

The Relationship between China's One-Child Policy and Female Empowerment

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Abstract

This paper employs a systematic literature review to examine the connection between China's One-Child Policy (OCP) and female empowerment. Based on Vanessa Fong's work, it hypothesizes a positive relationship, supported by an analysis of 32 studies. Findings largely confirm that the OCP strengthened female empowerment by concentrating resources and support on only daughters through reduced household size. This led to greater access to family investment, parental support, educational and career development, progressive gender role attitudes, stronger natal family ties, improved intergenerational relationships, and enhanced decision-making authority within marital families. While most studies support this hypothesis, some present conflicting results, plus the OCP's effects vary due to external factors such as local educational and economic resources, shifts in patriarchal norms, and parents' education and parenting concepts. This highlights the policy's complexity. Moreover, much of the literature fails to distinguish the OCP's effects from broader socio-economic changes, making its precise impact difficult to assess. Despite these overlapping influences, the database still supports that the OCP, together with other factors, has collectively shaped women's lives and influenced female empowerment.

1. Background and Research Question

This paper explores the relationship between China's One-Child Policy (OCP) and female empowerment via a systematic literature review, inspired by Vanessa L. Fong's (2002) study on urban daughters under the OCP. China started introducing the family planning policy in the late 1970s and officially implemented the OCP in 1979 to restrain rapid population growth. The policy combined incentives, such as access to financial rewards and job benefits, with coercive measures, including forced contraception, abortions and sterilisations, particularly targeting women (Pletcher 2018). While enforcement was stricter in urban areas, rural resistance due to son preference and labor needs led to the emergence of the "1.5-child policy" instead (Kane and Choi 1999). The OCP significantly reduced fertility rates and eased demographic pressures (Jiang, Li, and Feldman 2013), but it also resulted in a skewed sex ratio, undocumented children, population aging, labor shortages, and widespread controversy over women's reproductive rights (Fong 2002; Goodkind 2015).

Fong (2002) argues that the One-Child Policy (OCP) empowered women. Through extensive participant observation in schools and 107 families, she revealed that singleton daughters received greater family investment, educational opportunities, and improved family and gender status. As one of the earliest and most cited studies in this field, Fong's work serves as a pioneering study in this field, laying the foundation for subsequent work. However, some studies that are based on Fong yet challenge Fong's finding, such as Hu and Shi's (2018) study, argue that the deeply rooted paternal preference for sons over daughters will limit the OCP's role in empowering females, indicating that the influence of OCP is controversial. On the other hand, Fong also mentions that increased investment for only-daughters occurs mainly in economically advantaged households; families with limited resources may still underinvest even in an only daughter. These imply the OCP's impact may be complex and can be formed by external conditions.

Against this background, this paper asks whether the OCP led to female empowerment, and if so, in which way. To critically evaluate existing findings, verify Fong's conclusions, and gain a more comprehensive

and unbiased understanding of the OCP's impact on female empowerment, this paper takes Fong's study as a point of departure to conduct a systematic literature review on prior studies to explore whether, and how, the OCP has influenced female empowerment. Drawing on Fong's framework, this paper examines the following dimensions: family investment, education, employment, gender equality, family status, and the division of household gender roles. The central research question is:

How has female empowerment (measured as family investment, education, employment, gender equality, family status, and the division of gender roles within families) changed in response to the OCP?

Based on Fong (2002), this paper hypothesizes a positive relationship between the OCP and female empowerment.

The terminologies used in this paper are explained below:

- Only-daughters: daughters without siblings
- Only-son: son without siblings
- Only-child: the child without siblings (covering both female and male).

2. Relevance of this review

According to the European Institute for Gender Equality (2023), female empowerment encompasses women's self-worth, decision-making rights, access to opportunities and resources, control over their lives inside and outside the home, and the ability to influence social change. Education, training, awareness, confidence-building, and institutional reforms are key tools for empowerment. Female empowerment is closely linked to fundamental

human rights and gender equality, enabling women to live with dignity and make strategic life choices (Bayeh 2016; UNFPA China 2017). It strengthens women's roles in personal, family, and societal contexts. Female empowerment is also the key pathway toward gender equality (Peace Corps n.d.). However, in contemporary China, patriarchal traditions and son preference hinder gender equality and women's welfare, causing employment discrimination and skewed sex ratios, which lead to social issues such as marriage squeeze and gender-based violence (Fung & Ferchen 2014; Liu 2023; UNFPA China 2017). Gender inequality and insufficient female empowerment undermine women's rights and well-being, harming their emotional, economic, and social interactions and limiting their development (Liu 2023). Such disparities cause gender imbalances and violence, threatening social stability (UNFPA China 2017). Female empowerment and gender equality are essential for social development and poverty reduction; without them, national development slows, costs rise, and injustice grows (Bayeh 2016). Therefore, female empowerment is key to women's welfare and social stability.

Fong (2002) argues that the OCP has empowered females, providing a direction for exploring ways to enhance female empowerment. However, it remains unclear how extensively the literature has investigated this area and whether similar insights and conclusions have been reached. Moreover, according to Liu (2023), despite decades having passed since the OCP was implemented, gender inequality remains severe. This somewhat contradicts the hypothesis that the OCP may have promoted female empowerment, as that hypothesis would expect a reduction in gender inequality over time. Therefore, the impact of the OCP on female empowerment requires further investigation. This topic lacks a systematic literature review. This paper aims to fill this gap by systematically investigating the impact of the OCP on female empowerment. Through providing comprehensive insights on OCP's role, the paper will advance the understanding of how population policies influence female

empowerment and offer guidance for identifying effective factors to promote female empowerment in the future.

3. Theoretical Framework: Fong's Framework on Female Empowerment Through the OCP

Fong (2002) argues that Chinese urban daughters born under the OCP are often regarded as the most fortunate generation of Chinese females in thousands of years. Traditionally, China's patriarchal kinship system favoured sons in family resource allocation, including education, property, and inheritance. While through making the daughter as the only-child in a family, parents have no choice but to invest resources in their daughters therefore combat challenge the traditional patriarchal norms, Fong believes through create specific demographics, OCP makes the only-daughter have received higher input from family resources, which empowers daughters with the ability and opportunity to challenge inequitable gender norms and secure benefits.

To comprehensively understand OCP's impact on female empowerment, this paper conducts a systematic review to comprehensively examine existing studies. Fong's literature provides a relatively comprehensive examination of the subfield of female empowerment, covering aspects such as family resources, educational work, and gender norms. Thus, this paper initially adopts Fong's study as the theoretical basis, dividing female empowerment into four primary subfields (with subclasses in Table 1). Further subfields will be added if there are new findings during the research process.

Table 1: Subfields relevant to female empowerment according to Fong's study

Subfields relevant to female empowerment	Subclasses
Family investment and parental support	Family investment, resources Parental support, attention and care
Education	Educational opportunities and achievement
Employment and Career Development	/ (same as the subfields)
Gender Equality and Attitudes	Family roles/ Status (greater value for daughters) Marriage Social mobility

4. Methodology

Williams et al. (2020) state that systematic literature reviews help deepen and broaden understanding of a topic by collecting related studies and reducing bias. Through adopting clear protocols and criteria, this method makes the process clear, rigorous, and repeatable (Owens, 2021). Using multiple search strategies and at least three databases encourages researchers to go beyond their own fields and collect more comprehensive data (Mallett et al., 2012; Coombs, 2024). Combining multiple studies' results helps avoid bias from single studies, improves the accuracy and reliability of conclusions, and resolves conflicts between different findings (Lee, 2019). Therefore, systematic reviews can offer fuller and more accurate insights into China's OCP and female empowerment. However, this method also faces challenges such as limited access to databases, subjective screening, and high resource demands (Mallett et al., 2012), which this paper must address.

4.1 Databases, keywords, and selection criteria.

The Northeastern University Library guidelines recommend using at least three databases for a systematic literature review (Coombs, 2024). Accordingly, this paper searched six databases available through ANU student access: Scopus, ANU Supersearch, Web of Science, PubMed, Wiley Online Library, and Taylor & Francis Online Journals. Keywords were chosen based on the research topic and Fong's (2002) study, which examines the impact of the One-Child Policy on female empowerment, including family resources, education, employment, family status, support for only daughters against patriarchal norms, marriage, and domestic roles (see Table 1). Search terms and formulas were developed through iterative testing.

Searching terms:

Subset A :

OCP

Subset B:

Female empowerment

Subset C:

Education, labour market outcomes,
assets/property/ inheritance, domestic
labour division, gender
attitudes/feminist thinking/ family
status/ family investment//marriage



Subset D:

Chin* (this signifies China)

Subset E

Daughter, girl, woman, women

Search formula:

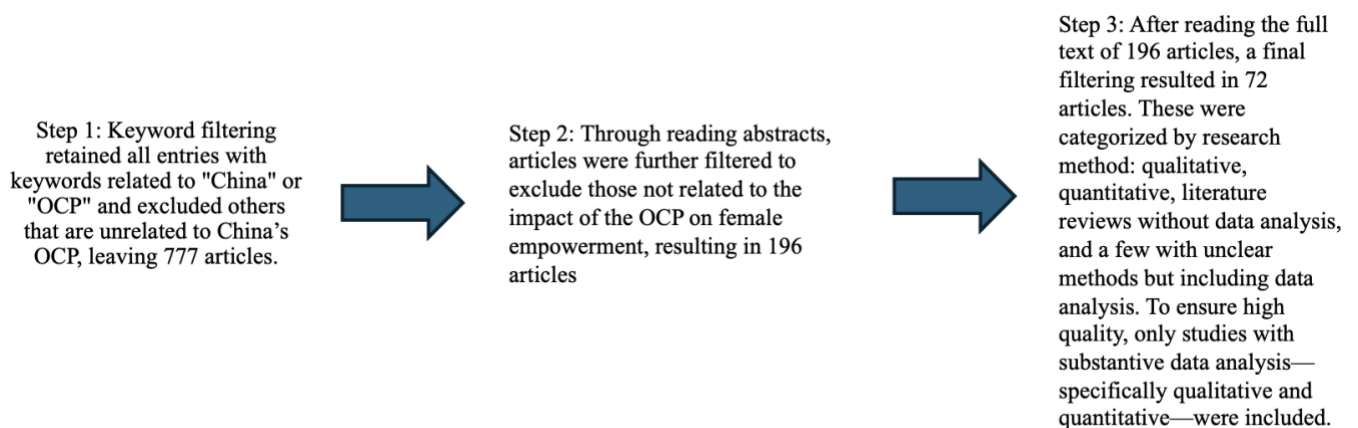
"one child policy" AND (female OR
women OR woman OR daughter
OR girl OR gender) AND
empowerment AND (fertility OR
reproduction OR education OR
labour OR labour OR employment
OR occupation OR career OR
opportunity OR job OR work OR
resources OR investment OR assets
OR property OR money OR
inheritance OR marriage OR
domestic OR housework OR
household OR family OR care OR
roles OR feminist OR feminism)

This formula was applied across all databases. All retrieved records were imported into Zotero for management, yielding 1,265 entries. After removing duplicates, 1,133 unique records were transferred to Excel.

There are five criteria for resource inclusion:

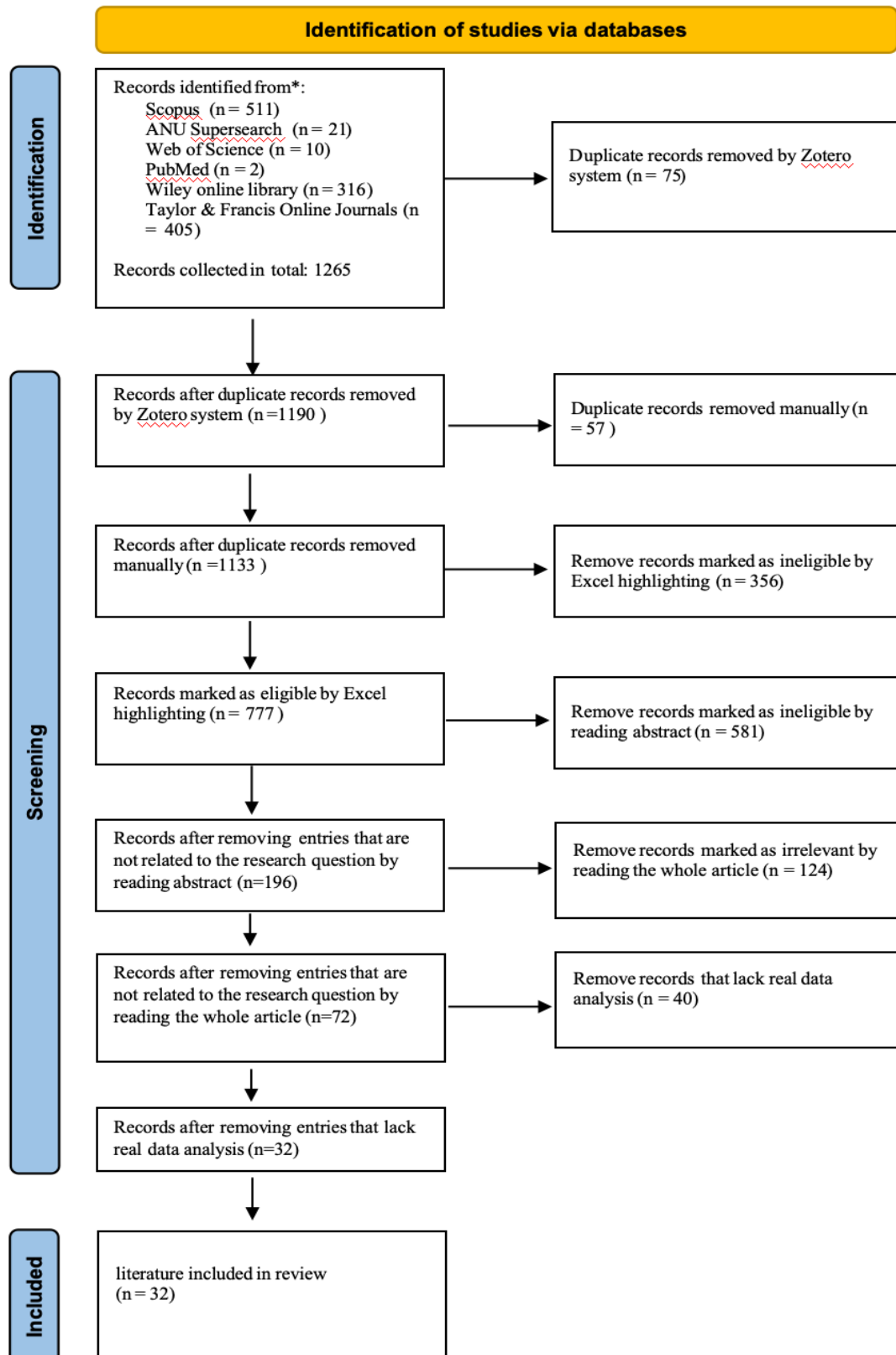
- A) It is about China
- B) It is related to the OCP or does not directly mention the OCP but implies that there is something related. For example, there is no direct reference to the OCP, but there is a study on the difference between only children and children with siblings
- C) It is relevant to female empowerment
- D) It contains a gender angle.
- E) The focus of this literature is related to the research topic.

Based on these criteria, the relevant literature was screened in three steps.



In total, 32 articles were selected (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Identifying studies for the systematic literature review and the number of studies included or excluded in each step



4.2 Data extraction

According to the Health Sciences Library guidelines, the standard tool for systematic reviews is a data extraction matrix, which organises research information in tabular form (Moreton 2022). This paper adopts the matrix from Raybould and Sear's (2020) review as a reference.

This paper will collect the following information :

- "Dataset"
- "Research question/Aim"
- "Theoretical background"
- "Temporal aspect"
- "Sample"
- "Independent variable"
- "Dependent variable"
- "Method"
- "Control variables"
- "Results Summary"
- "Nature of the relationship between independent variable and dependent variable" (with p-value)
- "Categorisation in review (association for each independent variable, categorised as positive, negative, curvilinear, none, or mixed, with the dependent variable)".

The nature of the relationship between the OCP and female empowerment is categorised in Appendix Table 1. The subfields, target groups, comparison groups, and birth cohorts are also recorded (Appendix Table 1 and Appendix Table 2).

4.3: Data analysis methodology

This paper categorises and analyses the selected literature into seven subfields related to female empowerment:

1. Family Investment
2. Education
3. Employment and career development
4. Gender equality and attitudes
5. Intergenerational relationships
6. Female reproductive rights, autonomy and health
7. Other social dynamics, including sex ratio and child sexual abuse

Although the sex ratio may not appear directly linked to female empowerment, in the context of China's son preference and selective abortion, an imbalanced sex ratio at birth is a key sign of gender inequality and female **disempowerment**. It reflects whether women's right to life is respected and their lives are valued. This imbalance increases gender gaps and leads to discrimination, violence, and rights violations against females (UNFPA China, 2017).

Therefore, it is an indirectly relevant factor in understanding female empowerment.

The OCP, implemented from the late 1970s to 2016, possibly had shifting impacts over time. This paper assumes that its effects on female empowerment vary temporally. Ideally, temporal changes would be analysed by birth cohort. However, due to limited or unclear birth cohort data in the existing database, an intergenerational comparison between mothers (older generation) and daughters (younger generation) is applied instead. While precise cohort analysis is not possible, this approach captures temporal changes of the OCP within the available data to some extent. Table 5 presents this comparison.

According to Appendix Table 2, mothers' birth years range from the late 1920s to the late 1990s, with most studies focusing on those born between the 1940s and 1990s, except Wu, Ye, and He (2014), who extended the range to the 1920s. However, due to the small sample sizes and the fact that women born in the 1920s–1940s were generally beyond childbearing age during the OCP, their experiences were largely unaffected. Thus, this paper limits the relevant mothers' cohort to births between the 1940s and 1990s. The most frequently studied cohorts are those born between the 1960s and 1980s, possibly because these women were of reproductive age during the OCP's strictest phase, making them the primary affected group. Daughters' cohorts mainly span the late 1970s to the 2000s. Some overlap exists between mothers and daughters from the late 1970s to the 1990s, but due to unclear cohort data, the precise distinction is impossible.

Despite overlap and ambiguity in cohort definitions, a generational distinction exists between mothers (born 1940s–1990s) and daughters (born late 1970s–2000s). Thus, intergenerational comparison offers a meaningful perspective to examine temporal changes in the OCP's impact on female empowerment. Although it is not a precise birth cohort analysis and cannot produce exact results, this approach effectively captures the temporal dimension of the policy's effects.

5. Subfields analysis

Existing studies are categorised based on the nature of the relationship between the OCP and female empowerment, specifically, whether the findings suggest the OCP is beneficial or detrimental to women. Appendix Table 2 provides an overview of the studies and subfield classifications. Table 2 presents the distribution of findings across six categories: positive, negative, mixed (both positive and negative), no effect, cannot show relevance (distinct from no effect, indicating inconclusive results), and complicated (difficult to define). Each study is

counted only once. Future research may adopt a multiple-counting approach to further unpack the “Mixed” and “Complicated” categories. For instance, a study classified as “Complicated” may show a positive impact on one group in a specific subfield and a negative impact on another group in a different subfield.

Table 2. Summary of Relationships Between the OCP and Female Empowerment

Nature of relationship	Number of studies
Positive	21
Negative	2
Mixed	1
No effect	2
Cannot show the relevance	1
Complicated	5

The database covers seven major subfields, as listed in the “Subfields of Female Empowerment” column in Table 3. Individual studies may appear in multiple subfields. To facilitate keyword searches in Excel, this paper adopts abbreviations—shown in parentheses after each subfield—based on the most representative term in each subfield. For convenience and concise text, these abbreviations are also used throughout the paper. Most studies concentrate on Family Investment, Education, Employment and Career Development, and Gender Equality and Attitudes, while the other subfields are comparatively underexplored. Detailed qualitative analyses of each subfield are presented in Sections 5.1 to 5.7.

Table 3. Literature by subfields of female empowerment and the nature of the relationship

Subfields of female empowerment	Number of studies	Result
Family investment and parental support (investment)	9	Complicated 1 Positive 8
Education (education)	11	Complicated 1 No effect 1 Positive 9
Employment and career development (employment)	10	Positive 10
Gender equality and attitudes (gender)	14	Cannot show the relevance 1 Complicated 2 Negative 1 Positive 10
Intergenerational relationships (relationship)	5	No effect 2 Positive 3
Female reproductive rights, autonomy and health (autonomy)	3	Negative 2 Positive 1
Other social dynamics: sex ratio (“sex ratio”)	3	Complicated 2 Negative 1
Other social dynamics: child sexual abuse (“child sexual abuse”)	1	Mixed 1

Table 4 analyses findings by the group of focus (women affected by the OCP) and nature of the relationship, with each study counted only once. Table 5 analyses the findings by subfields of female empowerment, the number of studies for the group of focus, and the

nature of the relationship, possibly multiple counts per study. These findings are discussed in Section 5.8.

Table 4. Literature by the group of focus and the nature of the relationship

Group of focus (Affected groups)	Number of studies	Result
Mothers	6	Negative 2 Positive 4
Daughters	21	Cannot show the relevance 1 Complicated 3 Mixed 1 No effect 2 Positive 14
Both mothers and daughters	1	Positive 1
Not clearly identified, just the female	2	All are positive 2
None, it only focuses on the main factor leading to China's gender ratio imbalance	2	Complicated 2

Table 5. Literature by subfields of female empowerment, the number of studies for the group of focus, and the nature of the relationship

Subfields of female empowerment	Number of studies for Mothers	Number of studies for Daughters	Number of studies for both mothers and daughters	Number of studies for Not clearly identified , just the female	None, it only focuses on the main factor leading to China's gender ratio imbalance
Family investment and parental support	Total:1 Positive:1	Total:8 Positive:8	0	0	0
Education	0	Total:9 Positive:7 Complicated:1 No effect:1	Total:1 Positive:1	Total:1 Positive:1	0
Employment and career development	Total:2 Positive:2	Total:5 Positive:5	Total:1 Positive:1	Total:2 Positive:2	0
Gender equality and attitudes	Total:2 Positive:1	Total:9 Positive: 6	Total:1 Positive:1	Total:2 Positive:2	0

	Negative:1	Complicated: 1 No effect:1 Cannot show the relevance: 1			
Intergenerational relationships	Total:1 Positive:1	Total:4 Positive:2 No effect:2	0	0	0
Female reproductive rights, autonomy and health	Total:3 Positive:1 Negative:2	0	0	0	0
Other social dynamics (sex ratio)	0	0	0	0	Total:2 Complicated:2
Other social dynamics (child sexual abuse)	0	Total:1 Mixed:1	0	0	

5.1 Family investment and parental support

Nine studies, four quantitative, four qualitative, and one mixed-method—examine family/parental investment, resource allocation, support, care, and attention. Findings consistently indicate that by restricting families to one child, the OCP significantly restructured resource distribution to the younger generation, concentrated investment, and particularly benefited only-daughters.

5.1.1 Synpaper of results in Family investment and parental support

5.1.1.1 Reduced sibling size and increased family investment

The OCP has significantly increased family investment and parental support for only-daughters by altering family structure (Liu 2012; Zhang 2007; Deutsch 2006; Liu 2017; Chen and Jordan 2018). By reducing family size, the OCP shifted the traditional parent-centred multi-child family model to a child-centred one, concentrating resources on the only-child regardless of gender (Liu 2012). Therefore, only-daughters receive more focused family investment than daughters with siblings (Zhang 2007; Deutsch 2006; Liu 2017).

Studies support that the OCP's reduction of family size mitigates resource dilution, thereby increasing investment in only-children. For example, only-children receive more financial and instrumental support than those with siblings, regardless of gender (Chen & Jordan, 2018). Hu and Shi (2020) report higher parental financial and time investment in only-children's education. Zhai and Gao (2010) note more parental care and enrollment in centre-based care for only-children. Therefore, only-daughters receive higher family investment than daughters with siblings. Meanwhile, Zhang (2007) highlights that rural daughters benefit from smaller families, as fewer siblings reduce resource dilution and increase individual allocation. This suggests daughters gain more family investment and support not only as

only-children but also with fewer siblings, highlighting the benefits of smaller sibling size. Importantly, only-daughters receive more investment than daughters with siblings, while both only-sons and only-daughters benefit equally from resource concentration.

5.1.1.2 Gender dynamics in sibship structure under the OCP

Fong (2002) argues that the OCP disrupted traditional son preference. In patrilineal multi-child families, resources were typically prioritised for sons. By compelling urban parents without sons to invest fully in their only-daughters, the OCP eliminated sibling competition and granted these daughters access to resources traditionally reserved for boys. Wang and Feng (2021) support Fong's (2002) argument, showing that having siblings—especially brothers—disadvantages women in accessing family resources and parental support, underscoring the benefits of being an only-daughter. In contrast, only-child status does not significantly affect men. Moreover, only-daughters continue to receive family support after marriage, extending the benefit to the next generation. This suggests the OCP primarily benefits only-daughters, challenging the view that both genders equally benefit from concentrated resources.

However, Hu and Shi (2020) and Zhai and Gao (2010) challenge Fong (2002) and Wang and Feng (2021), suggesting that while only-children receive more parental investment and attention than those with siblings, gender differences in such support are minimal regardless of sibling structure. This suggests that increased investment in daughters results from reduced sibling competition, not the absence of sons, indicating child's gender is not the primary factor and challenging the view that the OCP mainly benefits only-daughters while having limited effect on only-sons.

5.1.2 Discussion on family investment and parental support

Two factors explain the greater investment in only-daughters: resource concentration from smaller sibship size and the absence of competition from brothers. Studies in 5.1.1.1 suggest that by reducing sibling size, the OCP enables only children to receive concentrated investment and support regardless of gender. However, others argue that by producing no-son families, the OCP forces parents to reallocate resources traditionally favored for sons to their only daughter, thereby benefiting only-daughters more, while only-sons are less benefited due to their traditional resource advantage (Fong 2002; Wang & Feng 2021). This finding is further challenged by Hu and Shi (2020) and Zhai and Gao (2010), demonstrating that child gender does not significantly influence family investment across sibling structures. An open debate emerges: does the OCP benefit only-sons and only-daughters equally, or primarily only-daughters? Resolving this requires future research with rigorous variable controls and comparisons, such as between only-daughters and daughters with siblings, only-sons and sons with siblings, to determine if these groups experience similar changes.

5.2 Education

Eleven studies published between 2002 and 2024, six quantitative, two qualitative, and three mixed, demonstrate that the OCP promoted females' education by enhancing educational resources, opportunities, and achievement for only-daughters.

5.2.1 Synpaper of results in education

The OCP reduced sibling size, making only-daughters the sole child, which weakened traditional gender biases and raised parents' educational expectations for them (Fong 2002; Liu 2012; Wang, Huang, and Cai 2023). This resulted in greater educational investment, a more gender-equal environment, and thus enhanced cognitive development, personal abilities and academic outcomes (Gu and Yeung 2021). The changed sibship structure appears fundamental to multiple pathways of influence.

Data indicate that following the OCP, education's gender gap narrowed, especially in urban areas (Wu, Ye, and He 2014). Women's average schooling increased by 0.559 years, exceeding men's 0.265 years (Wang, Huang, and Cai 2023). Female educational level improved, with higher high school and university graduation rates, and only-daughters outperformed daughters with siblings in academic achievement and elite university access (Huang, Lei, and Sun 2021; Liu 2017). Moreover, only-daughters demonstrated greater innovation, excelling in line meaning fluency and originality compared to daughters with siblings (Guo, Lin, and Guo 2018).

In contrast, in rural areas, facing widespread multiple children and son preference, daughters with siblings face unequal family resource allocation, resulting in reduced educational access and lower attainment than urban only-daughters (Zhang, Wang, and Liu 2021; Gu and Yeung 2021). This highlights the OCP's role in enhancing females' education by concentrating resources on the only-child. Kim, Brown, and Fong (2018) also find that the OCP fosters more flexible gender identities, which boost adaptability and innovation, helping females outperform males in education and careers.

In conclusion, daughters with siblings are disadvantaged in education due to resource dilution and son preference. By reducing sibling structures, the OCP concentrated family resources

and support on only-daughters, granting them opportunities equal to sons and narrowing the gender gap in education.

5.2.2 Discussion on education

However, Huang, Jiang, and Sun (2024) challenged OCP's role, finding that in regions without strict birth spacing rules, traditional son preference and lenient birth policies protected first-born girls against the negative effects of mother-daughter separation on academic performance. Yet under strict OCP regulations, this protective effect declined, suggesting that strict OCP may hinder girls' academic outcomes. However, the claimed impact of traditional son preference on girls' academic performance lacks direct evidence and relies on indirect inference, potentially concluding a misattribution that requires further investigation.

Moreover, Guo, Lin, and Guo (2018) found that only-daughters outperformed daughters with siblings in line-meaning fluency and originality but not in real-world problem tests, while scoring higher than eldest sons with siblings in fluency and real-world problem tests. These suggest that while only-daughters benefit from concentrated resources, their real-world problem-solving abilities may be shaped by more complex factors such as birth order and gender, indicating that the OCP's role in learning performance may be limited and requires further investigation.

5.3 Employment and career development

Ten studies, including five quantitative, four qualitative, and one mixed method, indicate that the OCP benefits women's careers by reducing household burden, workplace discrimination,

thereby enhancing labor force participation, career development, incomes, and economic independence, while narrowing the gender income gap.

5.3.1 Synpaper of results in employment and career development

By reducing sibling size, the OCP provides only-daughters with concentrated family resources and support, including education, parental care and attention, social and psychosocial support, enhancing their academic achievements and career aspirations (Fong 2002). This fosters their enhanced family roles and greater economic independence through income-generating work (Zhang 2007; Liu 2012).

Kim, Brown, and Fong (2018) further demonstrate that concentrated resources enable only-daughters to resist traditional gender norms and develop flexible gender identities. This fosters adaptability and innovation, enabling them to access male-dominated fields, adapt better to China's rapidly changing market economy and outperform men in education and careers.

Additionally, more siblings or children are linked to lower labor participation and career achievement for women (Liu and Marois 2024; Wu, Ye, and He 2014). While strict birth control increases women's access to white-collar jobs (Huang, Lei, and Sun 2021). With fewer children and reduced family size, the OCP eases women's household and childcare burdens, reduces work-family conflict, and shields them from labor market discrimination, thereby freeing energy for their careers and promoting career advancement (Fong 2002; Zhou 2021).

Moreover, only-daughters often receive parental support for childcare after marriage, easing their burden and supporting career post-childbirth (Fong 2002; Shen and Jiang 2020).

Following the OCP, women's pre-tax and post-tax incomes significantly increased, while men's remained unchanged, narrowing the gender income gap (Wang, Huang, and Cai 2023).

All these promote gender equality and reflect the OCP's benefits for women's career development.

5.3.2 Discussion on employment and career development

Similar to education, evidences support that concentrated family resources from reduced sibling size are key to advancing only-daughters' employment and careers. Additionally, flexible gender identities due to OCP enable only-daughters to transcend gendered career boundaries, expand employment opportunities, and strengthen workplace competitiveness.

This suggests the OCP's promotion of gender awareness also plays a role in women's career development.

Moreover, the above analysis demonstrates that the OCP benefits mothers by limiting children, thereby reducing childcare burdens and workplace discrimination, and advancing labor participation and career achievements. Overall, the OCP promotes career development for both mothers and daughters.

5.4 Gender equality and attitudes

Fourteen studies — five quantitative, eight qualitative, and one mixed-method—support that the OCP has significantly challenged traditional gender roles and promoted gender equality.

Key effects include increased gender equality awareness among only-daughters, weakened patrilineal son preference, improved family status and recognition for only-daughters, a more equal division of household labor, and greater household decision-making power and well-being for married women.

5.4.1 Synpaper of results in gender equality and attitudes

The OCP, by limiting childbirth, compelled parents to invest more in fewer children regardless of gender, benefiting only-daughters and reshaping gender roles (Zhang 2007). In traditional patriarchal China, daughters were undervalued due to reliance on sons for elderly support (Zhang 2009). Smaller family sizes raised each child's value, prompting parents, especially with only-daughters, to shift son-oriented expectations onto them. Only-daughters now receive more investment, are expected to support families. Daughters are increasingly seen as equal to sons, with rising expectations and a decline in traditional gender attitudes (Fong 2002; Zhang 2009).

Concentrated family resources foster flexible gender identities, empowering only-daughters to challenge gender norms and succeed in China's rapidly transforming market and enter male-dominated fields (Kim, Brown, and Fong 2018), thereby facilitating shifts in traditional gender attitudes (Deutsch 2006; Liu 2008). This breaks patriarchal norms, reduces discrimination, and advances gender equality, demonstrating a strong link between family investment and changing gender attitudes.

The OCP compelled only-daughter families to reconsider family legacy continuation beyond the patrilineal line, thus prioritising only-children's happiness and success over surname continuity through a male heir (Deutsch 2006). This supportive environment fosters gender

equality awareness and enables only-daughters to challenge patriarchal norms. For example, before the OCP, male heirs had greater influence on corporate innovation than female heirs. However, this gender gap narrowed following the OCP, with male heirs no longer having a significantly greater positive impact (Chen et al. 2021). This suggests that the OCP enhanced women's capacity to influence and continue family legacy, reducing traditional son preference and strengthening daughters' familial roles.

Additionally, the OCP's demographic shift advanced gender equality by reducing motherhood burdens, promoting a more equal division of housework, and enhancing women's satisfaction with family status and happiness. Multiple siblings lower only-daughters' educational attainment, causing increased housework burdens and reducing family satisfaction (Wu, Ye, and He 2014). By limiting sibling size, the OCP improved women's educational and career outcomes, indirectly reducing their housework burden and increasing satisfaction with housework division, family status, and marriage, thus enhancing subjective well-being (Wu, Ye, and He 2014; Huang, Lei, and Sun 2021). Smaller family sizes have also eased the burden of childbirth and childcare, enabling women to pursue education and employment beyond motherhood (Fong 2002). Zhou (2021) also finds that individuals with stronger egalitarian gender role attitudes tend to support strict government fertility control. They view birth control policies as aligned with feminist goals of gender equality, particularly for those prioritising women's public participation. Such policies are believed to ease conflicts between unequal housework and careers by freeing women from childbirth and household burdens.

Moreover, according to Huang, Lei and Sun (2021), strict birth control policies have improved household income and savings and increased the likelihood of female household

heads. These policies have also shifted household consumption toward female-oriented goods, such as clothing and beauty products, and reduced male-oriented spending, including alcohol and dining out. This reflects a shift in household resource allocation toward women's preferences, enhancing their financial decision-making power and challenging the male-dominated family model. It reflects stronger female status and advancing gender equality within families. Stricter birth penalties have also weakened traditional beliefs that marriage and motherhood are essential for women, fostering greater awareness of female independence and gender-equal roles in society.

5.4.2 Discussion on gender equality and attitudes

Similar to previous subfields, the OCP's advancement of gender equality primarily results from concentrated family resources and smaller family sizes due to limiting fertility. The OCP advanced gender equality by concentrating family investment and expectations on only-daughters, enhancing their status in natal and marital families, and weakening son preference. This empowered only-daughters to assume traditionally sons' roles, develop flexible gender identities, shift gender role attitudes, succeed in male-dominated fields, and challenge patriarchal norms. Moreover, the OCP benefited mothers by reducing childbirth and caregiving burdens, alleviating career discrimination, and challenging the traditional overprioritization of marriage, family and motherhood, thereby enhancing women's independence and gender equality awareness.

However, Wang and Zhang (2022) argue that the equal treatment of daughters and sons under the OCP is a superficial outcome of compelled enforcement, rather than a fundamental challenge to deep-rooted gender biases. Parents were compelled to adapt to having only one daughter by reallocating expectations and resources traditionally reserved for sons, achieving equality within nuclear families but not beyond. This suggests that the OCP's impact on gender

equality is limited, as traditional gender bias and discrimination persist in broader society. Gender inequality remains a significant issue in China, harming women's well-being and social harmony, underscoring the importance of this paper (Liu 2023; Bayeh 2016). Similarly, Hu and Shi (2020) find that greater parental investment in only-children does not significantly increase their gender equality awareness, questioning the OCP's role. Liu (2024) also suggests other key factors, including socioeconomic background, family influence, and cultural norms. Controlling these factors in future research may better reveal the OCP's specific impact on gender equality. Additionally, evidence from Zou and Liu (2024) supports that state-mandated intrauterine device (IUD) use under the OCP violated women's bodily autonomy and posed serious health risks. Contraceptive burdens also fell disproportionately on women, while men were largely exempt, exposing gender inequality in policy implementation.

5.5 Female intergenerational relationships

Five studies—two quantitative, two qualitative, and one mixed-methods—indicate that the OCP significantly shaped female intergenerational relationships and increased family bonds

5.5.1 Synpaper of results in female intergenerational relationships

The OCP has enhanced female intergenerational relationships, particularly mother-daughter relationship, by reducing sibling size. Liu and Jiang (2021) find that only-daughters have closer bonds with their parents, especially mothers, than daughters with siblings. Compared to only-sons, only-daughters are closer to mothers but less so with fathers. In contrast, parent-daughter bonds weaken as the number of siblings increases, while sons are more likely to maintain close relationships. Liu and Jiang (2021) argue that this reflects persistent traditional

gender preferences in multi-child families, where son preference reinforces closer parent-son bonds and more distant relationships with daughters. Such evidence supports that the OCP mainly benefits daughters. By reducing sibling size, the OCP strengthens only-daughters' intergenerational relationships, particularly with their mothers.

However, the OCP's positive impact on father-daughter relationships remains limited. Xu and Yeung (2013) further find that whether a daughter is an only-child does not significantly affect fathers' involvement in their daughters' lives. Instead, factors such as fathers' educational and economic level, parenting attitudes, and broader cultural changes play a more decisive role in shaping father-daughter interactions (Xu and Yeung 2013).

Furthermore, the OCP reinforced married women's connections with their natal families, reversing the traditional patriarchal norm that married women live apart and remain isolated from their birth families (Zhang 2009; Deutsch 2006). Many couples, desiring more children, led women to hide at natal homes to avoid local OCP pregnancy checks, which increased contact, support from natal families, and strengthened family bonds (Zhang 2009; Deutsch 2006). Furthermore, only-children, regardless of gender, tend to live near parents after marriage, deepening family ties (Deutsch 2006). Stronger family bonds and interactions enhanced economic cooperation and social support between married women and their natal families, including business and labour collaboration. During marital difficulties or divorce, women often sought support from their natal families, challenging females' traditional dependence on men and increasing their autonomy (Zhang 2009).

5.5.2 Discussion on intergenerational relationships

The OCP strengthened parent-daughter relationships, particularly mother-daughter bonds for only-daughters, and reinforced married women's ties with their natal families. Similar to previous subfields, reduced sibling size contributes to stronger only-daughters' mother-daughter ties, while father-daughter relationships remain less affected, shaped more by fathers' personal factors and cultural shifts.

Notably, Huang, Jiang, and Sun (2024) argue that son preference has a paradoxically protective effect in reducing early mother-daughter separation, indirectly implying that the OCP may have unintentionally weakened these bonds. In regions without strict birth spacing regulations, girls are less likely than boys to experience parent-child separation at age two. Because son preference often motivates parents to have a second child soon after a firstborn daughter, aiming for a son. Mothers typically stay in their hometowns during pregnancy, reducing early mother-daughter separation. However, this protective effect disappears in regions with strict OCP enforcement. Thus, the OCP appears to weaken the moderating role of son preference and fails to prevent early mother-daughter separation. Given China's large-scale internal migration since the 1970s, with an estimated 61 million rural and 8.7 million urban left-behind children by 2010 (Tong, Yan, and Kawachi 2019), this issue is significant. Yet, the argument on the son preference's paradoxical protective effect relies on indirect inference without direct empirical evidence. Furthermore, there is no direct evidence that girls with siblings in regions without strict birth spacing experience less mother-daughter separation, nor that only-daughters under strict OCP face more. Therefore, Huang, Jiang, and Sun's (2024) study cannot refute the positive impact of the OCP on female intergenerational relationships.

5.6 Female reproductive rights, autonomy and health

Three qualitative studies suggest that the impact of China's OCP on women's reproductive rights, autonomy, and health is double-edged.

5.6.1 Synpaper of results in female reproductive rights, autonomy and health

The OCP compelled women to undergo sterilisation or other state-mandated birth control measures, thereby limiting reproductive rights, infringing on bodily autonomy, and posing serious health risks (Murphy 2003; Zou and Liu 2024). However, Zhang (2009) argues that the OCP strengthened relationships between only-daughters and their natal families. Instead of becoming isolated after marriage, women continued to receive familial support, reversing the traditional predicament of sole dependence on husbands after marriage and thereby enhancing their life autonomy.

5.6.2 Discussion on female reproductive rights, autonomy and health

Overall, the OCP presents both harms and benefits for women. While it imposed coercive reproductive controls that compromised women's rights, bodily autonomy, and health, it also reduced reproductive burdens and strengthened natal family ties, particularly for married women, thereby enhancing their life autonomy and choices.

5.7 Other social dynamics

This review also identified other social dynamics impacted by the OCP, including the skewed sex ratio and child sexual abuse (CSA). Three studies address the skewed sex ratio at birth:

one qualitative, one based on analysing secondary quantitative data, and one reappraisal of secondary data, without explicitly comparing specific groups (see Appendix Table 1).

Additionally, only one quantitative study examines CSA.

5.7.1 Skewed sex ratio

5.7.1.1 Synpaper of results in skewed sex ratio at birth (SRB)

Regarding the SRB, Murphy (2003) argues that the OCP combined with son preference has caused underreporting or misreporting of female births, and sex-selective abortions and infanticide, to secure a son. This causes severe gender imbalance, producing the “missing girls” phenomenon, especially in rural areas. However, Loh and Remick (2015) argue that son preference is the main factor, with the OCP only exacerbating it. Without son preference, the OCP alone would not produce this imbalance.

Goodkind (2015) also supports that son preference is the primary factor. He finds that the initial SRB rise in the 1980s was mainly because parents hid or underreported baby girls to avoid policy-violating fines, rather than prenatal sex selection. This rise was minimal, no more than 1 per 100, contradicting claims that the OCP exacerbated sex selection. Prenatal sex selection became significant only after 1990, aligning with the spread of sex identification technology. Underreporting remained substantial in the 1990s. Goodkind’s data analysis offers a stronger argument, supporting that son preference and technological advances, rather than the OCP itself, are the main causes of China’s gender imbalance.

Murphy (2003) argues that the 1.5-child policy, as a flexible form of the OCP implemented in rural areas, allowing a second child if the firstborn was a daughter, indirectly reinforced son preference and deepened gender bias. However, Goodkind (2015) argues that the 1.5-child policy would not promote sex selection more than a two-child policy, as it permits rural

parents to have a second child if the firstborn is a girl. This increases the value of firstborn daughters and reduces the incentive for sex-selective practices against them. However, Goodkind's argument appears flawed because allowing a second child does not guarantee that the child will be a boy. Even if sex selection is avoided for the firstborn daughter, parents may still resort to it for the second child to ensure a son. However, these conclusions rely on logical reasoning rather than rigorous data and cannot clarify the relationship between the 1.5-child policy and sex selection. Further research is needed to provide empirical evidence.

Despite flaws in Goodkind's (2015) argument on the 1.5-child policy, data indicate that rising SRB also occurs in countries without birth restrictions, including South Korea, Vietnam, and India, convincingly supporting that the OCP is not the main driver of SRB. Therefore, with overall analysis, this paper concludes that cultural son preference and the spread of gender identification technology primarily drive gender imbalance, with the OCP may only play a supporting role.

5.7.2 Child sexual abuse

Zhu, Xiao, and Zhu (2023) conducted a quantitative study on gender differences in child sexual abuse (CSA) in China, focusing on the role of sibling status. They find that, with older siblings, girls are less likely than boys to experience one-time indirect CSA, suggesting a protective effect. However, girls with both older and younger siblings are more likely than boys to experience one-time direct CSA, indicating that siblings can also pose risks. Direct CSA includes acts involving physical contact or sexual activity, while indirect CSA includes non-contact forms such as exposure or verbal harassment. This suggests the OCP had mixed

effects: it may protect only-daughters from direct CSA by reducing sibling presence, but also increase their vulnerability to indirect CSA due to the absence of older siblings' protection.

5.8 OCP Effects by Intergenerational Change

Table 4 shows that research on female empowerment primarily focuses on daughters, with comparatively limited attention to mothers. There is no research on the grandmother generation, maybe because they were not directly affected by the OCP. The subfields most concentrated on daughters are family investment, education, and gender equality. Moreover, there is a disparity between the quantitative and qualitative analyses. Quantitatively, no differences appear between the OCP's effects on mothers and daughters (Table 4: approximately 33% negative and 66% positive for both groups). However, deeper qualitative analyses demonstrate that mothers experience more negative impacts, particularly regarding reproductive rights, bodily autonomy and health, while daughters are rarely negatively affected. This may be because Table 4 counts each study only once by "groups of focus" and "nature of the relationship".

To improve data accuracy, this paper refines the analysis in Table 5 by more precisely aligning the nature of the relationship with subfields and groups of focus. For example, Murphy (2003) focuses on mothers and discusses both female reproductive rights and autonomy, and the sex ratio. However, only autonomy is linked to mothers; sex ratio is not. Additionally, for studies marked as having a "complicated" impact, this paper distinguishes the impacts when the complexity arises from differences across subfields or groups. For instance, Hu and Shi (2020) report a complicated relationship, which is separated into a positive effect on family investment and "no effect" on gender equality attitudes. Studies that cannot be further disaggregated remain marked as "complicated."

According to Table 5 and Appendix Table 2, “Family Investment and Parental Support” and “Education” primarily focus on daughters, with limited attention to mothers, possibly due to their limited relevance for older women. “Employment and Career Development” includes both groups, though daughters remain the main focus. Across these three subfields, findings are mostly positive, with no negative outcomes reported, indicating that the OCP predominantly benefited both groups. “Gender Equality and Attitudes” mainly focuses on daughters, with fewer studies on mothers. Daughters experience predominantly positive effects (about two-thirds), and the positive and negative impacts on mothers are equal. “Intergenerational Relationships” focuses mainly on daughters, with only one study concerning mothers, reporting positive effects. While daughters experience equal positive effects and “no effect”, possibly because the OCP mainly strengthens only-daughters’ mother-daughter bonds but has limited impacts on father-daughter relationships (Xu and Yeung 2013; Liu and Jiang 2021), this difference is not observed in mothers. “Female Reproductive Rights, Autonomy, and Health” only concerns mothers, with more negative than positive findings, possibly due to their direct exposure to reproductive controls (Zou and Liu 2024). “Other Social Dynamics,” such as “**Sex ratio**” studies, shift the focus to broader social factors, while CSA relates solely to daughters and shows mixed outcomes.

Importantly, studies report mostly positive effects for daughters without negative outcomes, while negative outcomes appear only among mothers. Overall, the OCP predominantly benefited daughters, especially in family investment, education, and career development. Whereas it had more complex impacts on mothers and even mostly negative impacts on autonomy, reproductive rights and health. These findings align better with the qualitative

analysis in Sections 5.1–5.7, suggesting Table 5’s detailed breakdown offers greater accuracy.

According to Part 4.3, the mothers' generation spans the 1940s–1990s, and the daughters' generation represents the late 1970s–2000s. From a temporal perspective, Table 5 supports that in family investment, education, and career development, the OCP mostly had positive effects across both generational periods, 1940s–1990s and late 1970s–2000s. However, in gender equality and “female reproductive rights, autonomy, and health”, mothers experienced more negative impacts, suggesting negative effects were more pronounced during the 1940s–1990s than the other. Furthermore, studies on reproductive rights, autonomy and health focus exclusively on the 1940s–1990s. In contrast, OCP’s impact on CSA is only relevant to the late 1970s–2000s. Finally, regarding intergenerational relationships, only-daughters mainly benefit from mother-daughter bonds, mothers’ generation benefits from broader parent-child ties. This suggests the OCP primarily enhanced mother-daughter relationships in the late 1970s–2000s, but supported all parent-child bonds during the 1940s–1990s. However, due to the limited research in this subfield, this conclusion requires further investigation.

Notably, according to the Appendix Table 2, the mother group, born between the 1940s and 1980s, and the daughter group, born from the late 1970s to the early 2000s, both encompass wide birth cohorts. This broad range possibly result in significant variation in life experiences and responses to the OCP within each group, thereby shaping the OCP’s impact on female empowerment. However, current literature lacks detailed birth cohort data. By separating mothers and daughters, this paper offers a limited perspective on intergenerational differences, overlooking cohort-specific nuances. Future research should adopt refined cohort

classifications, such as those by Wu, Ye, and He (2014), which segment birth cohorts by decade, enabling more precise temporal analyses.

Several promising research directions emerge. The partial overlap between mothers' and daughters' birth cohorts suggests that women experienced the OCP in different identity roles: solely as mothers (1940s–late 1970s), solely as daughters (1990s–2000s), or as both (late 1970s–1990s). However, this paper only focuses on “daughters” and “mothers”, overlooking overlapping identities. Some studies labelled “complicated” or “mixed” may demonstrate positive effects for daughters but negative effects for mothers. Individuals who are mothers and only-daughters may experience more complex impacts from the OCP. Future research should examine how such overlapping identities shape experiences of female empowerment. Additionally, maternal age at childbirth varied widely during the OCP era (1979–2015), with women born between the 1940s and 1990s giving birth in their 20s to 40s. It is worth exploring whether this variation relates to the OCP.

6. Discussion

6.1 Emerging insights

It includes several key insights, including:

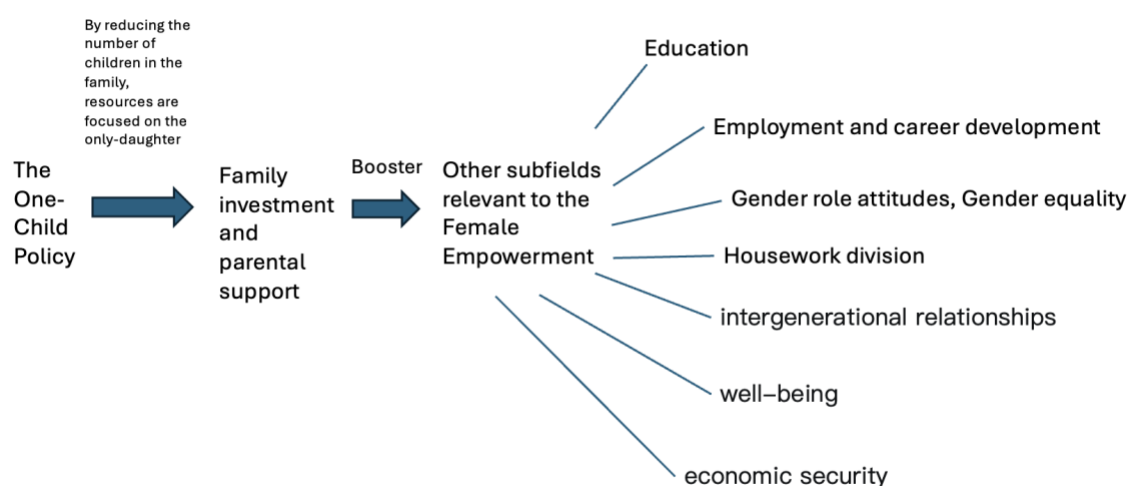
1. Change of family structure due to low fertility
2. The impacts of the OCP vary by external factors
3. Controversial issues

4. The impact of son preference or OCP
5. Empowering females in both natal families and marital families
6. Gender injustice in the mothers' generation in the OCP enforcement

6.1.1 Change of family structure due to low fertility

Analysis reveals that resource concentration due to smaller family size, driven by low fertility are key mechanism through which the OCP promotes female empowerment. Only-daughters benefit from concentrated family investment and support, which promotes their advancement in education, employment, gender equality, intergenerational relationships, well-being, and economic security. Fewer children have shifted families from parent-centred to child-centred structures, prioritising the only-child's needs. This demographic shift enables greater resource allocation to only-daughters, forming a chain relationship between the OCP, family resources, and other subfields of female empowerment (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. The chain impact between the OCP, family investment and other aspects relevant to female empowerment



6.1.2 The impacts of the OCP vary by external factors

This paper finds that the impact of the OCP is complex and cannot be generalised. Conflicting evidence appears in intergenerational relationships, gender role attitudes and autonomy. Xu and Yeung (2013) argue that fathers' investment in daughters is shaped more by parental education, economic status, and gender beliefs than by only-child status. Liu (2024) similarly finds that only-daughters exhibit more progressive gender attitudes, though mainly in urban families with better access to education and opportunities. These attitudes vary with socioeconomic background, family influence, and cultural norms. Fong (2002) further mentions that without adequate resources, fertility restrictions are not empowering; The OCP enables resource concentration for only-daughters only where resources are available. Overall, these findings suggest that the empowering effects of the OCP are shaped by external conditions.

6.1.3 Controversial issues

Conflicting findings debate whether the OCP equally benefited only-sons and only-daughters through reduced sibling size, or primarily benefited daughters. Evidence indicates that the OCP's reduction in sibling size allowed only-children, regardless of gender, to receive more concentrated parental support than children with siblings (Liu 2012; Zhang 2007; Deutsch 2006; Liu 2017; Chen and Jordan 2018). However, others argue that because sons have traditionally received more parental investment and were more highly valued, the reduced sibling size had less effect in concentrating resources for boys. Fong (2002) and Wang and Feng (2021) suggest that by eliminating the presence of sons, the OCP disrupted patriarchal norms of resource allocation and primarily benefited only-daughters by allowing them to access resources traditionally reserved for boys. Supporting this, Liu and Jiang (2021) find that only-daughters have closer relationships with parents than daughters with siblings, while daughters' closeness declines and sons' increases in multi-child families. Yet, this

perspective is challenged by research indicating no significant gender differences in family resource allocation across different sibling compositions (Hu and Shi 2020; Zhai and Gao 2010). Thus, while current evidence supports that only-daughters benefit more than daughters with siblings, whether the OCP benefits only-daughters more than only-sons remains inconclusive and needs further investigation.

Beyond the family, scholars also disagree on the OCP's broader impacts for gender equality. Although some studies suggest that the OCP raised awareness of gender equality (Deutsch 2006), others support that this equality is superficial and limited to families, failing to challenge deep-rooted traditional gender norms at the societal level (Wang and Zhang 2022). Moreover, socioeconomic background, education, family influence, marital dynamics, and cultural norms are considered more decisive in shaping gender attitudes than the OCP (Liu 2024). This suggests that the OCP's role in advancing gender equality remains an open question.

6.1.4 The impact of son preference or OCP

Only one qualitative study attributes China's skewed sex ratio primarily to the OCP (Murphy 2003). In contrast, two studies, with a comparative historical analysis using secondary quantitative data and a reappraisal based on secondary data, argue that son preference and the development of sex-selective technologies are the main drivers, with the OCP having minimal impact (Loh and Remick 2015; Goodkind 2015). The second argument has more supporters and is backed by detailed data analysis, making it more convincing. Moreover, gender imbalance is more pronounced in rural areas, where son preference is stronger (Lei and Pals 2011), further suggesting that cultural norms, rather than the OCP, are the primary cause of the distorted sex ratio.

6.1.5 Empowering females in both natal families and marital families

OCP elevated women's status both in their natal families during childhood and in their marital families in adulthood. The impact of being an only-child is also long-term and intergenerational, benefiting only-daughters and their children (Wang and Feng 2021). Concentrated family resources promoted only-daughters' educational and career development and enhanced their gender equality awareness. Even after marriage and childbirth, they continued to receive support from their natal families, easing childcare burdens and enabling continued career advancement (Shen and Jiang 2020). This support also extended to their children's education, a benefit less accessible to daughters traditionally due to traditional post-marriage separation from natal families (Zhang 2009). To avoid birth-limit penalties, married women often returned to their natal families. This enabled them to maintain close ties with their natal families, receive ongoing support, and increase interactions. Such a shift challenged traditional norms of female dependence on husbands after marriage and enhanced women's autonomy (Zhang 2009).

6.1.6 Gender injustice in the mother's generation in the OCP enforcement

There is evidence that the OCP affects mothers and fathers differently. Its impact on intergenerational ties is most visible in mother-daughter relationships (Liu and Jiang 2021), while fathers' involvement depends more on personal parenting attitudes, education, and sociocultural factors (Xu and Yeung 2013). Due to limited research, no firm conclusion can be drawn, and further study is needed.

The rise in mother-daughter closeness is also due to smaller family sizes under the OCP, which allowed focused resources and parental attention on only-daughters. These findings

suggest that mothers are more affected by family structure, while fathers are shaped more by personal and cultural factors. Liu (2012) also finds that mothers are more likely than fathers to sacrifice careers and personal freedom for their daughters' well-being, suggesting gender inequality. Although gender inequality exists under the OCP's implementation, it remains unclear whether the policy exacerbated this injustice or merely reflected long-standing norms in Chinese families. Future research should explore this question.

Finally, most studies support positive outcomes for only-daughters. In contrast, findings on mothers highlight the policy's double-edged nature: while it reduced childbirth burdens and enhanced women's life autonomy and status, it also violated reproductive rights and bodily autonomy, placing a disproportionate sterilisation burden on women. Fathers, however, are rarely mentioned. Jiang, Li, and Feldman (2013) criticise OCP's prioritisation of national over individual family interests. Jiang, Li, and Feldman (2013) argue that the OCP prioritised national over family interests. Most studies only indicate that sterilisation burdens, such as forced abortions and IUDs, fell mainly on mothers (Zou and Liu 2024; Pletcher 2018), suggesting fathers were largely unaffected. Thus, "violated family interests" largely reflects harms to mothers, suggesting gender inequality in the older generation.

6.1.7 Summarizing the key insights

In summary, the OCP empowered daughters primarily by reducing fertility rates, decreasing the number of children, and promoting a child-centred family model. This enabled one-child families to concentrate resources on only-children—especially only-daughters—laying the foundation for female empowerment. This advantage extended to education, career development, shifting gender roles, enhanced family status, stronger intergenerational ties,

challenges to traditional norms, and improved social mobility. Different subfields affected by the OCP are interrelated, forming a chain effect (as shown in Figure 2).

However, the empowerment effects of the OCP are not guaranteed but are shaped by external factors. Contradictory outcomes across subfields reveal its complex nature, with both benefits and limitations. Factors such as local educational and economic resources, evolving patriarchal norms, and parents' education and values all shape these outcomes. This may suggest that the complexity of the OCP itself is a result of the impact of different external factors. Ultimately, the empowerment effect largely stems from concentrated resources due to smaller family sizes, yet the OCP's impact is complex and varies under different external factors.

6.2 Limitations and gaps in the literature

Regarding gaps in the current literature, first, while evidence suggests only-daughters benefited more than daughters with siblings under the OCP, it remains unclear whether they benefited more than only-sons. Second, the distinction between the OCP and the 1.5-child policy is often blurred, with many studies conflating the two. Given urban–rural differences in socioeconomic and cultural contexts, this conflation can cause conceptual confusion, complicate literature selection, and misleading conclusions. Moreover, rural areas showed stronger son preference and more resistance to the OCP, while urban families were more accepting of having only one child even before the policy, due to shifting attitudes and economic development (Kane and Choi 1999). Fong (2002) also highlights regional

disparities in resource availability; families in large urban centres typically have better access to quality education than those in smaller towns or rural areas. Thus, the OCP's empowerment effects may depend on context. Future research should examine how such external factors are linked to OCP's impact on female empowerment.

Furthermore, most studies focus on the OCP's impact on the daughters, with limited attention to its effects on mothers. Additionally, although family investment is a key pathway through which the OCP benefits other subfields, its measurement lacks clarity. There is no consistent definition or scope for what constitutes 'family investment' or 'parental support', representing a weakness. Notably, while existing research often explores family investment, education, employment, and gender equality, fewer studies concern intergenerational relationships, female reproductive rights, autonomy, health, and broader social dynamics, including sex ratio imbalance and child sexual abuse. Moreover, all three studies on sex ratio lack clearly defined groups compared (see Appendix Table 1), and only find complex results (see Table 3), implying ongoing debates and insufficient research in this area.

Additionally, several studies report underreported or concealed births to avoid heavy fines for violating the OCP (Kane and Choi 1999; Goodkind 2015). This resulted in a population of unregistered children, mostly girls, who later faced significant barriers to education and employment due to a lack of official identification, concerning female education (Pletcher 2018). However, none of the studies retrieved from the six databases concern this issue, indicating a research gap.

Furthermore, most studies lack a clear birth cohort range, though some can be inferred from the article content. In others, birth cohorts cannot be inferred at all (see Appendix Table 2). For example, the birth cohort can be deduced as 1995–2000 in Hu and Shi's (2020) study, since the data comes from the 2010 CFPS and subjects were aged 10–15 at that time. This

inference method complicates tracking temporal changes, limits data precision and accuracy, and restricts insights into the OCP's evolving impact over time.

The impact that cannot be analysed independently :

While existing studies support the OCP's role in promoting female empowerment, they often overlook concurrent political, economic, and cultural shifts, leading to less rigorous conclusions. Among these, China's late-1970s market economy transformation is the most significant. According to Zhang (2007, 2009), expanded urban job opportunities enabled rural women to migrate to cities, access previously unavailable jobs, earn income, and gain economic autonomy. This also gave them greater freedom to visit natal families and engage in family economic cooperation, allowing them to shift from dependents to main providers and move beyond traditional gender roles. These changes redefined women's roles in families and the economy, promoting gender equality by enhancing their economic independence, social networks, and status. Similarly, demonstrate that modern industrialisation and educational expansion improved women's access to jobs and education, further enhancing their independence and socio-economic status (Fung and Ferchen 2014).

Additionally, Liu (2012) indicates that mothers were laid off in the late 1970s, many shifted focus from public work to family life, providing increased care for their only-child. Interview data support that mothers contributed more than fathers to their daughters' education and development. Liu argues that only-daughters received better support largely due to their mothers' sacrifices, accepting early retirement or lower-status jobs to prioritise their daughters' education and growth. This suggests that improved educational opportunities for only-daughters resulted not only from the OCP but also from the market economy

transformation and mothers' sacrifices. To accurately assess the OCP's impact on family investment, future research should account for these confounding factors. Otherwise, the effects of market economy transformation may be wrongly attributed to the OCP. However, most existing studies fail to distinguish these factors, demonstrating a key gap in the literature.

In summary, while existing studies suggest the OCP promoted female empowerment by reshaping demographic structures, they often fail to distinguish its specific impact from concurrent socio-economic and cultural transformations, indicating a research gap. For example, some urban families chose to have only one child before official family planning policies (Kane and Choi 1999), indicating that demographic shifts may not be solely attributable to the OCP. However, the OCP coincided with broader social changes that also promoted female empowerment, including market economy reforms, industrialisation, and educational expansion. These changes, together with the OCP, jointly enhanced women's autonomy, status, and redefined gender roles (Zhang 2009; Fung and Ferchen 2014). As such, the OCP's effects are deeply intertwined with concurrent social shifts and cannot be analysed in isolation. Collectively, these factors shaped women's experiences and advanced female empowerment.

6.3 Recommendations for further research

Addressing gaps and limitations in previous studies is crucial for improving research quality and clarity. Future research should clearly distinguish between the OCP and the 1.5-child policy, explicitly define birth cohorts, and explore under-researched themes such as intergenerational relationships, women's rights, autonomy and health, sex ratio, and child

sexual abuse. To fully understand the multifaceted impacts of the OCP, more attention should also be given to mothers and grandmothers. Investigating how the policy has shaped their gender attitudes, financial circumstances, and intergenerational dynamics could offer deeper and fuller insights into its role. Most existing studies focus on the OCP's micro-level impact within families, with limited attention to its influence on macro-level structures such as norms, policies, and culture. Future research should separately examine micro (families) and macro (society) effects to clarify the policy's role in empowering females and changing gender inequality. This paper could also be improved by categorising the literature into these two levels and assessing the proportion focused on each.

Moreover, future studies should investigate whether the OCP specifically benefited only-daughters and helped challenge traditional son preference, or whether the observed female empowerment and gender equality were merely byproducts of the broader advantages the one-child limit conferred on all only-children regardless of gender, without substantively advancing real gender equality. Clarifying this distinction requires examining whether only-daughters or only-sons benefited more, or were equally impacted, to fully understand the policy's role in shaping female empowerment.

Additional research should also consider how external factors may have affected the policy's empowering effects on women. A comprehensive analysis of external factors shaping the OCP's impact, including urban-rural differences, employment opportunities, regional resource distribution, broader cultural shifts, and socioeconomic backgrounds, is also needed. For example, evidence suggests that the interplay between son preference and the OCP significantly shaped female empowerment. Future studies should examine how cultural norms around son preference interact with the OCP and how this interaction influences

gender equality and female empowerment. This could involve comparing the policy's impact on female empowerment in regions with strong versus weak son preference. Although the OCP's effects are deeply intertwined with concurrent social changes and difficult to fully isolate, considering these confounding factors can yield a more accurate assessment of its role. Expanding research on shifting gender norms and economic development will further clarify how external factors influenced the policy's impacts.

Analysis of Table 4 and qualitative in-depth results yields somewhat different conclusions regarding the group of focus and the nature of the relationship, especially for mothers, while Table 5 aligns more closely with qualitative findings. The disparity may stem from Table 4, which summarises overall effects for mothers and daughters together, while Table 5 offers more detailed classifications. However, Table 5's classifications are simple and may still miss nuanced effects. Therefore, future research should count each finding separately and precisely link results to a specific group of focus, even if this means counting multiple findings from a single study in the analysis.

In addition, the partial overlap between mothers' and daughters' birth cohorts suggests that women experienced the OCP in different identity roles: solely as mothers (1940s–late 1970s), solely as daughters (1990s–2000s), or as both (late 1970s–1990s). However, this paper only focuses on “daughters” and “mothers”, overlooking overlapping identities. Some studies labelled “complicated” or “mixed” may demonstrate positive effects for daughters but negative effects for mothers. Individuals who are mothers and only-daughters may experience more complex impacts from the OCP. Future research should examine how such overlapping identities shape experiences of female empowerment. Additionally, maternal age at childbirth varied widely during the OCP era (1979–2015), with women born between the 1940s and

1990s giving birth in their 20s to 40s. It is worth exploring whether this variation relates to the OCP.

7. Conclusion

This paper examines the relationship between China's OCP and female empowerment through a systematic review of 32 studies published between 2002 and 2024. As a relatively new research field, it builds on Vanessa Fong's (2002) pioneering work, the earliest study on this topic, and hypothesises that the OCP positively contributed to female empowerment. The findings suggest that by limiting families to fewer children, the OCP concentrated family investment and parental support on only-daughters, thereby benefiting their educational and career advancement, gender equality awareness, family status, and intergenerational relationships. While most studies support this view, some offer divergent conclusions, reflecting the policy's complex and context-dependent impact. For instance, the empowerment effect of concentrated resources depends on the availability of broader resources. This underscores that the effects of the OCP cannot be generalised and must be analysed in conjunction with external factors, including regional disparities, economic and educational resources, and cultural norms such as son preference. This may suggest that the complex role of the OCP is a result of complex external factors. The OCP coincided with broader social transformations, including market reforms, industrialisation, and educational expansion, making it difficult to isolate its specific role. Nonetheless, it can be concluded that the OCP, together with these concurrent changes, reshaped family structures and significantly impacted women's lives.

An ongoing debate concerns whether the OCP benefits only-daughters and only-sons equally. Some studies argue the policy primarily benefits only-daughters, while others find no significant difference between the two groups. This debate points to a need for further research to determine if the OCP specifically empowered only-daughters and challenged traditional son preference, or if observed female empowerment was simply a byproduct of advantages conferred to all only-children regardless of gender. Additionally, this paper identifies a possible misconception in earlier research, where Murphy (2003) wrongly attributed gender imbalance mainly to the OCP, while cultural son preference was the primary cause.

For future research, several directions are recommended. First, researchers should further explore unresolved questions, such as whether only-sons and only-daughters benefited equally from the OCP, or whether only-daughters gained more. Understanding the underlying reasons for the policy's complex impact on female empowerment and identifying the factors that shape its effectiveness is also essential. Moreover, assessing the impact of the OCP at both the family (micro) and societal (macro) levels could offer a clearer distinction between its effects on individual households and broader social changes. To improve the comprehensiveness of future reviews, expanding the search to include multi-language databases, particularly Chinese-language sources, would enhance the scope and relevance of the data. Additionally, the analysis could be refined by more precisely categorising findings according to the group of focus and the nature of the relationship between the OCP and female empowerment. Finally, future studies should specify birth cohorts and examine how different generational positions and overlapping roles as both mothers and only-daughters, influence women's experiences of the OCP and its impact on female empowerment.

Overall, this paper is the first research employing a systematic literature review to investigate the relationship between the OCP and female empowerment. It not only provides fresh insights into this relationship but also identifies unresolved debates and research gaps, offering clear directions for future studies. By summarising and synpapering the relationships between the OCP and female empowerment in existing literature, this paper contributes to further understanding of this topic and assists in identifying gaps in the existing literature for further research. In conclusion, this paper contributes to the first comprehensive and deeper understanding of factors influencing female empowerment by combining multiple literatures and perspectives. This has the potential to inform to promote more effective practices for gender equality and female empowerment in China.

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