# Understanding China's New Fertility Policy System through 'Incrementalism':

## Inferences from Online Articles Published by China Population and Development Research Center

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# ABSTRACT

In the ongoing transformation from previous "one-child policy" to current "two-/three-child policy" in China, the newly issued "supporting measures" system is highlighted to be crucial to boosting fertility. Extant studies on the issue are mostly limited to idealized discussions, while lacking a Public Administration perspective to comprehensively understand the real policy process. To compensate for this shortage, the thesis introduced Lindblom's 'incrementalism' theory to interpret the policy process mainly by finding out and elaborating the divergent preferences among different "supporting measures" in actual implementation. Empirical data were collected by gathering 292 relevant online articles that China Population and Development Research Center posted on WeChat Official Account from October, 2016 to February, 2022. Content analysis and qualitative content analysis were chosen as appropriate methods to analyze the data in a coherent way. The results proved the existence of Chinese government's discernable preferences among different "supporting measures" as deducted from 'incrementalism' theory-- "Childcare services" and "Maternal and child health protection" were most preferred, following by "Education reform"; "Work-family balance" and "Reducing gender inequality" were less preferred, while "Direct financial support" and "Housing support" were least preferred. Their divergent features were further interpreted by investigating how they were diversely formulated and justified.


**Keywords**: China, "Two-/three-child policy", "Supporting measures" system, Incrementalism, Public Administration

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Background

Introduced in 1979 and aiming at curtailing the over-rapidly growing population for better economic prospects, China's long-standing family planning policy, or more simplified and well-known as "one-child policy", had transformed the country's demographic fabric profoundly during its 35 years of existence (Cai & Feng, 2021). In nearly four decades, the strictly performed one-child policy significantly reduced China's fertility rate to a low level (World Bank, 2022).

However, the side effects of "one-child policy" are also distinct. One major concern is the ongoing rapid population aging resulted from the sluggish total fertility rate which has been far lower than replacement level for long (Guo, 2012). Undoubtedly, an increasingly aging and distorted demographic structure is not a favorable prospect for such a country that is still at the very critical stage of economic development. Gloomy forecasts depict such challenges as the dilemma of "getting old before getting rich" (Deloitte, 2017), meaning that China will face similar demographic challenges as developed countries like Japan, but at the same time having a much lower average household income to cope with the challenges.

The incompatibility of one-child policy with the status quo of population has motivated the Chinese government to adjust the family planning policy in recent years. Four years after releasing "selective two-child policy" for couples who meet certain conditions, the new "universal two-child policy" was unveiled in 2015 and it put an official end to the one-child policy that had been in place for 35 years. The State Council (2015) mentioned that "the demographic dividend (of China) has weakened, and the advantage centered on human capital in international competition needs to be

further strengthened" in policy document, which told the aim of amending the family planning policy to raise the fertility rate.

Another six years later, the government released the "three-child policy" in 2021 to further encourage fertility. Realizing that simply relaxing the restrictions on "number" can hardly solve the real problem -- the declining fertility desire of people at reproductive age, the "three-child policy" document (The State Council, 2021) especially highlighted the "supporting measures" in the new fertility policy system and demanded that "a fertility-supporting policy system should have been basically established by 2025". The "supporting measures" shall consist of various aspects such as maternity and child health protection services, inclusive childcare services, parental leave system, direct financial support for couples with children, education reform, housing support, gender equality in the workplace and at home, etc. (The State Council, 2021). This leads to the research problem of this thesis -- considering the newly highlighted "supporting measures" in the new fertility policy system, how much could they help realize the goal of raising the fertility rate?

## 1.2 Research Aim, Research Questions and Findings

On the introduction of China's new fertility policy, there has been abundant heated discussion since 2015, both on the public media and in academia. The public has mixed opinions on the new policy – mostly agreeing on abolishing the old "one-child policy" while doubting whether the new policy system could really help reverse the declining fertility rate. In academia, the relevant researches can be categorized into two main types: first, evaluating or assessing the effects of the new fertility policy; second, making policy advice.

Since the so-called "supporting measures" was a newly emphasized agenda in 2021,

relevant academic research on it is still very scarce. Although many of the previous researches containing policy advice had involved one or several aspects of the "supporting measures", they usually failed to consider all the aspects as a whole. In other words, scholars have analyzed the issue and offered policy advice mainly from theoretical perspectives of their respective disciplines, but not from the very perspective where policymakers are standing -- Public Administration.

In fact, it should be recognized that the establishment and implementation of both the two- and three-child policy with the "supporting measures" will be a long-term process. Therefore, taking a perspective from Public Administration to understand the policy process itself is a vital prerequisite for evaluating its potential effects. To add to the currently scarce knowledge of China's new fertility policy system from the perspective of Public Administration, this thesis aims at doing a preliminary analysis of the ongoing policy process by referring to the 'incrementalism' theory (Lindblom, 1959) in the discipline of Public Administration.

According to the 'incrementalism' theory, an "omniscient" rational-comprehensive method is impossible for policymakers in dealing with realistic complex problems. Instead, they take the method of successive limited comparison, which means to "continually build out from the current situation, step-by-step and by small degree". It is a theory that highlights the merits of marginal values of "incremental" changes from the status quo (Migone & Howlett, 2015).

In context of the "supporting measures" in China's new fertility policy system, as mentioned above, various possible means that are recognized to be conducive to raising fertility rate have been listed in the policy document (The State Council, 2021). However, in the actual process of implementation, it is impossible for the government

to push every means simultaneously and equally, so there should be selectivity or preferences among all mentioned means, according to the 'incrementalism' theory. To verify this deduction, the first research question of this thesis is "has Chinese government shown selectivity or preferences among different 'supporting measures' in the actual implementation of the new fertility policy system?" Then, on the basis of the analyzed data, this thesis will also seek to further answer the second research question -- "what are the features of different 'supporting measures' in current implementation?", i.e., "how are these 'supporting measures' formulated and justified in divergent ways?"

By answering the research questions, this thesis can provide a significant perspective from Public Administration to understand China's new fertility policy as well as the valued "supporting measures", and that can be an indispensable premise of solving the future problem – "what are the potential effects of the policies?"

To answer the two research questions, the author chose the WeChat Official Account of China Population and Development Research Center (an official think tank under the regulation of the National Health Commission) as the data source and collected 292 relevant articles that CPDRC posted online from October 2016 to February 2022. Quantitative content analysis and qualitative content analysis were chosen as the methods to process the collected text data, and the two methods were applied to the analysis in sequence. The main findings of the analysis generally answered the research questions in a satisfactory manner. First, discernable preferences among different "supporting measures" in the actual implementation of China's new fertility policy system do exist as the 'incrementalism' theory suggests; second, the divergent features of each "supporting measure" in actual implementation are further summarized in order to distinguish which measures are preferred and which are less preferred or just put on hold. With the knowledge got from this research, the current

gap of "understanding the ongoing new fertility policy process from a Public Administration perspective" can be filled up by some extent, and a comprehensive understanding of the policy process is necessary for scholars to assess policy effects and make new advice for policymaking in the future.

## 1.3 Thesis Outline

The general structure of this thesis is arranged as follows. In addition to the introduction (Chapter 1) and the conclusion (Chapter 6), the rest of the thesis text is divided into the following four parts: Chapter 2 is a literature review which sums up recent researches on the topic of China's new fertility policy published in both English and Chinese academia since 2015; Chapter 3 provides the theoretical framework by referring to Lindblom's 'incrementalism' theory in the discipline of Public Administration and explains how this theory works in guiding this research; Chapter 4 is about the methodology and research methods applied in this research, namely how the data are collected and analyzed, with special emphasis on the reasons of choosing certain methodology and methods as well as reflection on the corresponding limitations and ethical considerations; and Chapter 5 delivers the process and results of applying the aforementioned methods to analyzing and interpreting the collected data and finally answers the research questions.

## 2  LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, existing literature relevant to China's new fertility policy system since 2015 will be systematically reviewed. It will begin with the overview of literatures which seek to evaluate or assess the effects of the new fertility policy (mainly the "two-child policy"), then the ones concentrating on making policy advice. Afterwards, it will discuss the contribution and main deficiency of the existing body of knowledge, to find out the gap in need to solve the research problem and thus justifying the

significance of this research.

**2.1 Evaluation or Assessment of China's New Fertility Policy**

Generally speaking, either by theoretical deduction or by empirical studies, most researchers do not expect highly from China's "two-child policy" to boost a "baby boom" immediately. In addition, a considerable number of researches also mentioned the necessity of corresponding supportive policies in terms of financial support, childcare services, education reform, and so on.

Qin & Wang (2017) reviewed a 30-year-long "two-child policy" experiment carried out in a county in China since 1985 as an empirical sample to assess the potential impact of the newly issued "universal two-child policy" and they came to a conclusion that the causal effect of "two-child policy" was not significant enough. Another empirical research from Xu et al. (2022) found that the new "two-child policy" led to a modest reduction in contraceptive use among internal migrant women with only one child in China, similarly indicating the limited effect of barely relaxing restrictions on the number of births, and they argued that more additional measures like providing childcare services, education and housing reforms, are crucial to a desired increase of fertility rate.

Many researchers introduced various quantitative tools to assess the possible effects of the "two-child policy" on total fertility rate or other relevant indicators. Zhang, Guo and Zhai (2019) developed a fertility simulation model which revealed that the effects would be significantly positive in the short term, yet mild in the long run. Comparing to this, another more pessimistic estimation came from Zhang & Zhang (2021), who applied quantitative methods to demonstrate the failure of China's "two-child policy" and recommended to analyze the influence of various factors on

the reproductive choices of women at childbearing age to improve the policies in implementation. In the discipline of Economics, Liu (2020) used multiagent simulation technology that "integrates the two-child policy into a complex model featuring population, resources, and economic growth", and the results showed that the "two-child policy" alone may only promote economic growth in a very limited sense.

Surveys are widely used to collect data on people's response of the new fertility policy. Zhang & Zheng (2021) found that the willingness of childbearing-age women to have a second child in Lanzhou City is relatively high under the "universal two-child policy", although there remain factors discouraging women's fertility intention like family economic pressure, childcare, work pressure, as well as the idea of eugenics due to the previous one-child policy. Zhang et al. (2021) conducted a cross-sectional survey online to investigate the prevalence of third birth intention among the population at childbearing age after the "three-child policy" was enacted, and their data suggested a quite low third birth intention (only 12.2%) on the whole. Analyzing the related "reasons" answered in the survey, they called for further measures from the government to stimulate birth intention among the childbearing-age population.

Many researchers took a gender perspective in particular in their studies. Fang & Xia (2021) criticized the government for only caring about fertility rate while ignoring the high costs of child-rearing, and they pointed out that the new fertility policy may easily result in a retrogression in the field of women's development and gender equality. Shen & Jiang (2020) focused their sights on professional women who gave birth to a second child under the new fertility policy. By interviewing 26 professional women who have two children in Shanghai, the researchers found that the work-family conflict for the interviewees was severe, and the lack of family-friendly working environments and gender inequality are to blame. Liu & Liu (2020) took

gender income as a variable that could affect the fertility choices in China. Presenting "a significant U-shaped relationship between female income and two-child fertility choice", they claimed that compared to relaxing the number of births per couple from one to two or more, other forms of supportive fertility policies are what really matters. Tang et al. (2022) analyzed medical records data from Shanghai and indicated that the "two-child policy" is effective in reducing the imbalance in the sex ratio at birth, which is one of the few pieces of good news about the new fertility policy.

**2.2 Policy Advice from Academia**

Since the academia almost have a consensus that the "two-child policy" alone could hardly change the current low-fertility pattern in China, there has also been a great deal of literature that focuses on policy advice, especially in Chinese academia. Nevertheless, the hundreds of suggestions show more or less convergence, so only several representative papers on behalf of different aspects are selected in this section.

Taking Guangzhou City as an example, Zou, Luo and Chen (2021) measured and calculated the cost of having a second child in first-tier cities. They believed the high cost is a main obstacle for the growth of second-child fertility rate, and prompt appropriate financial subsidies towards families with second child from the government.

Hong et al. (2021) conducted a nationwide survey on current development of childcare services for children under 3 years old in context of China's "universal two-child policy". The results of the survey disclosed the problems with the accessibility, quality, and administration of the existing childcare services that are still urgent, albeit certain progress have been made in recent years.

Lin (2021) used logistic regression model to study the influence of labor rights on the second-childbearing intention of professional women in Fujian Province. The results showed that discrimination in employment and low income have a significant impact on the decline of women's fertility intention. On that basis, Lin appeals to the government for protection of women's labor rights and elimination of gender discrimination in employment.

Utilizing CGSS2015 (the Chinese General Social Survey in 2015) data, Wei et al. (2019) discovered a significant positive correlation between residents' satisfaction with public education and their willingness to have a second child. Therefore, they suggested that targeted efforts to improve the quality of public education would help raise fertility rates.

Cheng (2020) reviewed literature on the influence of housing on reproductive behavior, emphasized the strong restraining effect of high housing price on fertility behavior, and suggested the government to make more rational housing policies related to fertility policy.

Some scholars introduced or compared the fertility policies of several developed countries including Japan, Sweden, France, Germany and Australia (Yang, 2016; Kan, Liang & Li, 2018; Wang, 2019; Xu & Liu, 2020) in order to provide enlightenment for the formulation and improvement of China's fertility policy system, and their specific suggestions are almost no more than those mentioned above.

Besides, there are also some meaningful researches on public response to China's new fertility policy, which directly reflects the public's thoughts and suggestions on fertility policymaking instead of the experts' views. Lu & Zheng (2017) made topic

analysis of nearly 20, 000 microblogs related to "two-child policy" on Sina Weibo, China's largest online platform for expressing public opinion. Deng et al. (2021) used text mining analysis of more than 74, 000 Weibo users' comments on 6 years' worth of *The People's Daily* media coverage to investigate social media interactions on fertility policy issues between the state-run news media and individual users. Wu, Liu and Yuan (2021) used a semantic network analysis of Sina Weibo posts to explore how the "two-child policy" was contended by various voices on social media. They all found that most people take this policy with a grain of salt, holding extensive concerns of the follow-up supporting policies.

## 2.3 Discussion and Summary

On the one hand, the existing literature have done well in pointing out the weaknesses of the 2015 "universal two-child policy" through data presentation and theoretical deduction. Also, they demonstrated the rationality and necessity of some "supporting measures" in various aspects including direct financial support, childcare services, education reform, housing support, labor rights protection, gender equality, etc. It is highly possible that some of the assessment and policy advice from academia have contributed to the government's adding the goal of establishing "supporting measures" system in the document of the "three-child policy" in 2021. On the other hand, there has been very few literatures in regard to the new "three-child policy" and the "supporting measures" system that was simultaneously initiated. After the government has accepted some of the critics and advice from the academia, is there anything more that the scholars can do? The answer should be "yes", out of question.

In these previous studies, the scholars mostly took a "rational" perspective to assess the effects of different measures individually under ideal conditions. They have well demonstrated why each "brick" in the "supporting measures" system is needed. However, Rome was not built in a day. In the actual process of policy implementation,

the government surely cannot build all the "bricks" simultaneously in a sudden. In policy implementation, decisions on the sequence and preferences among different "supporting measures" are necessary, and maybe the most important. Such a Public Administration perspective was lacked in the existing body of knowledge, which means more intelligence is demanded to understand the actual policy implementation of the "supporting measures" system before further pertinent advice can be produced to assist with better administrative decision-making.

In summary, by reviewing relevant literature, this chapter synthesizes opinions in regard to the influence of China's new fertility policy since 2015 as well as policy advice from the academia. In the meanwhile, the deficiency of the existing body of knowledge is clearly illustrated. The existing knowledge gap has motivated the design of this research and justified the introduction of the 'incrementalism' theory from the discipline of Public Administration to analyze China's new fertility policy system.

## 3   THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this chapter, the theoretical framework that guides the design of this thesis will be presented. Firstly, Lindblom's (1959) 'incrementalism' theory from the discipline of Public Administration will be introduced. Following that, the author will explain how this theory can be applied to answering the research questions of this thesis. Finally, the limitations of the chosen theoretical framework will also be discussed.

### 3.1 'Incrementalism' Theory

In 1959, political scientist Charles E. Lindblom published a remarkable paper *The Science of Muddling Through*, in which he formally and systematically explained the idea of "incrementalism" (or being called "muddling through") that is more close to the policymaking procedure in complex situations in reality (Migone & Howlett,

2015). This theoretical breakthrough by Lindblom influenced the discipline of Public Administration profoundly. It has been developed and improved continuously in later times by himself and other scholars and played very important roles in explaining or guiding the decision-making and implementation of numerous public policies.

In *The Science of Muddling Through* (1959), Lindblom compared two different methods of decision-making in real complex situations -- the rational-comprehensive method and the successive limited comparison method (i.e., the method of "muddling through"). The essential divergence of them is that the former seeks to solve problems by "root" with "perfect" predetermined plans that have taken all important relevant factors into account, while the latter values incremental changes step by step to achieve a complicated goal from "branches". To show the advantages of the "muddling through" strategy, Lindblom briefly listed the characteristics of both methods to make a contrast.

First, the rational-comprehensive method requires clarification of values as a prerequisite, which usually turns out to get stuck in the beginning because not only citizens but also public administrators themselves always disagree with each other on the degree of importance of several critical but conflicting values. In contrast, marginal or incremental values are easier to be quantified and thus compared, which is exactly what the "muddling through" method advocates. Second, by abandoning the "means-ends relationship" (Lindblom, 1959, p83), the "muddling through" method enjoys more freedom in the analysis before decision-making. Third, a "good" policy in the rational-comprehensive method must prove itself to be the most appropriate means to desired ends, while in the "muddling through" method, the standard of a "good" policy is just basic agreement on the policy itself. Fourth, by esteeming the value of modest incremental trials in practice, the "muddling through" method greatly reduces the reliance on theory in the other method and simplifies the analysis by

Having justified the superiority of the "muddling through" method of decision-making in real complex situations, Lindblom (1959) emphasized again the differences between theorists and practitioners. Theorists are usually inclined to the rational-comprehensive method while practitioners tend to find "muddling through" more reasonable and practical. The divergence in methodology usually lead to the consequences that the administrators may consider advice from outside experts of very limited help to them. Such dilemma coincides with the deficiencies of the research status of China's new fertility policy system mentioned in the literature review. Naturally, introducing the 'incrementalism' theory into the analysis to understand the real process of policymaking and implementation can be a potential way to make the researches more valuable for future policymaking.

## 3.2 'Two-/Three-child Policy' from the Perspective of Public Administration

As Chapter 2 illustrates, although scholars have already offered administrators abundant professional advice on how to improve the effects of "two-/three-child policy" in implementation, they can still make more contribution by thinking more from the exact perspective of Public Administration.

Deducting from the 'incrementalism' theory, when facing a package of "supporting measures" consisting of various aspects, it is unfeasible for the government to come up with a comprehensive and detailed blueprint to accomplish all the goals at one time. Instead, preferences among different "supporting measures" should exist, which is exactly what this thesis aims to find out and analyze. By clarifying Chinese government's preferences among different "supporting measures" at the beginning stage of implementation, the work of this thesis can lay a solid foundation for further

detailed researches in this area (e.g., researches focusing on how to improve the feasibility of those currently "not preferred measures" can be extraordinarily valuable henceforth).

In effect, there are two existing facts backing the suitability of applying Lindblom's 'incrementalism' theory to the analysis of China's new fertility policy system. First, from "selective two-child policy" (for couples who are both the only-child of their families) in 2011 and a slightly relaxed version (when either of the couple is an only-child) in 2013, to the "universal two-child policy" in 2015 and then "three-child policy" in 2021, the series of discreet steps to substitute the outdated "one-child policy" little by little explicitly shows the philosophy of "muddling through". Second, although the idea of establishing a "supporting measures" system as an integral whole was officially initiated in the "three-child policy" document (The State Council, 2021), the government had already taken the responses from society and academia seriously and deployed pilot implementation of some "supporting measures" at local levels before that. Therefore, it is well-grounded to suppose the whole process of establishing "supporting measures" system to be incremental. In this study, the empirical part is to find out evidence of divergent preferences for different "supporting measures" in actual implementation, thus verifying the hypothesis that China's new fertility policy system can be more properly understood by the 'incrementalism' theory.

## 3.3 Limitations and Summary

Certainly, the theory of 'incrementalism' is no panacea. Although it has become "the dominant model of public policy decision-making" (Migone & Howlett, 2015, p9) for long, challenges and critiques on it have also been a lot.

The biggest challenges came from the supporters of rational-comprehensive method, who stood on another philosophic base that it is possible for rational administrators to conduct comprehensive analysis and planning even in complex situation. They claimed that following the 'incrementalism' theory only leads to sub-optimal decisions while an optimal one is actually achievable (Migone & Howlett, 2015). Worse still, the rejection of radical policy changes inherent in the 'incrementalism' theory tends to reinforce the status quo as a consequence (Hayes, 2017). Indeed, the epistemological divergences behind the two contending methods of policymaking are difficult to judge. For example, when taking the development of technology and the accumulation of people's experience and knowledge into consideration, it is a clear fact that people's capability of conducting "rational-comprehensive" analysis has been greatly strengthened -- because a complicated problem 60 years ago may have turned into a rather easy one today. However, it still sounds utopian that scientific, rational knowledge shall prevail over and finally displace political behaviors (Render, 2001). To avoid getting bogged down in too abstract discussion, it is better to narrow it down to the research object of this thesis-- China's new fertility policy system including "two/three child policy" and corresponding "supporting measures". It is a huge project affecting 1.4 billion populations and involving almost every aspect of social life. In this sense, it is more suitable to be recognized as a "complex problem" beyond people's ability of rational analysis and planning under current conditions.

Another main critique is on the failure of the 'incrementalism' theory to explain "what ought to be" in the practice of policymaking or to offer a clear guideline. As Bendor (2015) asserts, Lindblom's critique on the conventional "rational-comprehensive" method has well stood the test of time, but Lindblom's positive applied theory of "disjointed incrementalism" has failed to instruct real-life policymaking. He also comments that despite the fading away of "disjointed incrementalism" as a coherent policymaking strategy, its key elements identified in "muddling through" are still thriving by serving as "a toolkit of heuristics" in a broader context. Therefore, there

has been scholars seeking to synthesize "rational" and "incremental" approaches (Migone & Howlett, 2015), and it is reasonable to suppose that administrators would absorb wisdom from both sides when making public policies in practice.

Overall, in Chapter 3, the theory of 'incrementalism' in the discipline of Public Administration was introduced as the theoretical framework of the thesis. Deducting from this theory, preferences among different "supporting measures" in the actual implementation of China's new fertility policy system is envisaged for further examining. The critiques and limitations of the chosen theoretical framework is also reviewed and further critical reflection on the limitations would be made on the basis of the research findings in the following chapters.

## 4   RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

The research methodology and specific methods for data collection and analysis are going to be explained in detail in this chapter. They will be justified in comparison with alternative methodology and methods. Besides, the limitations of chosen methods will also be discussed, and a reflection on ethical considerations related to this research will be included in the end.

### 4.1 Methodology

The main idea of this thesis work was initially derived from a deductive approach, but an inductive approach will be predominating in this research design. In the view of deductive theory, researchers can deduce hypotheses from existing relevant theoretical ideas and then verify them through empirical scrutiny. The results of verification can be either conformation or rejection of the initial hypotheses, which finally leads to the revision of theories (Bryman, 2016, p21). In contrast, the inductive approach allows researchers to infer implications and form theories from their observations and

findings, which shows a reversed sequence between the theories and the observations or findings. However, just as Bryman (2016) explains, both deductive approach and inductive approach may include an element of each other even in their typical models, so it is better to think of them as tendencies rather than absolute binary oppositions. In the research of this thesis, the first step to verify that "Chinese government should have shown selectivity or preferences among different 'supporting measures' in the actual implementation of new fertility policy system" goes a deductive way, while the second step to analyze the individual features of different "supporting measures" in current implementation is more navigated by an inductive way. The second step actually weighs more by serving for the overarching aim to understand the decision-making and policy implementation in this case.

On ontology, an objectivism view implies that social phenomena shall be regarded as external facts beyond observers' reach or influence, while a constructionism view emphasizes on the influence of constant interaction between social phenomena and social actors, implying that social phenomena are social constructions instead of pre-given realities (Bryman, 2016, p29). Similarly, on epistemology, positivism recommends the spirit of natural science which demands that statements can be proved or falsified by empirical evidence, while interpretivism challenges the positivist orthodoxy by stressing on the differences between people along with their institutions and the research objects of natural sciences. Inheriting the tradition of hermeneutics, interpretivism advocates the understanding of human behavior rather than the explaining (Bryman, 2016, pp.24-26). The different views on ontology result in the divergences on epistemology, and will further lead to different choices of research strategies.

In terms of this research, although objectivism and positivism seems to be more relevant to the process of answering the first research question -- to verify the

deduction about China's new fertility policy system derived from Lindblom's 'incrementalism' theory, when reiterating the main aim of this research to "understand" the new fertility policy system by analyzing the different features of "supporting measures" in current implementation, it is reasonable to introduce constructionism and interpretivism as the predominating methodological base for this research. Particularly, in the study of Public Administration, a constructionism perspective can be quite valuable in understanding the interaction between social actors (policymakers, policy scholars, policy audience) and social facts (policy outcomes and effects).

Given the discussion above, this study applies mixed methods combining quantitative and qualitative research. To be specific, it is an "explanatory sequential design" that analyzes data quantitatively first, and then uses qualitative methods to elaborate the quantitative findings (Bryman, 2016, p640). In answering the first question, a quantitative method of content analysis is selected to verify the hypothesis deducted from Lindblom's 'incrementalism' theory. After that, a method of qualitative content analysis that emphasizes concrete narratives rather than quantification will be chosen to induce more features from the data and provide better interpretations of the data. By referring to mixed methods, the advantages of both quantitative and qualitative methods can be utilized, which is conducive to the achievement of the research aim.

## 4.2 The Collection of Data

Considering the research aim and research questions, empirical materials about China's new fertility policy system at its implementation stage are needed for analysis. In other words, more specific policies and measures formulated and implemented on local level ought to be collected in addition to the several framework documents from the central government.

When the object of the research is a country with a population of 1.4 billion and over 300 prefecture-level cities, gathering all related data on a national scale is unfeasible allowing for the time limit for a master thesis. Selecting out representative samples can be a solution, but it was also negated after prudent consideration. First, it is highly challenging to work out such a group of "representative" samples and demonstrate its representativeness, because multiple factors are involved in China's new fertility policy and "supporting measures". Second, even if the first challenge is overcome, the data of official policy documents on local level can be cogent materials for answering the first research question, but hardly can they contribute to analyzing the different features of different "supporting measures" comprehensively in current implementation, because only what the governments have done is recorded in official policy documents while what they have failed to do is absent. Third, from the perspective of 'incrementalism' theory, the local policies can be viewed as experiments with various directions, so comparing to "what is being done in the experiments", maybe the more valuable information to know is "which experiments are deemed as good examples by the superior government". Therefore, alternative strategies are needed to find appropriate data sources.

In China, the formulation of population policies is in the charge of the National Health Commission (NHC, formerly called National Health and Family Planning Commission until 2018). Directly under its regulation, China Population and Development Research Center (CPDRC) is an official think tank with the responsibilities of "carrying out researches on population science, population policy consultation, and population policy publicity" (NHC, 2019). Inferring from its responsibilities, it is evident that CPDRC has <span style="color:red">dual identities in effect -- one as a think tank to advise the government with professional knowledge, another as a publicizing platform to explain and justify the executed population policies towards the public.</span> In that sense, the governmental background of CPDRC makes it distinct from pure "outsiders" who hardly takes public administrative angles into consideration. CPDRC

has been quite active in performing its duties since the two-child era from 2015. Through the lens of this official think tank playing the role as a bridge between the government and the public, a lot of valuable information can be available.

The official website of CPDRC (https://www.cpdrc.org.cn) is its portal to publish information, but it is actually inundated with information about its internal administrative affairs. Fortunately, CPDRC has been operating a new media platform based on the WeChat Official Account since 2016 and posted plenty of useful information related to its working content. It is called "Population of China" "大国人口".

By February 28, 2022, "Population of China" had posted nearly one thousand articles in relatively high quality. Excluding a few administrative news, the majority of the articles are written in the themes of its substantial working content including fertility policy, aging society issue, or some other issues related to population like internal migration. By selecting certain keywords (including fertility "生育", two-child "二孩", three-child "三孩", children "儿童", family "家庭", population "人口", etc.) in the titles, then filtering those which only talks about the former "one-child policy", 292 articles ware collected as the empirical data for analyzing. The selected articles consist of original policy papers, transcripts of the press conferences on new fertility policy hosted by NHC, news reports on fertility policies and "supporting measures" on both central and local levels, and some academic writings or policy advice from researchers in this center. By analyzing what was mentioned in these articles, if clues about how each "supporting measure" differs from others in actual implementation could be found, it can be verified that 'incrementalism' theory can be applied to understanding this case.

In general, the data collection based on CPDRC's posts on its WeChat Official Account solves the main problems with sampling mentioned above. The special identity of CPDRC as an official think tank under the regulation of central government has also made it possible to understand the policy implementation from a constructionism angle on the collected data, for both scientific criterion and political criterion are shaping this agency's work. As the researchers in CPDRC are both "scholars" and "government employees" at the same time, they create professional knowledge for policymakers to refer to, and also take the responsibility of conveying the policymakers' ideas to the public resolutely. This property suggests that the collected data should be interpreted with particular awareness of their aims, i.e., whether certain texts are written to advise the policymakers, or to inform the public, or both? It will provide plenty of room for qualitative content analysis to discover more themes beyond quantified numbers later.

**4.3 The Analysis of Data**

Following an "explanatory sequential design", content analysis and qualitative content analysis will be applied in sequence in the analysis of collected data to answer the two research questions in a coherent manner.

4.3.1 Content Analysis

For the first research question of this thesis -- "has Chinese government showed selectivity or preferences among different 'supporting measures' in the actual implementation of new fertility policy system?", a quantitative approach of content analysis (Bryman, 2016, p284) can be an appropriate method to provide answers.

To verify whether the actual implementation of China's new fertility policy system complies with the philosophy of 'incrementalism' theory, quantified data are needed

to see whether there are evident differences among the main "supporting measures" in their implementation. Content analysis is such an approach to quantify content from documents and texts, thereby generating quantified data. To make the analysis objective and systematic, predetermined dimensions (coding schedule) and categories with criteria (coding manual) are necessary. The predetermined coding schedule and coding manual must be clearly stated and then applied consistently through the entire process of coding to make sure it is systematic and replicable.

Based on the understanding of the "three-child policy" with "supporting measures" document (The State Council, 2021) and a rough reading of the text data collected in last section, a coding manual covering two dimensions was developed as below.

**Table 1. Coding Manual of Content Analysis**

| Categories of "supporting measures" | 1. Direct financial support |
| --- | --- |
| | 2. Maternal and child health protection (Medical support) |
| | 3. Childcare services |
| | 4. Education reform |
| | 5. Housing support |
| | 6. Work-family balance (Support from job market) |
| | 7. Reducing gender inequality |
| Relevance to actual policy implementation | 1. Mentioned with definite policies or with concrete action in response to policies in context |
| | 0. Mentioned without elements in "1" in context |

Several annotations for this seemingly simple coding manual should be elaborated to clarify how it will work. First of all, the content analysis in this section will only refer to "manifest content" (Bryman, 2016, p284) because the collected text data are explicit when delivering ideas, so discovering "latent content" beneath the superficial indicators is unnecessary here and it will be left for qualitative content analysis afterwards. Hence, the identification of different categories of "supporting measures" can be accomplished in a clear manner -- mainly by referring to keywords as Table 2 shows. Nevertheless, the keywords below will work only as references, and the coding procedure will still be done manually on basis of reading and comprehending the articles.

**Table 2. Keywords for Different Categories of "Supporting Measures"**

| Direct financial support | maternity benefits / allowance "生育补贴 / 津贴" |
| --- | --- |
| | tax breaks "税收减免" |
| | maternity insurance "生育保险" |
| Maternal and child health protection (Medical support) | maternal and child health "妇幼健康" |
| | eugenics "优生优育" |
| | reproductive health "生殖健康" |
| | marriage and childbearing at appropriate age "适龄婚育" |
| Childcare services | childcare "托育" |
| | nursery "托儿所" |
| | childcare by grandparents "祖辈照料" |
| Education reform | education "教育" |
| | school enrollment "入学" |
| Housing support | housing "住房" |
| | housing price "房价" |
| | public rental housing system "公租房" |
| Work-family balance (Support from job market) | maternity and paternal leave "产假 / 陪产假" |
| | childcare leave "育儿假" |
| | flextime "弹性工作制" |
| | employment "就业" |
| Reducing gender inequality | gender inequality "性别不平等" |
| | gender discrimination "性别歧视" |
| | women's development "女性发展" |
| | women's rights "妇女权益" |
| | fathers' engaging in child-rearing "父亲参与育儿" |

Secondly, to judge whether or not one "supporting measure" is mentioned "with definite policies or with concrete action in response to policies" in context, there must be explicit references to relevant laws or policies or corresponding actions in implementation if one case is to be categorized into '1', otherwise it should be coded

as '0'.

Thirdly, the coding manual as well as the keywords given above is a revised version after a pilot coding (Bryman, 2016, p298) on 30 random articles from the collected data. Certain adjustments have been made towards an early version to make sure of the exhaustivity and mutual exclusivity of the categories. Meanwhile, the "cases" in the coding are not equivalent to "articles" in the material, so sometimes there can be more than one aspects of "supporting measures" mentioned together in one single article, and then all the mentioned categories will be counted respectively. This operation will not erode the mutual exclusivity of the categories, because one "article" can cover multiple "cases", while each "case" is coded into only one category.

Fourthly, since it is a relatively simple coding schedule covering only two dimensions, the content will be coded in 14 merged numbers -- 1-1, 1-0, 2-1, 2-0, 3-1, 3-0, 4-1, 4-0, 5-1, 5-0, 6-1, 6-0, 7-1, 7-0 -- in actual process of coding for convenience. Illustrating with an example, if the measure of "Work-family balance (support from job market)" is mentioned once in data, and it comes along with a concrete policy, then it will be counted as 6-1. The operation of merging two dimensions into one in actual coding process is for the convenience of coding in Nvivo, while the decision of using Nvivo for the coding is in consideration for the qualitative method to be applied in the next step.

Finally, the results of coding will come in seven pairs of frequencies $F_{i-1}$ & $F_{i-0}$ (i=1,2...,7). By adding $F_{i-1}$ to $F_{i-0}$, it generates $T_i$ which represents the total frequencies of seven "supporting measures". Then, dividing $F_{i-1}$ by $T_i$, the percentage of policy-related cases to totality can be calculated as $P_i$. The introduction of $P_i$ makes it easier and more intuitive to distinguish between "what has really been done" and

"what has been generally talked about". With the '7×4' matrix gotten, an overall rough pattern of different "supporting measures" in current implementation can be derived.

## 4.3.2 Qualitative Content Analysis

For the second research question -- "what are the features of different 'supporting measures' in current implementation of the new fertility policy system?", qualitative content analysis (Bryman, 2016, p563) is an appropriate approach to search out underlying themes in the text data. Unlike quantitative content analysis, qualitative content analysis emphasizes researcher's understanding of the materials and allows themes to emerge out of data inductively in a constant "recursive and reflexive" manner. Since the themes or categories are not predetermined as those in quantitative content analysis, the generating and refining of themes could only be conducted throughout and after the coding process in the first step, when the researcher gets more and more familiar with the contexts. Hence, the concrete introduction and explanation of the chosen themes in qualitative content analysis of this study will be presented in the next chapter, after the quantitative content analysis is finished.

In contrast with the quantitative content analysis in the first step which creates a rough description of the data, the qualitative content analysis in this step is going to dig more deeply into the texts and elaborate more on the initial findings. For instance, supposing that the quantified data in the first step shows some clear differences among the seven different categories of "supporting measures", how can one assure whether it is a deliberate application of the 'incrementalism' theory by policymakers, or it is just an unintended consequence due to the failure of implementing a "rational-comprehensive method"? To solve such problems, the qualitative content analysis will find out some useful implications from the texts.

**4.4 Limitations and Ethical Considerations**

Several limitations of the proposed methodology and methods deserve further declaration and discussion. Issues about ethical considerations are also going to be covered within this section.

4.4.1 Limitations of the Research Design

First of all, the method of collecting data is a compromised choice. As explained in Section 4.2, an alternative way of collecting local fertility policies directly from nationwide is dismissed allowing for the time limit. Although the official think tank CPDRC provides an excellent entry point for collecting data, it should be admitted that if time and intelligence are allowed, a well-designed scheme to collect data in quantity directly from governments and media nationwide may offer more comprehensive information for the study.

Another limitation related to the data source is CPDRC's own bureaucratic nature. Recognizing CPDRC's dual roles of decision-advisory agency and policy publicity tool is a prerequisite of using its data to answer the second research question. However, the bureaucratic nature of CPDRC may still cause some unintended defects in the collected data. For instance, in the "academic writings or policy advice from CPDRC researchers" part of the collected data, Dan He, the director of CPDRC, is covered significantly more often than any other researcher, which may possibly cause an amplification effect on her personal focus of research.

Considering the method to process data, only using the frequencies of different "supporting measures" mentioned as the indicator to judge the preference or priority

is not perfect, for stronger or lighter emphasis can be attached to the mentioned "supporting measures" in accordance to the context they lie in, while such differences will be ignored when only counting frequencies. Likewise, the binary division in the second dimension is also a simplified way that fails to reflect the fact that linked policies in different context can be of more or less significance. However, these simplifications should be regarded as acceptable because the aim of the content analysis in the first step is to form an overall despite rough pattern from the data, and the more detailed depiction can be expected from the qualitative content analysis afterwards.

Language is also a potential factor to cause limitations. The collected data are in Chinese, and so will be the whole coding process, while the thesis is written in English. It is possible that certain inaccuracy can be generated when conveying information obtained in Chinese context through translation to English. To mitigate this, all the keywords that play a crucial role in the coding process are given in bilingual form above.

Finally, it should be acknowledged that the own identity of the author may bring about invisible biases unconsciously. That is to say, as a young Chinese citizen who is likely to be affected by the new fertility policy in the future, he may have a few preconceived ideas about the research object without his own consciousness.

4.4.2 Ethical Considerations

In terms of ethical considerations, this thesis work, especially the data collection part, does not violate any ethical principle required in the Master Thesis Guide. The thesis does not involve interviewing (Bryman, 2016, p466) or participant observation (Bryman, 2016, p423) as methods to collect data, so possible violations like "harm to

participants, lack of informed consent, invasion of privacy, and deception" (Bryman, 2016, p125) related to these methods are not main concerns in this thesis work. Alternatively, the data were collected from online posts of an official think tank which are open for reading and disseminating. Since the information is publically archived and readily available without requirement of password, and there are no stated site policy prohibiting the use of the material (Bryman, 2016, p139), collecting data from it is thought to be harmless to privacy issues. Actually, the targeted data are more similar to news articles in traditional mass-media in genre, although they are published on a social media platform.

## 5 ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

### 5.1 Content Analysis

A content analysis under the principles mentioned in Section 4.3.1 is applied to processing the data of the 292 collected online articles. It quantifies the text data within the predetermined framework of the two-dimension coding manual. Table 3 records the quantification results:

**Table 3. Quantification Results of Content Analysis**

| i * | $F_{i-1}$ | $F_{i-0}$ | $T_i(=F_{i-1}+F_{i-0})$ ** | $P_i(=(F_{i-1})/T_i)$ ** |
|-----|-----------|-----------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1 Financial | 25 | 99 | 124 | 20.16% |
| 2 Medical | 43 | 84 | 127 | 33.86% |
| 3 Childcare | 66 | 132 | 198 | 33.33% |
| 4 Education | 27 | 81 | 108 | 25.00% |
| 5 Housing | 5 | 39 | 44 | 11.36% |

| 6 Job | 36 | 103 | 139 | 25.90% |
| 7 Gender | 13 | 98 | 111 | 11.71% |

\* the variable i (from 1 to 7) corresponds to the seven categories of the first dimension listed in Table 1, and their names are abbreviated here.

\*\* the ways to calculate $T_i$ and $P_i$ have been explained in Section 4.3.1.

And Graph 1 turns the quantified data into a graph to present them in a visualized way:

**Graph 1. Quantification Results**



Quantification Results of Content Analysis
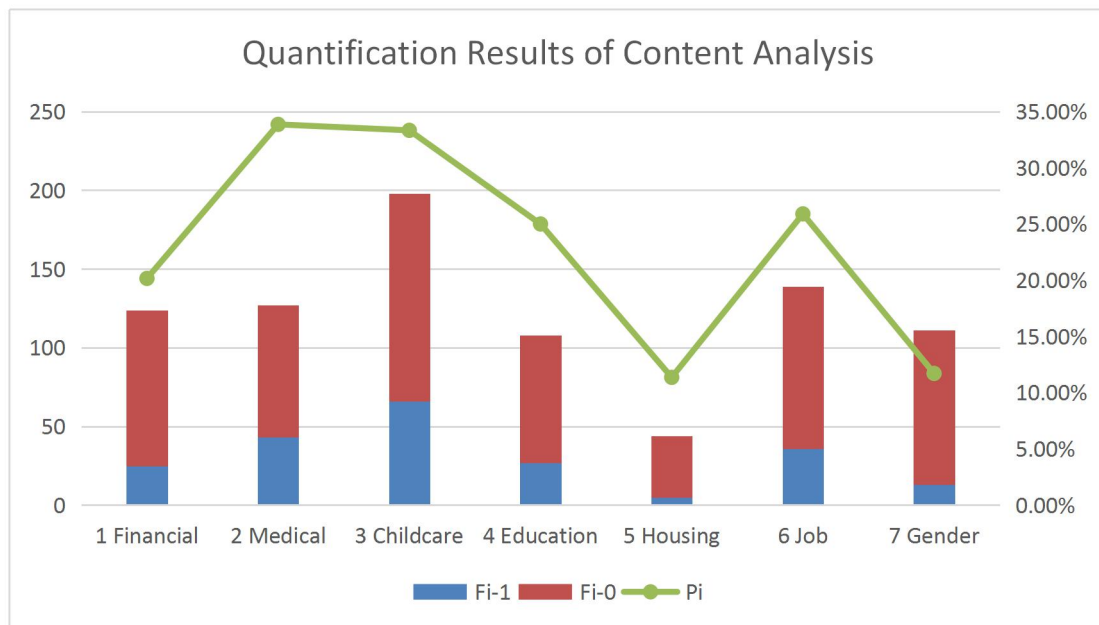
Some initial rough inferences about the implementation of seven "supporting measures" in China's new fertility policy system can be drawn from the quantification results above, thereby answering the first research question -- "has Chinese government showed selectivity or preferences among different 'supporting measures' in the actual implementation of new fertility policy system?"

After some simple calculations, the original coding results $F_{i-1}$ and $F_{i-0}$ are transformed into $T_i$ and $P_i$ for convenience of elaborating the implications conveyed by data. $T_i$ represents the total frequencies of each "supporting measure" mentioned in the collected material, no matter whether or not they have relevance to specific policies or corresponding action. Thus, it can work as an indicator of the government's general preferences towards different "supporting measures", when the identity of CPDRC as a publicizing tool of the government is acknowledged. Investigating $T_i$, it is clear that $T_3$ (Childcare) is significantly high and $T_5$ (Housing) is significantly low, whereas the others are quite close to one another (varying from 108 to 139). From this perspective, it seems that the majority of the seven "supporting measures" did not show very evident divergences.

However, as an official think tank, CPDRC is not only a publicizing tool of the government, but also an advisory agency for the government. Taking the dual-identity feature of CPDRC into account, it is necessary to distinguish measures in implementation from measures staying at advisory phase. That explains the meaning of introducing the variable $P_i$ as an indicator to mark the proportions of policy-related references in each category.

Combining $P_i$ together with $T_i$, a more accurate pattern of the implementation of seven "supporting measures" can be depicted. In general, $P_i$ and $T_i$ show a positive correlation -- measures with higher "total frequencies" usually have higher "proportions of policy-related references". Yet, exceptions do exist. $P_2$ (Medical) is the highest among all despite that $T_2$ is just average; besides, $P_7$ (Gender) is almost as low as $P_5$ (Housing), suggesting that the "reducing gender inequality" measure is also more talked than practiced like the "housing support" measure.

Fixed by $P_i$, a preliminary answer to the first research question can be concluded as below: there does exist certain selectivity or preferences among the seven "supporting measures" in the actual implementation of China's new fertility policy system. The seven measures can be roughly divided into three main groups in accordance to their divergences shown in both $T_i$ and $P_i$:

A. 2) "Maternal and child health protection (Medical support)" and 3) "Childcare services". These two measures both have the highest level of "proportion of policy-related references", indicating that they are preferred in the actual policy implementation. In addition, "Childcare services" has the highest "total frequency", though "Medical support" has only average.

B. 1) "Direct financial support", 4) "Education reform", and 6) "Work-family balance (Support from job market)". These three measures all have medium "total frequency" and medium "proportion of policy-related references", suggesting their secondary roles in the policy implementation sequence.

C. 5) "Housing support" and 7) "Reducing gender inequality". "Housing support" has a much lower "total frequency" than all other measures, while "Reducing gender inequality" shares the lowest level of "proportion of policy-related references" with "Housing support". Therefore, they are categorized as the least preferred measures by the government in the actual policy implementation.

## 5.2 Qualitative Content Analysis

Following the quantitative method used in the first step, qualitative content analysis is subsequently adopted to provide triangulation (Bryman, 2016, p386) for the preliminary findings in Section 5.1 and to further elaborate the initial findings by investigating how the seven "supporting measures" are divergently formulated and

justified at policymaking and implementation stage.

During the process of the first-round quantitative coding, the author got more familiar with the collected text data of 292 articles through detailed reading. When reexamining the data for qualitative content analysis in the second step, there emerge several crucial themes that can reveal the diverse features of different "supporting measures", which include:

A.  The relationship between different "supporting measures". It is the most important one that conveys a great deal of valuable information. It is quite often that two or more "supporting measures" are mentioned together in the material. In most of such cases, the relationship between them can be identified, which may include being competing, compatible, complementary, etc.

B.  The motivations for different "supporting measures". Each "supporting measure" was developed in reaction to certain reasons for the unfavorable fact of low fertility rate. Therefore, the more urgent reasons behind one "supping measure" mark the stronger motivation for it, thus justifying specific preference for it.

C.  The costs and expected effects of different "supporting measures". When a measure is talked about in the material, obviously, the more positive its expected effects are, the more preferred one "supporting measure" should be. Besides, referring to the emphasis of "marginal or incremental comparisons" in Lindblom's (1959) 'incrementalism' theory, it is more helpful to take the costs into account as well and consider the marginal utility.

D. Different agents to implement policies. To promote the implementation of one "supporting measure", multiple agents (e.g., government, enterprises, society, family) can be involved. Inside the government, it can also involve the collaboration of many departments. As a result, the different agents involved in policy implementation can indicate some extended information like how easy / hard it is to implement different measures.

In the following texts of this section, these four themes will be referred to in order to answer the second research question – "what are the features of different 'supporting measures' in their current implementation?" The seven "supporting measures" have been roughly divided into three groups in last section, but with the assist of qualitative content analysis, this section seeks to further investigate each of them individually. For the sake of logical coherence in narrating, the seven "supporting measures" will not be analyzed in the sequence of their coding number in last chapter. Besides, sometimes a pair of different measures can be analyzed together when the comparison between them is thought to work better in elaborating their features in implementation.

5.2.1 Direct Financial Support

Theme A "the relationship between different 'supporting measures'" and theme C "the costs and expected effects of different 'supporting measures'" are relevant to help understand the feature of "Direct financial support" in implementation.

First, looking into theme A, the measure of "Direct financial support" has a competing relationship with almost all other measures. In this measure, the government gives financial support directly to those families with babies in forms of maternity allowance and special tax break. Maternity insurance should also be counted in

because the deficit of it would be financed by the government.

*After the implementation of the "universal two-child policy", maternity insurance funds had a deficit of 900 million yuan in 2016 and 10.1 billion yuan in 2017, falling short of revenue for two consecutive years. (No. 91)*

Meanwhile, it is obvious that other "supporting measures" also need financial support from the government to back up implementation. Only by allocating funds to health care, childcare or education, housing support in the government budget can the corresponding "supporting measures" get implemented. Thus, if "Direct financial support" to families takes up too much of the government budget, other areas may not get sufficient financial backup as a result. To deal with such kind of dilemma, the attitude of the government can be implicated through the texts below:

*The adoption of economically stimulus policies requires both scientific evaluation of effects and prudent operation in terms of costs. (No. 134)*

*Considering the affordability of the country's financial resources, (the government) should improve measures such as parental leave, maternal and child health care in family planning, and women's employment rights, etc. on the basis of rational allocation of public service resources including medical care, education, and social security, and in accordance with the principles of "prioritizing filling in the current shortcomings of services", "prioritizing the easy before the difficult". After that, follow-up implementation of measures like tax support and financial subsidies can be considered as to build a complete policy system to encourage fertility. (No. 18)*

Obviously, "Direct financial support" is put on the back burner by the government because of its highly competing relationship with other measures. Apart from this inference, the two principles mentioned in above texts deserve attention, too. The two "prioritizing" principles show the inner 'incrementalism' logics of how various

mutual competing "supporting measures" should be ranked, and they directly corroborate the existence of specific preferences in policy implementation, as can be seen as a good triangulation for the quantitative findings in before.

Getting back to the discussion on the measure of "Direct financial support", theme C may tell the reason why this measure is not preferred by policymakers. When expected effects of the measures are predicted in the material, the great majority of them are positive. However, "Direct financial support" and "Work-family balance (support from job market)" are the only two exceptions which also include a few negative effects in. "Direct financial support" is claimed to be ineffective so its output-input ratio is not very competitive in view of marginal utility.

*Using direct economic means to encourage fertility is expensive and often ineffective. (No. 28)*

*Economic subsidies have an impact on short-term childbearing arrangements for low-income families, but have limited impact on middle- and high-income families. (No. 188)*

The analysis till now brings out another puzzle – why such an "unappreciated" measure still has an average "total frequency" and a close-to-medium "proportion of policy-related references" in the results of quantitative coding? A closer inspection into the contents of the references is necessary to solve this puzzle. It can be found that most of the "policy-related references" only involves a one-off maternity benefit like the reference from No.179, while very few of them includes monthly childrearing subsidies like the reference from No.90. Moreover, if comparing the amount of the subsidies with the model countries in the "policy advice articles" (see the reference from No.80), it is fair to say that China's "Direct financial support" measure within the new fertility policy system is still at the very preliminary stage.

*Families having the second-child in Xiantao City can receive a benefit of 1,200 yuan. (No. 179)*

*(In Panzhihua City,) a monthly childrearing subsidy of 500 yuan can be available for eligible families. Although not much, it can cover part of the "milk powder money". (No. 90)*

*The French government provides a subsidy of nearly 300 euros (equals to about 2070 yuan) per month for families who have the first child; if the second child is born within three years, the government provides a subsidy of about 600 euros per month until the child is 6 years old; if the third child is born, the subsidy is increased to 900 euros per month until the child is 18 years old. (No. 80)*

To summarize, by qualitative content analysis, the initial finding about the feature of "Direct financial support" in Section 5.1 is challenged. A more convincing inference is that, the measure of "Direct financial support" is not preferred by the government of China allowing for its highly "competing" relationship with other measures in budget, as well as its low marginal utility in expectation.

5.2.2 Reducing Gender Inequality

Theme A "the relationship between different 'supporting measures'" and theme B "the motivations for different 'supporting measures'" can explain why the measure of "Reducing gender inequality" shows an odd mismatch between medium "total frequency" and low "proportion of policy-related references" in quantification results.

In the material, the low fertility problem is fundamentally acknowledged as one of the objective results caused by "socio-economic development" and it is "endogenous" (No. 106). Such a scientific rhetoric is common in the material, generally reflecting

the professionalism of CPDRC as a think tank. When it comes to gender equality issues, they are also outspoken about the importance of eliminating gender inequality to boost fertility rates in modern society (No. 263, No. 142 & No. 144). The relatively strong motivation for the "Reducing gender inequality" measure makes sure that this measure has not been ignored, at least on the advisory level.

*Regions with higher socio-economic development levels have extremely low fertility levels, along with later reproductive age, lower lifetime fertility levels, and earlier endogenous fertility delays. (No. 106)*

*Gender inequality at the social and family levels is an important reason for China's low fertility rate. (No. 263)*

*Equal and harmonious gender relations will support high-quality stable marital relationships, which will turn into higher fertility enthusiasm and a greater number of fertility practices. (No. 142)*

*Women's development will be a critical key to unlock the demographic dilemma. (No. 144)*

Contrary to the medium "total frequency", an extremely low "proportion of policy-related references" of "Reducing gender inequality" seems to be unusual. To understand this, theme A must be refocused on. Different from other "supporting measures" with concrete moves that can be implemented, "Reducing gender inequality" is kind of abstract because it is "a long-term strategic task that cannot be accomplished overnight" (No. 275). From another angle, many of the other "supporting measures" can also be viewed as approaches toward the final accomplishment of the general goal of "Reducing gender inequality". For instance, by developing childcare services or promoting work-family balance for professional women, the current inequality that women tend to take most of the responsibility in childrearing can be eased (No.117 & No. 149). Broadly speaking, other measures

including "Direct financial support" and "Maternity and child health protection (medical support)" also can contribute to the ultimate goal of "Reducing gender inequality". Bearing that in mind, a compatible and even reinforcing relationship can be built between many other "supporting measures" and "Reducing gender inequality". Therefore, the preference for "Reducing gender inequality" is at least higher than what has been reflected by the quantified data in Section 5.1, even though it is a "long-term strategic task" that ranks behind other short- and medium-term tasks.

*Promoting gender equality is a long-term strategic task that cannot be accomplished overnight. It requires continuous and hard work. (No. 275)*

*......build social mechanisms to promote gender equality within the family, including labor market policies, income distribution policies, social welfare policies (such as maternity leave, parental leave), public service policies (such as childcare services) with a gender equality perspective. (No. 117)*

*Feminists' demands for public childcare services stem from their advocacy for women's employment rights, and women's employment is a part of achieving gender equality; in other words, the appeal of childcare services is derived from the proposition of gender equality. It should be the theoretical basis of all our social policies to make childcare work separate from women in the family, so that women can enter both the market and family at the same time, and have the same economic production capacity as men. (No. 149)*

## 5.2.3 Maternal and Child Health Protection (Medical Support) & Childcare Services

"Maternal and child health protection (medical support)" and "Childcare services" are the two measures which have the highest level of "proportion of policy-related references", and "Childcare services" also has the highest "total frequency" at the same time. Theme B "the motivations for different 'supporting measures'" and theme

D "different agents to implement policies" can help understand the features shown in the implementation of these two measures.

As is clearly said in the references below, coordination of "more than 40 departments of the State Council" is needed for the implementation of the new fertility policy system. Local governments also have most of the corresponding departments in accordance with the State Council, making the responsibility quite dispersed. In the reference from No. 184, social actors like NGOs are also mentioned as the agents to implement policies.

*(The central government) clearly proposes to build a family development support system to encourage childbearing according to policies. In accordance with the requirements of the central government, more than 40 departments of the State Council have clearly defined the division of responsibility to promote the implementation of tasks. (No. 86)*

*The implementation of the fertility policy requires the coordination of the National Development and Reform Commission, the National Health Commission, the Ministry of Civil Affairs, the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security, etc. At the same time, it is needed to mobilize the broad participation of social actors and take advantage of non-governmental organizations to make up for the shortcomings of public services provided by the government. (No. 184)*

The dispersed responsibility easily creates obstacles for policy implementation. In such situation, the chief department for one task can play a decisive role within that domain. From the two references below, it can be recognized that the National Health Commission plays the chief role in the two measures – "Maternal and child health protection (medical support)" and "Childcare services". As the general leadership

department of China's new fertility policy, NHC's direct leading role in these two measures absolutely makes their implementation less tough than the measures led by other departments. This explains their highest level of "proportion of policy-related references". Combined with the principle of "prioritizing the easy before the difficult" in implementation emphasized in Section 5.2.1, the significant preferences for these two measures can be justified.

*The National Health Commission has coordinated with the National Development and Reform Commission, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security, the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development, the China Banking and Insurance Regulatory Commission and other departments to increase the supply of inclusive childcare services. (No. 122)*

*We (the National Health Commission), together with the National Development and Reform Commission, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security, jointly issued the "Several Opinions on Strengthening Basic Medical Care Services during the Whole Course of Pregnancy". (No. 86)*

The motivation for pushing the measure of "Childcare services" is actually stronger than that of "Maternal and child health protection (medical support)", which is in line with the nearly 50% higher "total frequency" of the former. The problem of childcare ranks secondly among the reasons for the frosty reception of the "universal two-child policy" (No. 179). While the problem of "high economic cost of childrearing" is impossible to be solved at low expense, solving the problem of "childcare" is more achievable. The preference for "Childcare services" in actual implementation also complies with the principle of "prioritizing filling in the current shortcomings of services", because there does exist plenty of room for improvement in this area, as the reference from No. 139 shows. In contrast, China's performance of "Maternity and

child health protection (medical support)" has been satisfactory despite certain improvement to be achieved (No. 260), so the preference for this measure is ranked behind "Childcare services".

*(The main factors affecting the second child birth:) the first is the high economic cost of childrearing... the second is the problem of childcare. According to the survey, more than 1/3 of the respondents indicated that there is a need for childcare services... 60.7% of the surveyed mothers who have given birth to one child but do not plan to have a second child are due to lack of childcare services... (No. 179)*

*Due to the imperfect policy system for childcare services for infants and children under the age of 3, lack of standard regulations, along with inadequate supervision and high risks for operators, the development of nursery institutions is slow and the service supply is seriously insufficient, which is far from meeting the actual needs. (No. 139)*

*China is a high-performing country in achieving the maternity and child health indicators in the Millennium Goals... However, in the rapid socio-economic transformational development, the reproductive health needs of different groups of people are diversified, complex and individualized, so there are still many unmet needs. (No. 260)*

5.2.4 Education Reform & Housing Support

From the perspective of theme D "different agents to implement policies", the chief departments for "Education reform" and "Housing support" are not the National Health Commission like the two measures in Section 5.2.3. The Ministry of Education takes main charge of "Education reform" and the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development takes main charge of "Housing support". Although they are both led by departments other than the NHC, which makes their implementation become more difficult to some extent, the features of "Education reform" and

"Housing support" in implementation still shows great divergences. According to the quantified results in Section 5.1, "Education reform" keeps a medium "total frequency" (although the number of '108' is the lowest in the medium tier) and a medium "proportion of policy-related references", but "Housing support" only has the lowest level of the two indicators. The curious divergences need further illustration, and theme A "the relationship between different 'supporting measures'" along with theme C "the costs and expected effects of different 'supporting measures'" may provide possible answers.

The measure of "Housing support" is rarely mentioned in material. In one way, such an unusual ignorance can be interpreted as deliberate avoidance of this "not preferred" measure, considering one identity of CPDRC as a political voice tube. Even in the cases when it is mentioned, the relevant references are often very short with only several words. Therefore, the costs and expected effects of implementing "Housing support" are not directly narrated. The following references indicate a little about the underlying huge costs to solve the problem of "high housing price". To further elaborate it, the difficulty of providing "Housing support" must be investigated.

*High housing prices, especially the school district housing, and insufficient housing conditions for children have made the phenomenon of dink families more and more popular. (No. 1)*

*First-tier cities gather a large number of outstanding young people, but high housing prices make it difficult for them to start an independent family life at a young age. Measures such as stabilizing housing prices and providing low-cost housing for large families will alleviate some of the pressure. (No. 54)*

In effect, land finance acts as the major source of fiscal revenue for Chinese local governments (Chiang, 2022). If the local governments take actual measures to limit

the housing price on a large scale, their fiscal revenue will be greatly cut. In consequence, local governments will not have enough budgets to implement not only "Housing support" but also many other "supporting measures". Learning the great incompatibility of "Housing supporting" with other measures, it can be understood why it is unrealistic to expect the government to push it vigorously.

The measure of "Education reform" is another picture. References from No. 121 and No. 209 show the fact that most Chinese parents spend a great deal of money on their children's education, especially on the so-called "extracurricular education". Such a phenomenon can be attributed to the "education fever" (Anderson & Kohler, 2013) that widely exists in East Asia. Under the tenet of "quality over quantity" in childrearing, Chinese parents tend to invest much time and money in their children's education to make them become more competitive and more promising to gain success in the future. China has already built a free nine-year compulsory education system (Xue & Li, 2021) and a relatively cheap public higher education system (Liu, et al. 2021), but such "education fever" usually drives Chinese parents to pay a lot for "extracurricular education" on the market, which brings the heavy economic burden in raising their children.

*According to relevant research, from pre-school education, compulsory education to higher education, education costs are the largest direct cost of having a second child, accounting for more than 70%. (No. 121)*

*In terms of educational burden, extracurricular education expenditure accounts for a high proportion. (No. 209)*

To bring down the high education cost that discourages Chinese parents' fertility willing, what the government needs to do is to provide better and more equitable education to reduce parents' "education anxiety" for their children, and this surely

needs time and financial input. However, compared to the long-term scheme, what has already been done in "Education reform" is a strict "double reduction" policy which does not cost the government any much. The most important measure in the "double reduction" policy is "strict governance and comprehensive regulation of off-campus education" (Ministry of Education, 2021). By compulsorily limiting the supply of "extracurricular education" on the market, the government tries to cool down the "education fever" in the short term at a low cost.

*We should provide more high-quality education resources and make school education more equitable, so as to reduce the "education anxiety" of the society. (No. 182)*

*Various departments actively introduced a series of measures, including the 'double reduction' of education. (No. 90)*

*The Ministry of Education has established the Off-Campus Education Supervision Department, which is responsible for supervising the off-campus education of primary and secondary school students (also including kindergartens). (No. 182)*

"Education reform" also has a relatively compatible relationship with other "supporting measures". For example, some of the concrete actions like preceding kindergarten enrollment age, or providing after-school services, are conducive to relieving the shortage of "childcare services". The compatible relationship undoubtedly facilitates the implementation of "Education reform" in contrast with "Housing support".

*It is recommended that kindergarten enrollment be preceded by one year to reduce family care time and childcare costs for young children. (No. 16)*

*So far, 25 provinces have issued a series of policy documents on the development of after-school services. For example, Shanghai explores to achieve 100% coverage*

*of after-school services, Beijing stipulates that extracurricular activities should be carried out from 3:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m., and Jiangsu explores flexible school-leaving time system. (No. 127)*

5.2.5 Work-family Balance (Support from Job Market)

The factors affecting the implementation of "Work-family balance (support from job market)" is a little complicated. There are several indications that its priority is not as high as the quantitative results suggest.

First, the current situation of "work-family balance" is very severe (No. 198), so considerable effort is needed to create a more balanced condition for parents (especially mothers). Nevertheless, just like "Direct financial support", "Work-family balance (support from job market)" is another exception that includes its negative effects in the material. One typical side effect mentioned is the possibility that policies giving more benefits to professional women may unintentionally "exacerbate employment discrimination on women" (No. 285 & No. 153). The high costs and possible side effects make "Work-family balance (support from job market)" a low cost-effective measure.

*The adverse impact of the second child on women's employment is also a reality. 57% of the respondents said that they were the main force in taking care of the baby, and some even chose to quit their job and go back home to take care of the baby. Only 6.9% of mothers said that their career prospects have improved because of their second child, while 93.1% of mothers chose "the same" or "worse career prospects". (No. 198)*

*Some people argue that extending maternity leave will exacerbate employment discrimination on women on the job market. (No. 285)*

*Under the new demographic situation, maternity benefits increase the labor cost*

*of companies, which inhibits companies from hiring women. (No. 153)*

Second, the agent to implement this measure is miscellaneous. Apart from multiple departments inside the government, "enterprises" from society are also defined as important participants to implement "Work-family balance (support from job market)" (No. 45). Without powerful assist from enterprises, relevant policies can only remain on paper and become castles in the air (No. 108). Objectively viewing, extra coordination with enterprises outside the government upgrades the difficulty of policy implementation.

*Enterprises are important participants, and the absence of enterprises will make those who have a second child face greater occupational and economic pressure. Therefore, the enthusiasm of enterprises must be encouraged, which requires that changes at the policy level should not make enterprises bear too much responsibility. (No. 45)*

*China's parental welfare policy is mainly maternity leave system. However, even if relevant supporting policies have been introduced, they are often not implemented in place. (No. 108)*

Third, inferring from the reference below, "Work-family balance (support from job market)" has a complementary relationship with "Childcare services". In a way, these two measures can substitute each other in achieving the goal of solving childcare shortage. Since "Childcare services" has been the most preferred measure at the early stage of implementation, it becomes reasonable that "Work-family balance (support from job market)" can be slightly delayed.

*To a certain extent, the problem of childcare may even become an important factor that inhibits fertility willingness. If this is to be resolved, it is bound to seek out alternative care for children. Judging from the previous research results and practices,*

*childcare services and parental leave system are two policy paths to solve this problem. (No. 41)*

## 5.3 Summary

In this chapter, quantitative content analysis and qualitative content analysis are applied to processing the data collected from online articles published by CPDRC in turn. At first, seven categories of "supporting measures" and a binary indicator of "whether or not a reference is related to definite policies or concrete action" are defined in the quantitative analysis. The quantified results depict a rough pattern of how the seven "supporting measures" vary in their actual implementation, thus providing a preliminary answer to the first research question. After that, qualitative content analysis is adopted to provide triangulation and to further investigate the different features of seven "supporting measures" at implementation stage. By introducing four new qualitative themes emerging out through the reexamination of the data, some of the initial quantified findings are further elaborated, while some are revised according to the new qualitative evidence found in the material. Table 4 shows the main results after integrating the quantitative and qualitative findings.

**Table 4. Main Results Integrating Quantitative and Qualitative Content Analysis**

| Preferences | Measures | Main Reasons |
|---|---|---|

| Most preferred | Childcare services | Under the direct leadership of NHC; strong motivation |
|---|---|---|
| | Maternal and child health protection (medical support) | Under the direct leadership of NHC |
| | Education reform | Relatively low cost ; compatible relationship with other measures |
| Less preferred | Work-family balance (support from job market) | Involving endeavor from both government and enterprises in implementation; low expectation of its effects; a complementary relationship with "Childcare services" |
| | Reducing gender inequality | A long-term strategic task that can be approached through the accumulation of other measures; relatively strong motivation |
| Least preferred | Direct financial support | Highly competitive relationship with other measures; unconvincing effects by expectation (low marginal utility) |
| | Housing support | A more competitive relationship with other measures in terms of government budget |

With the findings above, the two research questions can get answered as below: first, consistent with the deduction from the 'incrementalism' theory, Chinese government has showed discernable preferences among different "supporting measures" in the actual implementation of its new fertility policy system; second, different "supporting measures" have showed divergent features in their current implementation. Under the direct leadership of NHC, "Maternal and child health protection (medical support)" and "Childcare services" enjoy the highest priority level, and "Childcare services" is the most preferred measure currently because of stronger motivation to improve it. Behind them, the implementation of "Education reform" is also in place due to its relatively low cost and its compatible relationship with other measures. "Work-family balance (support from job market)" and "Reducing gender inequality" rank near the

back for different reasons. The former involves endeavor from both government and enterprises in implementation, which makes the expectation of its effects quite low. The latter is more of a long-term strategic task that can only be approached through the accumulation of other measures. "Direct financial support" is not preferred in the short run because of its competitive relationship with other measures and its unconvincing effects by expectation. Finally, "Housing support" has an even lower possibility of getting implemented for a more competitive relationship with other measures in terms of government budget.

Under the guiding theoretical framework that applies the 'incrementalism' theory to understanding China's new fertility policy system, the research findings summarized above generally answered the research questions, and the work done in the research achieved the research aim by adding the perspective of Public Administration to the existing body of knowledge of China's new fertility policy system. The analysis of the ongoing policy process in this research narrowed done the existing knowledge gap defined in the literature review. The effort in this research may lay a foundation for those future attempts to study the effects of China's new fertility policy system and to produce further policy advice for it.

## 6 CONCLUSION

The transformation from the 35-year-long "one-child policy" to current "two-child policy" and "three-child policy" in China since 2015 is remarkable. The policy shift shows the government's determination to raise the low fertility rate and relieve the crises of aging society and depopulation. The potential effects of the new fertility policy system are not very clear by now, and the author believes that a comprehensive understanding of this ongoing policy shift is a necessary prerequisite of any substantial analysis on its potential effects. The awareness of a lack of the Public Administration perspective in the state-of-the-art in the field motivated the research

design of this thesis that mainly invokes the 'incrementalism' theory from the discipline of Public Administration to understand China's new fertility policy system.

"Has Chinese government shown selectivity or preferences among different 'supporting measures' in the actual implementation of the new fertility policy system?" and "what are the features of different 'supporting measures' in current implementation?" are the two research questions formulated to achieve the research aim feasibly and coherently. To answer them, empirical data are collected by gathering 292 relevant online articles that China Population and Development Research Center posted on its WeChat Official Account from October, 2016 to February, 2022. Content analysis and qualitative content analysis are chosen as the appropriate methods to analyze the data in a coherent way.

According to the results of analysis, the research questions are well answered. For the first research question, convincing evidence from both quantitative and qualitative results proves the existence of Chinese government's discernable preferences among different "supporting measures" in the actual implementation of its new fertility policy system. For the second research question, "Childcare services" and "Maternal and child health protection (medical support)" are the top two most preferred "supporting measures" currently, with "Education reform" following behind; in contrast, "Work-family balance (support from job market)" and "Reducing gender inequality" are less preferred, while "Direct financial support" and "Housing support" are the least preferred ones. Their divergent features in current implementation can be inferred and understood from combinations of four qualitative themes: the relationship between different "supporting measures", the motivations for them, the costs and expected effects of them, and the different agents to implement them.

Reflecting on the whole process of analysis, the theoretical framework as a premise for this research design deserves further discussion here in the conclusion part. The quantitative and qualitative content analysis have verified that China's new fertility policy system as a whole is conducted in an incremental way rather than a rational-comprehensive way, but there still remain some elements of the rational-comprehensive strategy (e.g., putting the measure of "Direct financial support" on the back burner in a planned way). Therefore, it comes back to the puzzle raised in the previous chapters – how to define whether it is a deliberate application of the 'incrementalism' theory by policymakers, or it is just an unintended consequence due to the failure of implementing a "rational-comprehensive method"? To solve this, we need to jump out of the "either-or" mindset. As quoted in the "Theoretical framework" Chapter, Bendor (2015) has justified that Lindblom's 'incrementalism' theory now mainly works as a "negative applied theory" that recognizes the facts of cognitive constraints and conflicting policy objectives, but not a "positive applied theory" to instruct real-life policymaking. This suggests that policymakers can refer to both strategies whenever necessary without binding to one orthodoxy. After all, the 'incrementalism' theory is referred to in this research to describe and understand the objective outcome (what the policy process turned out to be) but not to define the original intention (what the policy process ought to be), because the latter does not serve for the research aim that much.

By introducing the perspective from Public Administration, the work done in the research enriches the extant body of knowledge of China's new fertility policy system. It makes up for the common deficiency shown in relevant studies that ignores the importance of understanding the actual policy implementation except from pure theoretical argumentation. The effort in this research narrowed done the existing knowledge gap a little and the divergent features of different "supporting measures" concluded on the research findings may have significant implications for the future attempts either to study the effects of China's new fertility policy system or to

produce further targeted policy advice for it.

Finally, there are also some discussions reflecting on the choices of methodology and the outcomes of the research process. The methodological premise of constructionism and interpretivism was chosen as the most suitable one to serve for answering the research questions and achieving the research aim. Also, the decision of adopting mixed methods combining quantitative content analysis and qualitative content analysis was thought to be a feasible way to make the best use of the collected text data. It turned out that the strategy of using an "explanatory sequential design" really worked. The quantitative method got preliminary rough results first, while the following qualitative method provided triangulation by slightly revising the initial findings and further elaborating them. Therefore, the reliability of the findings and the conclusions drawn are satisfactory. In terms of generalizability, the work done in this thesis as well as the conclusions drawn can be referenced for similar studies on certain policies when the perspective from Public Administration is needed for understanding and evaluating the policies at the implementation stage.

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