrating how state capacity, when exercised under the paternalistic logic, can both safeguard and constrain.

As the level of marketization increased within China's economy alongside the rollout of the one-

[1]Ding (2022) discusses four types of governance: inert, paternalistic, substantive, and performative. She defines paternalistic state behaviors as those occurring when capacity is strong but scrutiny is weak. She discusses how SOEs are among of the examples of paternalistic bureaucracies in China: "when capacity is strong but scrutiny weak, the state exhibits paternalism. Like a strict parent, a paternalistic state can use its autonomous capacity for good or ill.".

child policy, private companies provided women with more equal opportunities, but also saw them as replaceable by men when the end of the one-child policy undermined the credible commitment mechanism. The weaker enforcement of laws among private companies also allowed for more gender discrimination as well as the violation of maternity leave provisions. In this article, I document these differences using both quantitative and qualitative evidence. Differences-in-differences on the CFPS data show that, looking at all sectors, men are more likely to be employed compared to women. Focusing on the state and private sectors, the gender gap widened in the private sector after the policy change in 2016. There was, however, no significant change to the gender gap in the state sector after the policy change.

This paper proceed as follows. Section 2 introduces background on the marketization of China's economy and the evolution of its population planning policies – from the one-child policy to the current three-child policy. It also hypothesizes impact of ending the one-child policy on women's employment, and how this impact varies across the state and private sectors. Section 3 presents findings from survey analysis, and section 4 offers additional insights from qualitative interviews. Section 5 concludes the paper.

2 Background and Theory

2.1 The Marketization of China's Economy

China represents one of the most puzzling cases among developmental states. As one of the only five communist party-states – and the most economically successful one – scholars have debated how China managed to become rich without democratizing (Slater and Wong 2022). Since Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping launched economic reforms in the late 1970s, China has undergone rapid marketization and development. In the 1970s, state-owned enterprises (SOEs) dominated the economy. After a wave of privatization that began in the late 1990s, China's private sector now accounts for 60 percent of the gross domestic product, 70 percent of innovation, 80 percent of urban employment, and 90 percent of new employment (Pearson, Rithmire and Tsai 2021). Scholars describe China's current economy

as "party-state capitalism", where the party-state prioritizes its own political survival over economic goals (Pearson, Rithmire and Tsai 2021).

While China's economic transformation has been drastic, its gendered labor market outcomes remain a critical dimension of this economic transformation. As marketization reshaped the structure of the economy, gender inequality in the labor market evolved over time. During the early reform era in the late 1970s, factory and enterprise managers doubted the central Party's commitment to equal employment, given the absence of compliance mechanisms to enforce such policies (Robinson 1985). This led to hiring discrimination toward women, particularly in state and collective enterprises. The argument that women should return home gained traction at the time.

During the early reform years, SOEs were central to China's economy. Although the number of women employed in SOEs increased, women workers were more vulnerable to layoffs compared to men (Robinson 1985). During economic reforms, socialist goals of economic development were prioritized over gender equality, and the focus of women was on their domestic and reproductive roles (Woo 1994). During periods of economic reforms, women have always been the last to be hired and the first to be laid off.

Today, SOEs exhibit strong institutional inertia, making them more paternalistic in protecting their workers, including women. SOEs have become resistant to reform due to an "institutional rebound", where established institutional structures make change difficult (Chen 2023). This has implications for gender equality: SOEs today offer women stability in employment, but they do not necessarily provide pathways for upward mobility.

In contrast, the private sector has been a driver of economic growth and innovation in the process of marketization. Although formal institutions such as labor laws and gender equality policies exist, in reality, the way private firms operate is constantly shaped by a combination of informal institutions, selective state favoritism, and sectoral attributes.

Throughout the process of economic development, China succeeded where and when bottom-up, private entrepreneurship flourished, and it stagnated where and when entrepreneurship was sup-

pressed (Huang 2008). The private sector has been central to China's economic success, accounting for a significant share of its GDP, employment, and technological advancement. Research on China's informal institutions further expands on this dynamic by demonstrating how private sector actors develop informal coping strategies in response to institutional constraints (Tsai 2007). While formal institutions – including laws regulating labor protections and gender equality – set certain expectations, the enforcement of these rules is flexible, and firms often navigate them based on market pressures and their relationship with local authorities. As Tsai (2007) argues, "adaptive informal institutions" emerge when private firms interact with the state in ways that are not officially sanctioned, yet become normalized through with repetition and diffusion.

Furthermore, China's selective property rights system has shaped these dynamics by favoring politically connected private businesses and allowing low-level bureaucrats to extract rents from smaller, less connected firms (Hou 2019). As Hou (2019) notes, this system effectively "selects winners and discards losers" in a Darwinian sense, meaning that more competitive and better-connected firms are more likely to survive.

Another dimension in understanding China's private sectors includes Hsueh (2022), which shows how sectoral economic structures shape China's pathways to globalization, with different industries exhibiting distinct dynamics. She argues that sectoral attributes – such as technology complexity, asset specificity, capital versus labor intensity, tangible versus intangible assets, and the nature of commodity chains – shape Chinese firms' integration into the global economy.

Together, studies on the political economy of China show an economic system in which formal institutions, market incentives, and sectoral structures interact to shape everyday dynamics within the private sector, which carries implications for understanding the market-driven logic and how women workers are treated post-one-child-policy. Although the Chinese model of development contributes to economic growth, it introduces segregation and inequality in the labor market, including gender inequality.

2.2 History of the One-Child Policy

The one-child policy was one of the most puzzling and consequential policies enacted since the founding of the People's Republic of China. The policy, introduced in 1979, was originally designed with the goal of curbing population growth and facilitating economic development under a planned economy that faced shortages of capital, natural resources, and consumer goods (Wang, Gu, and Cai 2016). While originally intended for population control, the policy has had far-reaching consequences and remade lives of millions of Chinese through impacting sex ratio, women and gender relations, aging and family life, and the institutional adaptation of Chinese bureaucracy (Cai and Feng 2021).

When the People's Republic of China was founded in 1949, its population was approximately 540 million. The Chinese Communist Party, led by Chairman Mao Zedong, sought to transform China from a backward, agrarian society into an advanced socialist society (White 1994). The party initially promoted women's participation in the workforce as part of the broader socialist goals. Shortly after the founding of the country, Mao's stance toward population was pronatalist. When foreign observers were skeptical about whether the party could feed its people, Mao dismissed these concerns and condemned them as reactionary, Malthusian, and "utterly groundless" (White 1994). By the mid-1950s, faced with challenges of governing the country and ensuring food security, Mao began to shift his stance to considering population planning (Whyte, Feng and Cai 2015).

In the 1970s, Chinese political leaders started focusing on population control by launching a "Later, Longer, Fewer" (*wanxishao*, 晚稀少) campaign. This campaign encouraged Chinese couples to which encouraged later marriage and childbearing, longer spacing between births, and having fewer children. These policies resulted in a decline of the total fertility rate from an estimated 5.9 births per woman in 1970 to 2.9 by 1979 (Zeng and Hesketh 2016).

Following Mao's death in 1976, Deng Xiaoping took power by 1978 and introduced market reforms and economic liberalization. Deng had always been a supporter of population control in China. It was the intricate relationship between science and policy at the time that made the one-child policy thinkable and implementable (Greenhalgh 2008). When Deng Xiaoping took power, he began to

think about having a set of "scientific" policies that would guide his governance (Greenhalgh 2008). In this context, missile scientists such as Song Jian presented to Deng population projections and models that demonstrated the necessity of population planning, paving the way for the introduction of the one-child policy in 1979.

Although unintended, the one-child policy brought social benefits for women through low fertility, allowing them to step outside their traditional reproductive roles. Through the credible commitment mechanism, the one-child policy mitigated employers' concerns about women taking extended leaves or exiting the workforce to have multiple children. The assurance that female employees were unlikely to take maternity leave after having one child allowed them to fully focus on their careers. Low fertility through the one-child policy improved gender equality and Chinese women's careers. According to a report in 2015, more than a quarter of CEOs of medium and large Chinese companies were women (Zeng and Hesketh 2016). This phenomenon can be attributed in part to the improved health outcomes of young and middle-aged women.

Before the one-child policy, families with multiple children prioritized investments in sons, where sons were expected to support their parents in old age. Daughters were often assigned domestic responsibilities rather than encouraged to pursue education and careers. After the one-child policy, parents – particularly those in urban areas – were more likely to invest in their daughters' education and career development, as families directed all their resources toward their only child's long-term success (Fong 2002). This "singleton daughter" effect, or structural mechanism, further allowed women to pursue better careers than they otherwise would have had.

2.3 From One- to Three-Child Policy

Discussions about ending the one-child policy began long before its official abolition in 2016. During the early 2000s, demographers had already begun recognizing the need for adjustments in China's population planning (Zhao 2015). For example, as early as 2007, Zeng (2007) examined debates and potential pathways for transitioning fertility policies, considering factors such as population aging, elderly living arrangements, dependency ratios, pension deficits, labor force supply, the marriage

squeeze, and economic costs. Zeng (2007) proposed a "two children with late childbearing soft-landing" policy.

Ultimately, three key realizations – economic, demographic, and political – contributed to the end of the one-child policy (Scharping 2019). First, there was a growing acknowledgment that China had moved beyond the extreme poverty that once justified stringent population control measures, and this shift happened more rapidly than anticipated. Second, fertility rates had declined below replacement levels, raising concerns about severe demographic imbalances and future economic stability. Last, the Central Party was reminded of its 1980 pledge that population control measures would be reassessed once population pressures eased (Scharping 2019).

In October 2015, China officially replaced its one-child policy by a universal two-child policy, announcing that all Chinese couples could have two children, starting on January 1, 2016. Prior to this policy change, China already announced a partial policy relaxation, which allowed couples two children if one parent is an only child. Throughout the development of the two-child policy, the process happened in three steps. First, China merged the National Population and Family Planning Commission with the Ministry of Health to create a new National Health and Family Planning Commission in March 2013 (Wang, Gu, and Cai 2016). Next, in November 2013, China announced a partial policy relaxation that allowed couples to have two children if one parent is an only child. Finally, in October 2015, it was announced that all couples would be allowed to have two children, starting in 2016. However, under the partial relaxation of the policy in 2013, only 1.69 million (out of 11 million couples that were eligible) actually applied to have a second child (Wang, Gu, and Cai 2016).

While ending the one-child policy was anticipated to increase fertility rates, slow population decline, reduce the elderly dependency ratio, and create greater labor market opportunities associated with childbearing and childrearing, the actual impact turned out to be limited. In reality, these effects have been far more modest than anticipated, with far fewer families choosing to have a second child than expected. As a result, China's total fertility rate has fallen to just 1 birth per woman (The

World Bank 2022).

2.4 Ending the One-Child Policy and Women's Employment

The history of China's population planning has important implications for women's role in the labor market. As the generation of singleton daughters enters their 20s and 30s along with the end of the one-child policy, new patterns of gendered labor market outcomes are emerging.

During the economic reform era in the 1980s, economic growth was prioritized over social equality, and the state allowed – and at times encouraged – certain inequalities to emerge (Hershatter 2004). This led to widened gender gaps in labor market outcomes, including occupation segregation, lower wages for women, and an increasing focus on gender in public discourse. Importantly, these gender dynamics from the 1980s resemble those seen today.

In the 1980s, despite an increase in the number of women employed in state-owned and collective enterprises, women workers were more likely to face layoffs during employment crises, experience occupational segregation, earn lower wages compared to men, and are disproportionately employed in collective and poorer enterprises. During the reform era, factory and enterprise managers doubted the Communist Party's commitment to equal employment given the lack of compliance mechanisms to enforce such policies (Robinson 1985). The argument for women to return home also gained traction during this time. State and collective enterprises preferred hiring men, with management citing additional costs and perceived inferior work quality associated with female employees (Robinson 1985).

Just as gendered employment inequalities emerged in the 1980s following economic liberalization, they resurfaced in the late 2010s and early 2020s with the relaxation of birth restrictions. The end of the one-child policy in 2016 has widened the gender gap in labor market participation. Throughout the years following the policy change, discussions on gender – both in official discourse and public conversations – have become increasingly prominent and polarizing. These discussions span social media, academia, and popular culture, reflecting broader anxieties about women's evolving roles in the labor market and the household.

The end of the one-child policy reinforces societal perceptions of women and reduces their opportunities to build sustainable careers and marketable skills. From an employer's perspective, hiring women potentially entails higher levels of risk. While gender-friendly government policies can potentially mitigate these issues, China's welfare state lacks comprehensive family policy provisions, and their official pronouncements are generally ineffective (Ringen and Ngok 2017).

Findings from two recent studies demonstrate the gender gap in labor market since the end of China's one-child policy, and both present evidence suggesting a widened gender gap. Through over 100 in-depth interviews, Zhou (2019) argues that, while having one child is viewed as the normative step following marriage, various obstacles remain for second-birth transition. Challenges with time and finances are prevalent for both men and women. Furthermore, compared to men, women encounter additional labor market disadvantages and they perceive conflicts between work and motherhood.

In line with the literature reviewed above, I hypothesize the following:

> **Hypothesis 1:** The end of the one-child policy negatively impacts women's participation in the labor force more than men's.

2.5 Heterogeneity Across China's State-Owned and Private Sectors

History repeats itself in how women are perceived by their employers; but the structure of the economy, women's self-perception, and their empowerment have changed drastically. One key difference between the reform and the post-one-child-policy era is the shift in economic dominance from state-owned enterprises (SOEs) to the private sector. During the reform era, SOEs played a central role in China's economy, whereas today, the private sector accounts for most of its economy.

In this section, I draw on existing secondary literature as well as original qualitative interviews to document two key mechanisms that explain the difference between the state and private sectors: institutional logic and labor law enforcement. Interviews were primarily conducted in Guangdong province, with additional insights from Beijing and Shanghai. Guangdong is a particularly valuable

field site due to its economic landscape, including several Special Economic Zones (SEZs), which were central to China's marketization since the 1980s. It is one of the most economically developed provinces in China, yet it remains deeply unequal. First-tier cities such as Guangzhou, Shenzhen, and Zhuhai attract many rural-to-urban migrants and other less developed cities such as Maoming, Yunfu, Zhaoqing, and Meizhou[2]. As a province with both SOEs and a thriving private sector, Guangdong provides a fitting case for examining the state and private divide in employment dynamics.

There has been a proliferation of literature examining workplace norms in the state-owned sector in China. Much of this research highlights how SOEs operate under paternalism, which shapes their hiring practices and their employees' career mobility and occupational roles. Leutert and Vortherms (2021) examine personnel power within state-owned enterprises, and argue that leaders of well-performing firms as well as those with patronage ties to elites in charge of their evaluation are more likely to stay in office, implying that states can leverage personnel power to pursue economic and political stability through SOEs. Leutert (2018) discusses how the Xi Jinping administration has established ways to govern state-owned enterprises, including central leading small groups, the cadre management system, Party committees, and campaigns. Using a biographical dataset, Leutert (2018) shows that under the Hu Jintao administration, SOE leaders either retired or were transferred laterally to other core SOEs, provinces, or central positions. These studies demonstrate paternalism within SOEs, where employment decisions and career mobility are shaped by political loyalty in addition to performance alone.

Paternalism extends to segregated and gendered roles within SOEs. For example, Mrs. Wang, an employee within an SOE, says[3], "When I was in a state-owned enterprise, the company mostly follows a 'one person, one work position' (*yige luobo yige keng*, 一个萝卜一个坑) policy. That's why the workload was huge for one person.".[4] Mrs. Wang's account underscores the institutional logic that shapes the rigid role allocation within SOEs.

[2]Author's fieldwork notes, 2023-2024.

[3]All surnames have been changed to protect the anonymity of interviewees.

[4]Anonymous interview, January 2024.

Within SOEs, gendered pattern persists: women often occupy "women's roles" in departments such as HR, administration, finance, or accounting, whereas men occupy "men's roles" in more demanding, revenue-generating departments like sales[5]. Institutional logic and paternalism within SOEs have gendered consequences and impacts when it comes to women's work experiences and hiring practices. For example, a female manager in the HR department at an SOE in Guangdong Province, Ms. Li, shared:

> From my experience, I feel that women are better at communication and coordination skills. However, when it comes to hiring, the preference is still to recruit men. There is an underlying belief that men can endure hardship better. That said, it is rare for state-owned enterprises like ours to lay off employees; state-owned enterprises and civil servant positions are well known for their stability.[6]

Gendered roles are furthered reinforced by paternalism within SOEs, which also limits women's opportunities for career advancement. Like a strict parent, paternalism implies that the culture that "women manage the household, and men dominate the outside world" (*nüzhunei nanzhuwai*, 女主内男主外) remains entrenched and challenging to change. Ms. Yang, an employee of an SOE in Shanghai, shared:

> The idea of 'women manage the household, and men dominate the outside world' is a mainstream norm within state-owned enterprises; decision-making power is within the hands of older generations. State-owned enterprises have a conservative value system with clearly defined roles, and it sometimes feels like the perspectives of young generations cannot make their way to the top.[7]

Paternalism not only shapes gendered roles within SOEs but also reflects a logic through which SOEs are expected to shoulder part of the state's social responsibilities. In contrast to the private

[5] Anonymous interview, February 2025.
[6] Anonymous interview, February 2024.
[7] Anonymous interview, Janurary 2024.

sector's market-driven logic, SOEs operate under the logic where collective welfare often takes precedence over profitability. This difference becomes especially salient when considering how different sectors approach issues related to fertility and childbearing. Mr. Liu, an employee at a university – a government-affiliated position typically considered part of the extended state sector – shared insights about how these dynamics affect his own family (his wife works in an SOE):

> State-owned enterprises (SOEs) do not prioritize profitability; they operate under a model where everyone 'eats from the same big pot' (*chi daguofan*, 吃大锅饭). However, raising children comes with significant costs. The fact that SOEs don't focus on profitability – essentially disregarding costs – is beneficial for our society. This is because, in this process, SOEs bear part of the responsibility for the nation, specifically the costs associated with raising children. On the other hand, private enterprises are generally unfriendly toward childbirth. From this perspective, SOEs shoulder the societal burden of childbirth and child-rearing costs, while private enterprises are unwilling to bear these costs. Private enterprises won't even give you the opportunity to have children; they will simply terminate your employment. If adequate compensation is provided throughout the process, then it's not as much of an issue.[8]

In contrast, the private sector provides opportunities based on merit but lacks job security for women, meaning that women are more easily replaceable by men – particularly during periods of policy change such as ending the one-child policy. Private companies focus on maximizing productivity, often at the expense of labor protections for women. Ms. Zheng, who has experience working in both the state and private sectors, commented on this:

> In private companies such as the IT sector, for example, a women's age is a major factor in hiring decisions. If a woman gets pregnant shortly after joining a company, it raises concerns.[9]

[8] Anonymous interview, February 2024.

[9] Anonymous interview, January 2024.

On the other hand, a male employee from a private company in the finance sector shared,

> If a married woman has two children, she may struggle to keep up with the company's demands. She could be out of the workforce for five years, while her male competitors gain five more years of experience. This is undeniably unfair. From an employer's cost-benefit perspective, men are seen as the more 'efficient' choice. But this isn't a good thing – it's not beneficial for anyone except from the capitalists who profit from it.[10]

The second dimension, labor law enforcement further distinguishes the state and private sectors. Within SOEs, there is stronger adherence to labor protections ensuring compliance with maternity leave regulations. In contrast, the private sector lacks these protections, where women face greater employment insecurity when they take maternity leave.

On the second dimension, law enforcement, Mr. Pan, a manager at a state-owned enterprise, comments on the enforcement of maternity leave policies in state-owned versus private sectors:

> Maternity leave policies for female employees in our company are granted in accordance with national laws. State-owned enterprises strictly adhere to these rules. On the other hand, in private enterprises, employees may face situations like worrying about not being able to keep their jobs if they leave work early because of maternity leave or other pregnancy-related reasons. This is especially common in small private enterprises, which often do not fully comply with regulations.[11]

Mrs. Zheng, previously cited, shared her observations on what labor law enforcement looks like in the private sector:

> Private companies may not fire employees who can create a lot of profits for the company regardless of whether they take maternity leave. But the early days of employment may

[10] Anonymous interview, January 2024.

[11] Anonymous interview, January 2024.

be a sensitive period. For example, the IT industry has a low tolerance towards these issues.[12]

Her comments suggest that while job performance may protect some employees, many women remain vulnerable to discrimination in the private sector especially during hiring.

Mr. Liu, an employee in the finance sector, echoed this view:

> Objectively speaking, labor laws do offer protection for women – such as in areas like retirement and maternity leave. But no employer wants to hire someone who plans to take three to four years of maternity leave.[13]

To summarize, paternalistic logic and stronger law enforcement regarding maternity leave policies within SOEs provides women with greater job security following the end of the one-child policy. In contrast, market-driven logic and weaker labor law enforcement within the private sector resulted in greater employer discrimination and job instability for women in the post-one-child-policy era.

To explain women's varying degrees of employment vulnerability after the one-child policy ended, I propose a 2 by 2 framework, as shown in table 1. This framework captures two key dimensions: institutional logic, and law enforcement.

In line with the literature and interviews reviewed above, I hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 2: Compared to the state sector, women in the private sector experience greater negative impact in the labor force after the end of the one-child policy.

3 Empirical Analysis

I analyze data from the China Family Panel Studies (CFPS), a nationally representative biennial survey of Chinese communities, families and individuals, run by the Institute of Social Science Survey (ISSS) of Peking University. My analysis uses the 2012-2020 waves of the CFPS data. The CFPS

[12] Anonymous interview, January 2024.

[13] Anonymous interview, January 2024.

Dimension/Sector Type	**State Sector**	**Private Sector**
Institutional Logic	Paternalistic logic emphasizing stability and entrenched, segregated gendered roles	Market-driven logic valuing performance but with less job security; women are seen as replaceable by men
Labor Law Enforcement	Stronger law enforcement; more adherence to formal labor protections	Weaker law enforcement; greater possibility to bypass labor regulations and protections

Table 1: Theoretical Explanations Comparing the State and Private Sectors

collects data on respondents' information, such as their financial situation, demographic and socioeconomic characteristics, family relations, and political attitudes. Given the scope, time frame, and large sample size, the CFPS lends itself well to the core research question in this paper. Variables such as employment, education, *hukou* (the Chinese housing registration system) status, and age are included in the analysis.

It took several steps to process the CFPS data. The binary indicator for those employed were created for each wave (2012, 2014, 2016, 2018, and 2020) of the data based on how the survey question surrounding employment was designed. Then, the age and education variables were standardized. For the purpose of this analysis, I only consider people both of working age and of childbearing age, here I define as those between the age of 18 and 45.

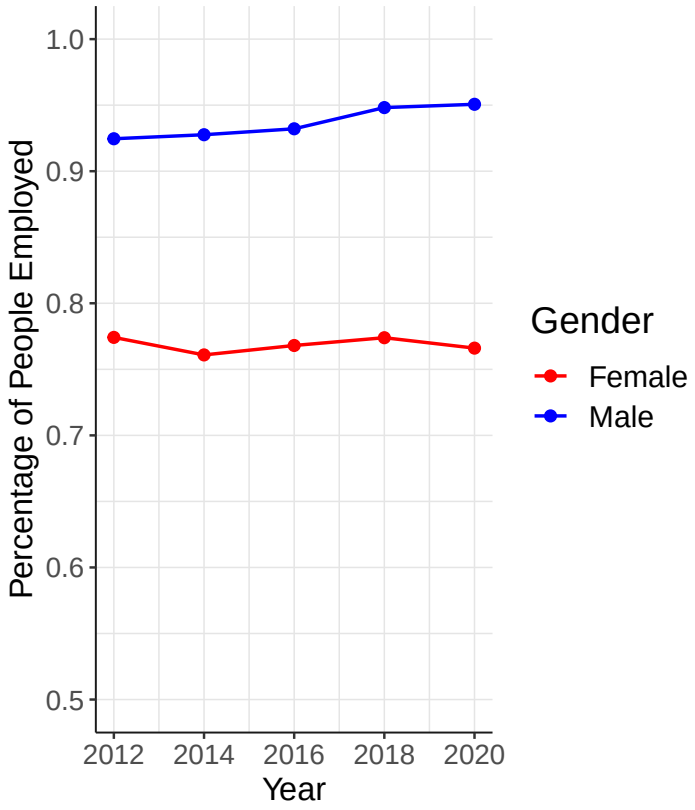

Figure 1: Share of people employed among the total population of working age, by gender.

Calculations from the China Family Panel Studies (CFPS).

In figure 1, I plot the percentage of people employed among the total population of working and of childbearing age over time, from 2012 to 2020, disaggregated by gender. To isolate the differential effect of the policy change on men and women, I conduct a differences-in-differences (DiD) analysis. Using this model means that, in the absence of treatment, employment trends for both groups would have continued in parallel; the treatment – the end of the one-child policy in 2016 – introduces a deviation from this parallel trend. In addition, this model assumes that there are no major confounders around 2016 that differentially affected men and women's employment; both groups were subject to common macroeconomic and labor market conditions during this period. Last, this model assumes no spillover effects between individuals – that is, one woman's decision having children would not directly affect another woman's employment status.

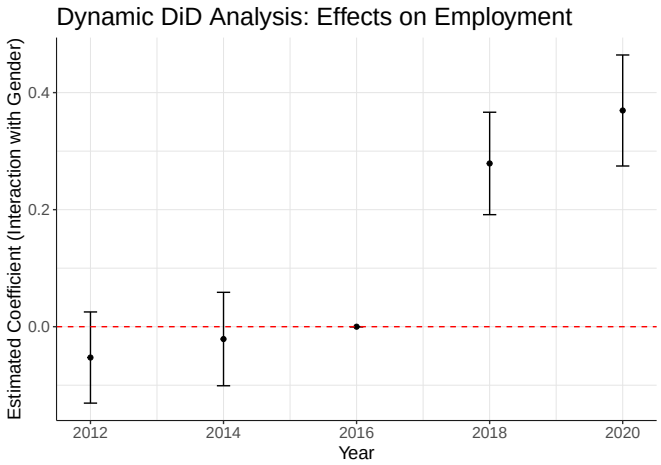

Figure 2: Dynamic effects for the interaction between gender and survey year.

Figure 2 presents estimated dynamic DiD coefficients for the interaction between gender and survey year. The analysis examines employment rates among individuals of working and childbearing age from 2012 to 2020. Coefficients prior to 2016 test for parallel pre-treatment trends between men and women, and are close to zero and statistically insignificant, supporting the parallel trends assumption. Coefficients after 2016 capture the treatment effect of the end of the one-child policy, showing a widening gender gap in employment.

In the background and theory section, I hypothesize that the end of the one-child policy negatively impacts women's employment more than men's. This implies that we should see a statistically significant difference between men's and women's participation in the labor force after the policy change compared to before the policy change. The DiD model specification is below:

$$Employment_i \sim Binomial(1, p_i)$$

$$\text{logit}(p_i) = \beta_1(\text{Male}_i \times \text{Post2016}_t) + \beta_2 \text{Male}_i + \beta_3 \mathbf{X}_{it} + \gamma_p + \delta_t + \varepsilon_{it}$$

where p_i is the probability that individual i is employed; $\text{Male}_i \times \text{Post2016}_t$ is the interaction term capturing the differences-in-differences effect; Male_i is a binary indicator for the gender of individual

i, where $\text{Male}_i = 1$ if the individual is male, and where $\text{Male}_i = 0$ if the individual is female; $\mathbf{X}_{it}$ is the vector of individual-level control variables, including education (standardized), age (standardized), and hukou status; γ_p is the province fixed effects; δ_t is the year fixed effects; and ε_{it} is the error term. The variables in this analysis include: employment, which is coded as 1 for those employed and 0 otherwise; education, which is coded numerically based on survey respondent's highest level of education achieved; age; gender, where 1 indicates men and 0 indicates women; hukou status, which refers to survey's respondent's status under the Chinese household registration system; and Post2016, a binary variable that differentiates between the period before and after the end of the one-child policy.[14] For this specification, β_1 is the coefficient of interest, as it can be used to inform us of the change in probability of employment men compared to women after the policy change.

Table 2: The End of One-Child Policy and Gender Gap in Employment

	Dependent variable:		
	Employment Status (Logit)		
	All	State-Owned	Private
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Gender (Male) × Post2016	0.224***	−0.366	0.326***
	(0.054)	(0.317)	(0.092)
Control Variables	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes	Yes
Province Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	65,422	4,152	24,241

Note: Standard errors are shown in parentheses. *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

The purpose of this analysis is to compare the 2012-to-2020 change in employment in Chinese men to the change in employment among Chinese women. The results of the analysis, including heterogeneous effects across the public and private sectors – can be found in table 2. I first apply the model to the full sample to estimate the overall gendered impact of the end of the one-child policy,

[14] A more detailed descriptions of how these variables are calculated are included in the appendix.

which tests Hypothesis 1. I then conduct a heterogeneous analysis by separately estimating the same model for survey respondents working in the state and private sectors. This split is used to test Hypothesis 2, examining whether the effect differs depends on sector.[15]

The results support both hypotheses derived in the previous section. Column (1) shows that men experienced a significantly larger increase in employment than women following the end of the one-child policy. This suggests a relative decline in women's labor market outcomes, consistent with Hypothesis 1. Dis-aggregating by sector, Column (3) indicates that the gender employment gap widened particularly in the private sector, where men had higher probability of employment than women post-policy. By contrast, Column (2) shows no significant difference in the state-owned sector. These findings align with Hypothesis 2, which suggests a more pronounced negative impact of the policy change on women in the private sector.[16]

These results remain robust when compared against alternative specifications and measures used in other academic studies on the gendered impact of the end of the one-child policy (see Zhou 2019; Li 2024).

4 Discussion

In the background and theory section, I argue that compared to the state sector, women in the private sector experience greater negative impacts on their labor force participation after the end of the one-child policy. This is due to two key factors: (1) institutional logics – paternalistic governance in the state sector versus market-driven logic in the private sector; and (2) variations in law enforcement, particularly regarding labor protections and maternity leave policies. The state sector, operating un-

[15]The coding of the state and private sectors is based on the CFPS survey classifications. Individuals working in the state sector are those employed by state-owned enterprises (国有企业/国有控股企业), while individuals working in the private sector are those employed by private enterprises or individual and family businesses (私营企业/个体工商户/个人/家庭).

[16]These results indicate that in the state-owned sector, the gender gap in employment remained relatively unchanged after 2016. In contrast, in the private sector, the gender employment gap widened significantly, with men's probability of employment increasing more than that of women post-2016.

der paternalism, limits women's career advancement but provides greater job security and adherence to national labor laws. In contrast, the private sector offers more equal opportunities but sees women as more easily replaceable by men.

To uncover the causal mechanisms behind these dynamics, this section presents additional qualitative evidence. Mrs. Huang, who works in the finance department of a state-owned enterprise and recently returned from maternity leave, reflected on her experience:

> I am not worried about returning to work after maternity leave. While I may not return to the exact same position, my employment is not at risk. The decision will ultimately be based on my manager's arrangements, but I have job security.[17]

Her comments suggest that while gendered segregation within SOEs may limit role flexibility, it also creates stability.

This sense of stability within SOEs is not unique to women. Men employed in the state sector also benefit from long-term job security, even during times of economic disruptions. Mr. Huang, a Director of General Office (*bangongshi zhuren*, 办公室主任) and father of two, described how his career path shifted during the COVID-19 pandemic:

> I used to work in the sales department. But after the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the company reassigned me to the role of the Director of General Office. Now that the economy has recovered, I am still in this position. My job is secure in the long run, and it provides me with the means to raise my children.[18]

Unlike SOEs, private firms prioritize economic efficiency and competitiveness, making women more vulnerable to hiring biases and layoffs. This is particularly evident in sectors like finance and information technology (IT), where women are seen as more easily replaceable due to their childbearing potential. Mr. Xu, and employee at a private financial firm, described the challenges women face:

[17] Anonymous interview, February 2025.

[18] Anonymous interview, January 2024.

> During company interviews, candidates are often asked about their marital status and whether they have children. If a woman is newly married but hasn't had children yet, this could count against her. Companies take these factors into consideration, and this severely impacts women. Most businesses are concerned about this issue, making it more difficult for women in general. Are there any policies that could help? Perhaps there could be regulations requiring a certain proportion of female employees or subsidies for hiring women. Alternatively, women could focus on improving their skills to surpass male competitors in their respective fields.[19]

Mr. Xu's perspective illustrates how private firms view women as replaceable, particularly in a market-driven environment with weak labor protections. However, he remains optimistic about the future: "This situation will start to improve. Artificial intelligence means that people can start businesses from home. It may be possible to engage in flexible employment, like running a small business through WeChat[20]."

Gender norms are not only institutional but also interpersonal. Ms. Zheng, an employee at a small private company and mother of an eight-year-old son, reflected on how her family's division of labor evolved over time:

> After having our child, I began leaning more toward managing the household (*zhunei*, 主内), while he leaned more toward responsibilities outside the home (*zhuwai*, 主外). But this shift took a lot of struggle and adjustment. At first, we both wanted to fully commit to our careers. It's hard to explain in just a few words, but we went through a long period of emotional struggle.[21]

The only major exception to women's employment in the private sector concerns industries dominated by women, such as cosmetics and childcare. In these fields, most positions are implicitly regarded as "women's work", a perception that mirrors gendered role assignments within SOEs. As a

[19] Anonymous interview, January 2024.

[20] WeChat is the most popular social media platform/chat app in China.

[21] Anonymous interview, January 2024.

result, women in these industries are not seen as easily replaceable by men, and their employers seek to accommodate their desires to balance career and family responsibilities.

Mrs. Su, a manager in the cosmetics industry – a sector dominated by women – described how in her experience, private companies seek to accommodate women's employment:

> One of our company's missions is to help women grow. We provide flexible work options for women; the only requirement is a high school diploma to start selling our products via online platforms.[22]

She then took out her phone and showed a video of a mother selling cosmetics, saying, "Look, here's a mom of five kids who is doing really well at our company".

Mr. Xu and Mrs. Su's comments reflect a shifting economic landscape where online and other flexible work arrangements within the private sector may provide new opportunities for women outside traditional employment. As marketization continues, these dynamics will remain critical in shaping China's labor market and gendered employment outcomes.

5 Conclusion

Throughout the process of development, political institutions profoundly shape developmental states' trajectories of economic development and marketization, often producing unintended consequences, including gender inequalities. Among cases of developmental states across the world, China stands out for the scale and pace of its economic transformation, a process that began with leader Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms in the late 1970s and 1980s. Alongside sweeping marketization, China introduced its famous one-child policy in 1979. While these twin interventions – one on economic liberalization, the other on population control – were driven by distinct goals, together they shaped the gender gap in labor market participation within the next few decades.

In particular, the one-child policy, though designed as a "scientific" intervention under male-dominated political leadership, produced unintended gendered effects – the policy improved women's

[22] Anonymous interview, July 2023.

social and economic status through low fertility and led to the rise of generations of singleton girls who received their parents' full attention.

This paper shows that the end of the one-child policy in 2016 also carries important implications for gender equality. While the one-child policy improved gender equality through the credible commitment mechanism and the "singleton daughter" effect, the end of the one-child policy undermines the credible commitment mechanism, leading employers to believe that hiring women entails higher levels of risk since women can have potentially up to three children. This effect, however, various across China's state and private sectors. The end of the one-child policy has led to a widened gender gap in labor market participation in the private sector compared to the state sector. In particular, the state sector operates under paternalism, meaning that the state sector both safeguard and constrain their employees' participation in the labor force. There is also stronger labor law enforcement, meaning that there is more adherence to formal labor protections within the state sector. Analysis on survey data show that the end of the one-child policy in 2016 did not lead to a statistically significant difference between men and women's labor force participation in the state sector. Interview evidence with employees within SOEs show that women often occupy "women's roles" in departments such as HR, administration, finance, or accounting, whereas men occupy "men's roles" in demanding, revenue-generating departments like sales. Paternalism limits women's career advancement and leads to segregated, gendered roles within SOEs.

On the other hand, private sector's employment is Janus-faced; it provides women more equality and not just letting women to work gender-specific or "women-type" positions. This sector operates under a market-driven logic, meaning that they value performance but often at the expense of labor protections for women. There is weaker labor law enforcement within the private sector, meaning that there is greater possibility to bypass labor regulations and protections. Analysis on survey data show that the end of the one-child policy in 2016 led to a statistically significant difference between men and women's participation in the private sector. Interview evidence with employees within the private sector show that women face greater job insecurity and are more vulnerable to hiring biases

and layoffs, especially after the end of the one-child policy.

Taken together, this paper highlights the difficulties of "seeing like a state" and the unintended gendered consequences of state interventions – particularly in contexts where male bureaucrats dominate policy design and implementation. Understanding these sectoral, institutional, and gender dynamics is crucial for addressing gender inequality in China's evolving labor market.

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7 Appendix

7.1 Data and Variables from the CFPS

The analysis in this paper uses the 2012-2020 waves of the China Family Panel Studies (CFPS) data. The CFPS collects data on respondents' information, such as their financial situation, demographic and socioeconomic characteristics, family relations, and political attitudes. Given the scope, time frame, and large sample size, the CFPS lends itself well to the core research question in this paper. The descriptions for different variables are listed below. For the purpose of this analysis, respondents with invalid responses such as "Don't know", "Refuse to answer" and respondents with missing response are excluded.

Employment. Survey respondents are coded as employed based on the CFPS classification. Survey respondents that are employed refer to those that are either actively working, on temporary vacation, sick leave or other vacation, on some on-the-job training, running a business that is currently off-season, or performing agricultural work that is currently off-season. These survey respondents are coded as 1 and the rest are coded as 0.

Education. My definition of education follows the same format as the CFPS, which categorizes respondents into 8 categories: (1) Illiterate/semi-literate (文盲/半文盲), coded as 1; (2) Primary school (小学), coded as 2; (3) junior high school (初中), coded as 3; (4) senior high school/vocational school (高中/中专/技校/职高), coded as 4; (5) junior college (大专), coded as 5; (6) 4-year college/bachelor's degree (大学本科), coded as 6; (7) master's degree (硕士), coded as 7; and (8) doctoral degree (博士), coded as 8. In the regression, the value of this variable is standardized using the following formula:

$$\text{Education (standardized)} = \frac{\text{Education - mean(Education)}}{\text{sd(Education)}}$$

, where mean(Education) indicates the mean of the Education variable, and sd(Education) indicates the standard deviation of the Education variable.

Age. The age variable is calculated using following formula: age = the year the survey was conducted – birth year of the survey respondent. In the regression, the value of this variable is standardized using the following formula:

$$\text{Age (standardized)} = \frac{\text{Age - mean(Age)}}{\text{sd(Age)}}$$

, where mean(Age) indicates the mean of the Age variable, and sd(Age) indicates the standard deviation of the Age variable.

Gender. My definition of gender categorizes respondents into 2 categories: (1) male, coded as 1; and (2) female, coded as 0.

Hukou (户口). My classification of hukou (户口) status follows the CFPS, which categorizes respondents into the following categories: (1) agricultural (农业) hukou, coded as 1; (2) non-agricultural (非农) hukou, coded as 3 (with the exception of 2020, when there is also the residential (居民) hukou, which was coded as 7); (3) not registered, coded as 5; and (4) not applicable (non-Chinese nationality), coded as 79. In the regression, the built-in R function as.factor() is applied on this variable to make sure these numbers are considered as factors and not numbers. In DiD analysis, all respondents with hukou types "Not registered" and "Not applicable (Non-Chinese nationality)" are excluded.

7.2 Full Table from Regression

Table 3: The End of One-Child Policy and Gender Gap in Employment

	Dependent variable:		
	Employment Status (Logit)		
	All	State-Owned	Private
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Gender (Male)	1.403***	1.613***	1.155***
	(0.038)	(0.260)	(0.074)
Age (Standardized)	0.561***	0.590***	0.532***
	(0.014)	(0.088)	(0.025)
Education (Standardized)	0.318***	0.645***	0.257***
	(0.015)	(0.087)	(0.026)
as.factor(hukou)3	−0.289***	0.131	−0.113**
	(0.033)	(0.184)	(0.056)
as.factor(hukou)7	−0.112	−0.465	−0.216
	(0.099)	(0.461)	(0.155)
Gender (Male) × Post2016	0.224***	−0.366	0.326***
	(0.054)	(0.317)	(0.092)
Constant	1.656***	3.437***	1.858***
	(0.141)	(1.033)	(0.213)
Year Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes	Yes
Province Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	65,422	4,152	24,241
Note:			*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001