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Short-term gains versus long-term strains: productivist policies and family resilience in China

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Abstract

This article studies the intricate dynamics of family resilience within the Chinese productivist regime over the course of seven decades, emphasizing the instrumental role of public policy in shaping this resilience. Drawing on a dynamic approach, the research demonstrates how, across distinct periods of central planning and economic reform, policies have persistently harnessed families to advance economic objectives. Showing that the productivist regime's double-edged role on family resilience emerged while public policies bolstered short-term family resilience in times of sustained economic growth and favorable demographics, and signs of family sector downturn—declining fertility rates, family dysfunctions—became evident, the current article underscores the challenges of a model that primarily perceives families as economic instruments. Advocating for a policy paradigm shift that harmonizes economic ambitions with family well-being, this study offers valuable insights for policy-makers and lays the groundwork for future research in comparative welfare systems.

Keywords: Family resilience, Productivist regime, Family-related public policies, Short term, Long term, China

Introduction

Family resilience is the inherent strength and adaptability that a family unit has to endure challenges and bounce back or even thrive from crises and adversities (Masten 2018). This concept encompasses a complex interplay of risks, protective factors, and outcomes that ultimately lead to the strengthening of families. Conversely, families with limited resilience resources to manage challenges can often become dysfunctional (Walsh 1996) or even disintegrate.

Existing studies on family resilience have examined the impacts of micro-, mezzo- and macro-level factors, such as individual, family, and community characteristics and natural disasters (Osofsky and Osofsky 2018; Ungar 2016; Maurović et al. 2020). There has been an international increase in research focusing on family resilience since the outbreak of COVID-19. As Maria Gayatri and Dian Kristiani Irawaty (2022) noted in their review, families have demonstrated resilience by employing enhanced coping strategies, showing mutual support, and spending more time together. Families have also been

struggling with mental health issues, anxiety, and distress, which often leads to increased conflicts (Chan et al. 2021). In the context of China, there has also been growing attention placed on the family as a social unit in recent years. The COVID-19 pandemic has further enhanced the level of interest in the topic of family resilience, i.e., the focus on care and mental health issues during and immediately after the pandemic response period (Wei et al. 2023; Ding and Zhong 2021).

The dual emergence of families exhibiting strong resilience in the face of COVID-19, juxtaposed with the long-term degradation of family structures in numerous nations, is intriguing. China provides a particularly good case for understanding the relationship between public policy and family resilience. The state has played a pivotal role in economic development and has adopted an instrumentalist view toward families (Mok et al. 2017). Chinese families have actively adapted to state policy changes (Papadopoulos and Roumpakis 2017; Wu 2017). This study explores the paradoxical phenomena of China's growing level of short-term family resilience and its long-term family decline. The purpose is to understand the roles of policies in setting the trend of short-term stronger resilience and long-term decline. To achieve this, it is essential to examine the impacts of public policies over an extended period. The subsequent sections will first establish an analytical framework for assessing the influence of public policies on Chinese families. Following the methodological section, this article provides a historical review of family-related public policies in China since 1949. This review explains how public policies have transformed both familial roles and the availability of public support. This is followed by a discussion of the strategies employed by Chinese families to pool and leverage resources to address the potential risks and challenges they encounter due to state-centered public policies and external shocks. In the final part of the case study, we highlight the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and an aging population on family resilience.

Our findings unveil a paradox within the productivist framework, namely, the simultaneous bolstering of family resilience in the short term that leads to a gradual erosion of the family institution in the long run. This duality accentuates the intricate interplay between policy design and family resilience, advocating for a recalibration toward more family-centric public policies.

Productivist regime and family resilience: short-term and long-term

A family serves both as a social actor and a social institution, functioning within the private realm while also contributing to society. The functions of a family depend on the resources it can utilize and its capability to use these resources (Strach and Sullivan 2011). Walsh Froma (1996) discussed that a resilient family can adjust and remain healthy under long-term stress or daily pressures.

Short-term and long-term family resilience

Short-term family resilience refers to a family's ability to work together to overcome immediate adversities, whether these adversities are economic, emotional, or health-related. This is achieved through pooling resources, emotional support, and immediate problem-solving. At the societal level, such resilience can offer temporary stability and even support the narrative of familial strength and unity in the face of adversity.

While individual families showing resilience can be seen as a positive narrative, systemic long-term decline stemming from overreliance on short-term strategies can erode social service capacity and may even affect social cohesion. If a substantial proportion of families within a society continually rely on temporary fixes, then systemic societal issues may emerge. For example, an overemphasis on the self-reliance of people with disability may maximize their pursuit of leading an independent life while simultaneously sidelining the push to improve the needed support and environmental accessibility for such people (McLaughlin 2020). Similarly, the normalization of extreme work hours in a bid for short-term financial resilience can contribute to the societal acceptance of poor work-life balance, leading to broader public health concerns (MacEachen, et al. 2008). Repeated short-term resilience strategies adopted by multiple families, especially those that are resource-intensive or lack sustainability, can strain societal infrastructures. For instance, families relying on emergency health care services due to a lack of preventive care can overburden emergency medical infrastructures. Over time, this not only affects the quality of healthcare available but may also lead to increased healthcare costs for society at large. In the long run, patterns of short-term resilience without addressing underlying challenges can foster “learned helplessness” or a normalized perception of instability among younger members. This can influence their worldview and aspirations, thereby affecting societal progress and innovation in the long run (Walsh 1996).

Family resilience and productivist regime: short-term and long-term

Public policies can shape the relations between the state and the family. Family-centered policies put the needs of families at the forefront, supporting them in providing care and achieving financial stability as well as maintaining familial bonds (Leitner 2003). In contrast, state-centered policies prioritize state-set goals such as economic growth and political stability, with family needs being secondary. Examples of such practices can be found in productivist, developmentalist, or fragmented liberal-conservative welfare systems (Holliday 2000).

The productivist regime, as an economic-social model, prioritizes economic growth and high labor market participation (Holliday 2000; Lee and Ku 2007; Goodman and Peng 1996). Within this framework, public policies are designed to incentivize and support productive activities that help determine labor demand. Public services such as education and training are designed to enhance employability and job retention. Housing and urban planning are designed to support greater devotion to work or real estate construction. At the same time, there is a strong emphasis on minimizing welfare dependency. Members of the “nonproductive” population, such as women, the elderly, and children, are expected to rely on private sector services and familial support. A productivist regime instrumentalizes the family through public policies in diverse domains to achieve economic goals and take care of family members (Holliday 2000). Such a regime, in its push for rapid economic development, might encourage families to prioritize immediate economic stability over long-term well-being. While such approaches provide families with immediate relief, they also inadvertently promote an environment where low-wage industries thrive and extreme work hours become the norm. In the short term, families might appear to be resilient by making ends meet and coping with immediate adversities.

However, the emphasis on short-term resilience can have unintended long-term consequences. For example, normalizing long work hours can lead to decreased family time, thereby increasing emotional and physical strain on family members. This, in turn, can affect familial bonds and the well-being of children, who might grow up in environments where financial survival trumps emotional or psychological well-being. Moreover, state-centered policies that do not provide adequate social support systems may force families to rely heavily on their immediate resources and short-term solutions. Over time, this can lead to a depletion of family resources, making such families vulnerable to long-term adversities and potentially contributing to the decline of the family unit at the societal level. Through the previously mentioned “learned helplessness” effect, one may expect to see a decline in families among the younger generation.

Therefore, to sustain a thriving society, state policies must strike a balance between promoting economic growth and ensuring the well-being of its foundational unit, i.e., the family. Table 1 differentiates the state and family centered approaches to public policies and shows how public policies may result in family changes and signaling changes in family resilience.

Methodology

This article examines the impacts of public policy under the productivist regime on family resilience in China. Following the theoretical framework proposed earlier, we first map out the public policies related to families, identifying the resulting resources that families can utilize and observe the long-term trends of family changes indicative of changes in family resilience.

Assessing family resilience

Assessing family resilience entails examining crucial resources such as financial assets, time availability, and skill sets (McCubbin and McCubbin 1988; Walsh 2016). Internally, resources span from household income and savings to the availability of time and skills of family members during trying times. However, if the internal resources are outweighed by challenges and not supplemented by external means such as public assistance, then families might face adversities such as instability or breakdowns. In times of crisis, assistance from community and governmental entities becomes indispensable (Patterson 1991, 2002).

Table 1 Policy approach—impact on families—family resilience. *Source:* compiled by authors

Policy approach	State-centered	Family-centered				
Policy goals	Prioritizing nonfamily goals	Meeting family needs				
Shaping family roles	Instrumental	Non-instrumental				
Policy impacts on resilience resources	Positive or zero	Negative			Positive or zero	
Support to family resilience	N/A	Yes	No	Yes	N/A	
Family pressure reduced?	N/A	Yes	No	No	No	Yes N/A
Long-term family changes	N/A	Declining family formation; Lower fertility; More dysfunctional families			N/A	

For a holistic understanding of long-term resilience, a resource-focused perspective can be employed, which assesses resource availability and adaptability to recurring challenges. Nonetheless, predicting long-term resilience remains intricate due to the unpredictability of future adversities. Nevertheless, by tracking shifts in family attributes such as structure and relationships, one can gauge the outcomes and trends of resilience. Indicators such as marriage and divorce rates, family sizes, and the rise in dysfunctional families can provide insight into societal family resilience. Dysfunctional families, characterized by strife and lack of emotional safety, can precipitate societal issues such as behavioral problems and mental health concerns, especially among younger members.

Data

The data in this article were drawn from several sources. First, government policies at both the national and municipal levels were collected and categorized into three themes for each period: labor suppliers, labor reproducers and care providers, and consumers of housing and other social services. These policies were reviewed starting in 1949, which was the year when the People's Republic of China (PRC) was founded.

We employed official statistics released by the National Bureau of Statistics of China (NBS) and the Ministry of Civil Affairs of China (MCA) to understand the responses of Chinese families and identify trends in family changes. Furthermore, we used other publicly available data published by government agencies, as well as data from the Chinese General Social Survey Data (CGSS) and secondary data from published research articles and reports.

Impacts of productivist policies on Chinese families

The historical trajectory of China as a productivist regime can be traced back to the early days of the central planning system. Economic goals have consistently been at the forefront of the policy agenda, irrespective of the economic system in place. This section outlines how the productivist state actively used public policies to shape the roles of families as labor suppliers, labor reproducers and caregivers, and consumers of housing and social services.

Families as labor suppliers

Prior to 1949, China's economy relied mostly on agriculture and craftsmanship. Large, extended families served as a buffer against the hardship caused by wars and economic recessions. The 1950 New Marriage Law began altering family dynamics by prohibiting polygamy and arranged or forced marriages and permitting divorce. This marked a shift in attitudes toward marriage and family life, challenging patriarchal authority within families and kinship networks and placing greater emphasis on state guardianship (Glosser 2003). As China transitioned into an industrial era, the family was seen more as a burden, with members, especially women, being encouraged to contribute to urban economic development. In 1950, the China Federation of Trade Unions called for the establishment of women's departments at all levels of trade unions to address female workers' concerns, including childcare and house chores, and motivate them to work. As a result, the number of women serving as industrial workers increased from 600,000 people in 1952 to 10.087 million by 1960 (Jin 2006). Meanwhile, both family life and

household consumption were minimized, and homes became de facto resting places for workers. Housing allocation was need-based and kept at a minimal level, with households in cities having only 3.6 square meters per person at the end of the central planning era (Lee 1988).

To further boost economic development, rigid labor control was relaxed in the early 1980s. In 1981, the State Council issued the Guideline of Non-Agricultural Self-Employment in Urban Areas, which allowed urban families to start self-employed businesses. In rural areas, with the abolishment of communes in 1982, the Household Responsibility System was formally introduced. These policies greatly motivated families, as they could increase income and family wealth in the private sector.

After China's 2001 World Trade Organization (WTO) entry, rural-to-urban migration became easier. However, local urban policies made family unity difficult. Migrant workers often had to live in dormitories that were segregated from family-centric accommodations. Coupled with the *hukou* system, which restricted urban welfare benefits to locals, migrant families faced challenges in availing urban education and other services (Song 2014). These policies made it difficult for migrant workers to relocate with their families. While migrant workers could increase their family income, they had to leave their children, aging parents, and other family members behind in villages. According to the 2020 Census, across the country, 16.7% of children did not live together with either of their two parents.

In recent times, as China's economy has evolved, there has been a shift toward making cities more accommodating to skilled laborers and their families. After 2014, *hukou* control was relaxed to integrate migrant workers and their families more harmoniously into urban settings.

Families as labor reproducers and care providers

Regulating family behavior in childbirth has been primarily accomplished through the implementation of birth-control policies. In the early 1950s, the state recognized the importance of population in nation-building postwar and viewed the population as an asset rather than a burden (White 2016). Consequently, laws and regulations were established to strictly restrict contraception and birth control activities. The 1950 Marriage Law also encouraged early marriages and increased fertility rates by allowing men to marry at 20 and women to marry at 18. As a result, the population grew from 541.6 million in 1949 to 796 million in 1969.

Between the mid-1950s and the 1960s, young people who were engaged in productive activities in the heavy industry sector began voluntarily advocating for contraception and birth control. Young people working in heavy industrial production wrote letters to state leaders, expressing that early and frequent childbirths were hindering their educational and professional pursuits (Liang 2014). In response, in 1955, the state adjusted its position and issued the Report on the Birth Control, which stated that "the Party supports appropriate birth control for the benefit of the nation, families and the new generation". Subsequently, regulations were amended to facilitate the voluntary practice of birth control and the use of contraceptive methods among young people.

In the late 1960s, concerns arose as the state realized that rapid population growth could pose a threat to China's economic growth, straining resources and the

environment. In response, the wan-xi-shao policy known as “later marriage (wan)-longer intervals between births (xi)-fewer children (shao)” was introduced to curb population growth. While not mandatory, this policy aimed to regulate the reproductive behavior of families. As a result, the average household size decreased from 5.9 in 1970 to 4.9 in 1979 (Hesketh, Lu, and Xing 2005). However, policy-makers remained concerned that the large population size would impede efforts to improve living standards (Feng, Cai, and Gu 2013). Thus, the one-child policy (OCP) was formally launched nationwide in 1982 to strictly control population growth. Several accompanying policies were adjusted accordingly to support the enforcement of the OCP. The amended 1980 Marriage Law raised the minimum age of marriage to 22 for men and 20 for women. Incentives were introduced, such as granting additional maternity leave for couples who delayed childbirth or chose to have only one child. The state also provided maternity leave allowances for young couples who obeyed the law starting in 1994. Although China’s population continued to grow, the total fertility rate had dropped below the replacement rate before the advent of the new century (1.22 children per woman in 2000).

As China has experienced an accelerated aging population and a sharp decline in fertility rates, the government has become concerned about the sustainability of the labor force and its potential impact on economic prosperity. In response, the universal Two-Child Policy was introduced in 2016, officially ending the OCP. In 2021, a Three-Child Policy—along with supportive measures—was implemented to further encourage childbirth.

Public care services for children and the elderly

During the central planning era, childcare and other family responsibilities were viewed as “burdens” for laborers. To ensure maximum dedication from laborers, in 1953, the state revised the Regulations on Labor Insurance, entitling working mothers to only 56 days of fully paid maternity leave. It also mandated that “work units (*danwei*) with 20 or more children from female workers must establish a nursery, either independently or jointly with other work units.” Consequently, public childcare services expanded significantly. In 1980, more than 34 million children aged zero to three attended over 988 thousand nurseries and kindergartens across the country, compared to only 200 thousand children aged zero to three who attended approximately 7,000 nurseries and kindergartens in 1952 (Qi and Melhuish 2017). This substantial increase in public childcare services demonstrated the government’s commitment to supporting working parents and alleviating the burden of childcare. As a result of these policy changes, urban women’s labor participation rate increased to 75% by 1988 (Meng 2012).

In 1988, to increase competitiveness and boost the economy, the state decided to alleviate the financial burden of childcare and other social welfare on state-owned enterprises. The state issued the Opinions on Strengthening the Work of Early Childhood Education, stating that raising children is a social obligation of parents and that early childhood education is not compulsory and it was deemed reasonable for parents to bear certain costs of care. Due to the retrenchment of public funds, many enterprises closed childcare facilities and stopped offering childcare services (Li and Piachaud 2006). Maternity leave was accordingly extended to 90 days according to the 1988 Labor Protection for Female Workers and further extended to 98 days according

to the 2012 Special Provisions on Labor Protection for Female Workers. However, a three-month maternity leave was still insufficient to meet the care needs of children aged zero to three.

In 1995, the State Council issued the Plan for China's Child Development of the 1990s. While it aimed to enroll 35% of children aged three to five in public kindergartens for preschool education, no specific goals were outlined for children younger than three. Instead, the plan encouraged the use of social resources to support early childhood education and care (aged zero to three) to reduce the strain on limited public funds. Consequently, public childcare services declined significantly, while market childcare services expanded rapidly.

Childcare services for children aged zero to three have recently changed significantly in response to the new birth-control policy. In 2019, the State Council issued Opinions on Promoting the Development of Care Services for Infants and Young Children Under Three Years of Age, which clearly stated that local governments should offer financial support to private and social organizations to provide affordable and accessible childcare services for children aged zero to three. Since 2021, maternity leave has been extended from 98 days to 128–190 days, with regional variations. In 2022, the State Council further provided a tax deduction to support childcare. Parents with children under three years old can deduct RMB 1000 per month per child from their income tax. However, the state's financial support for childcare (aged zero to three) is still insufficient to reduce the cost borne by families (Ma et al. 2020). While childcare is still regarded as a family responsibility, the state has acknowledged that it is no longer a private issue and requires public financial and service support.

Elderly care services in China have followed a path similar to that of childcare. During the central planning era, older people were less dependent on their families for elderly care due to their short life expectancy, although adult children were expected to take care of them. The state issued an open letter to all members of the Communist Party and the Communist Youth League in 1980 to reassure people that the OCP would not affect elderly care. It was anticipated that "aging will not happen until at least forty years from now [i.e., 2020]. We can take steps to prevent it in advance." However, the aging process accelerated faster than anticipated, and the state had to clarify its stance on elderly care responsibilities. In 1996, China enacted the first Law on the Protection of the Rights and Interests of the Elderly, which explicitly stated that "the elderly mainly depends on their families for old-age support."

Following the establishment of the pension insurance system in the 1990s, the state began to develop an old-age care service system in 2006. Although families remain the main caregivers, they are supported by social care services, including community services and institutionalized care. In 2018, local governments introduced a single-child family care leave granting 7–20 days per year to support adult-only children in taking care of older parents with serious illnesses. However, the state does not cover the costs of family care leave. Employers are unwilling to pay these costs, and local governments have not seriously enforced this policy. Moreover, adult children whose parents are over 60 years old have been able to deduct RMB 2000 per month from their income tax since 2019. However, although old-age care services in the private market have grown quickly, only a small proportion of older people can afford such care services.

Families as consumers of housing and social services

During the central planning era, urban families were subject to stringent consumption restrictions due to material shortages. The social welfare system was designed to support a minimalistic level of family consumption, with the state providing essential services such as childcare, education, housing, and health care through work units. However, in an effort to reduce the burden on state-owned enterprises and stimulate economic growth, housing and social services underwent significant privatization between the 1980s and 1990s. In the meantime, the state recognized the potential economic contribution of family consumption.

One typical example of this is the state's regulation of family housing consumption. As the real estate market drove economic growth, the state acknowledged families' desires for housing as a means of wealth accumulation and improved living standards. In 1998, the State Council announced the Circular on Further Deepening the Reform of the Urban Housing System and Speeding Up Housing Construction, which ended public housing allocation and commercialized housing. Consequently, most families were required to purchase housing within the market independently, with exceptions made for low-income families who received public or subsidized commercial housing from local governments.

However, with the soaring housing prices in the new century, urban families have been faced with more difficulties in affording homes. To curb price inflation and speculation, local governments in major cities introduced Housing Purchase Restrictions in 2010, limiting each household to purchasing only one new commercial property. However, in 2022, these restrictions were relaxed by the central government to encourage childbirth, allowing families with multiple children to purchase second properties. Additional measures included housing allowances and increased housing loans.

The state has also marketized child education and promoted family consumption. Since the 1990s, early childhood education has been predominantly provided by the private sector, placing a financial strain on ordinary families. The State Council issued the Plan of China's Education Reform and Development in 1993, with the aim of "gradually increasing public spending on education to 4% of GDP by the end of the twentieth century." However, this goal was not achieved until 2012 and remained at approximately the same level until 2020 (4.22% of the GDP). This low level of public spending on child education has caused anxiety among urban middle-class families who compete to invest more in extracurricular tutoring courses for their children. In 2015, the Ministry of Education issued a residence-based enrollment policy to promote the acceptance of migrant children by public schools in the place of inflow. Data showed that in 2019, 83.4% of eligible primary-school-age migrant children were registered in public elementary schools, while in the junior high school age group, 85.2% were registered in publicly funded junior high schools (NBS 2020). However, despite the progress that has been made over the past decade or so, nearly half of the children of migrant workers still cannot live with their parents.

In recent years, the state has begun to provide financial support for family consumption related to childrearing, housing, and social services in an effort to encourage childbirth. In 2019, a tax deduction was introduced in the Personal Income Tax Law to indirectly subsidize children's education. Parents with children attending

kindergartens, primary schools, high schools, colleges, and universities can deduct RMB 1000 per month per child from their income tax.

In sum, during the central planning era, China embarked on a journey toward modernization, despite its predominantly productivist orientation. This period witnessed a heightened awareness of gender equality and a temporary boost in birth rates. These shifts were underpinned by policies aimed at molding family structures in line with the nation's evolving economic objectives. In this era, with an emphasis on heavy industries, the state provided limited public services to families and often sidelined family unity for overarching social policies. However, this epoch was pivotal in distancing China from its traditional societal norms. After 1978, as China gravitated toward a market-driven economy, families emerged not only as units of production but also as pivotal consumers, particularly in sectors such as housing and social services. Across these varied historical contexts, a common thread has persisted, namely, China's determination to synchronize family dynamics with its broader economic aspirations.

Impacts of public policies on family resources

In China's productivist regime, public policies influence available family resources. During the central planning era, policies prioritized labor, minimal consumption, and reproduction, resulting in poverty, subpar housing, and limited services.

The pursuit of economic growth in the reform era has created new jobs and increased household income over time. The commercialization of housing and social services has also created economic opportunities and wealth for families. As housing values have increased, housing has become the biggest contributor to a household's wealth. In 2018, the net property value of urban households accounted for 71.4% of per capita household wealth; a 91% growth in per capita household asset value was due to higher net property value (China Institute of Economic Trends 2019). The freer urban labor market that has been in place since the 1990s has also allowed rural families to migrate to cities. They frequently change jobs and cities to take advantage of employment opportunities in the national labor market and generate higher family income. Data from China Rural Revitalization Survey (CRRS) showed that the per capita net income of rural families in China rose from 5919 RMB in 2010 to 17,371 RMB in 2019 (Rural Development Institute of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, RDICASS 2022), with urban employment accounting for 45.7% of total income (The World Bank and DRC China 2022).

It is worth noting that the welfare state experienced major transitions during the reform era, providing a greater variety of social safety nets and services. These included a range of community-based services that often targeted older and disabled people, improved quality of services such as health care and education, and social insurance that protected people against costs associated with childbirth, unemployment, health care, housing, industrial accidents, and retirement (Li 2022).

These positive developments in income growth and living standards, along with external support from the newly established welfare system, should have strengthened family resilience as they were faced with shocks. However, as the economy becomes increasingly privatized, families also face new pressures on several fronts.

1. *Increased living costs.* In the period following the reform, there was an increase in the variety of goods and services consumed, and the living standards of most people saw a substantial enhancement. However, the costs of living became much higher than before. Housing consumption has imposed significant financial pressure on families since the termination of public housing provision. Housing affordability in 30 sampled Chinese cities showed an average house-price-to-annual household income ratio of 7.2 and a rent-to-monthly household income ratio of 34%, both of which were significantly higher than the internationally recognized value of affordability (i.e., $HPIR \leq 3.0$, $RIR \leq 25\%$) (Sun 2020). Table 2 shows family consumption patterns between 1990 and 2020. With the privatization of social services such as childcare, education, and health care and the emergence of new fee-charging services such as old age care and estate management fees, families' social service spending had increased to approximately 28% of urban families' disposable income by 2020.
2. *Decreased care and education capacity.* The birth control policies that have been implemented since the early 1980s have challenged filial practices that require fam-

Table 2 Urban family consumption (1990–2020). Disposable income = 100%

	Food	Clothing	Necessities and consumer goods	Transportation and communication	Housing	Education, culture and entertainment	Health and healthcare	Other services
1990	45.9	11.3	7.2	2.7	4.0	7.4	1.7	4.4
1995	41.4	11.2	6.1	4.3	6.6	7.7	2.6	2.7
2000	31.4	8.0	6.0	6.8	9.0	10.7	5.1	2.7
2001	29.6	7.8	5.5	7.2	8.9	10.7	5.0	2.7
2002	29.5	7.7	5.0	8.1	8.1	11.7	5.6	2.5
2003	28.5	7.5	4.8	8.5	8.3	11.0	5.6	2.5
2004	28.8	7.3	4.3	9.0	7.8	11.0	5.6	2.5
2005	27.8	7.6	4.3	9.5	7.7	10.5	5.7	2.6
2006	26.5	7.7	4.2	9.8	7.7	10.2	5.3	2.6
2007	26.3	7.6	4.4	9.8	7.1	9.6	5.1	2.6
2008	27.0	7.4	4.4	9.0	7.3	8.6	5.0	2.7
2009	26.1	7.5	4.6	9.8	7.2	8.6	5.0	2.8
2010	25.1	7.6	4.8	10.4	7.0	8.5	4.6	2.6
2011	25.2	7.7	4.7	9.9	6.4	8.5	4.4	2.7
2012	24.6	7.4	4.5	10.0	6.0	8.3	4.3	2.7
2013	21.0	5.9	4.3	8.8	16.3	7.5	4.3	1.9
2014	20.8	5.6	4.3	9.1	15.6	7.4	4.5	1.8
2015	20.4	5.5	4.2	9.3	15.1	7.6	4.6	1.9
2016	20.1	5.2	4.2	9.4	15.2	7.8	4.9	1.8
2017	19.2	4.8	4.2	9.1	15.3	7.8	4.9	1.8
2018	18.4	4.6	4.2	8.8	15.9	7.6	5.2	1.8
2019	18.3	4.3	4.0	8.7	16.0	7.9	5.4	1.8
2020	18.0	3.8	3.7	7.9	15.9	5.9	5.0	1.5

Since 2002, an urban household survey has targeted the permanent residents of city districts and county towns. Data since 1990 had been adjusted accordingly

Since 2013, the National Bureau of Statistics has carried out an integrated survey of urban–rural household income and living conditions. The post-2013 data are different in terms of scope, method, and index of urban and rural households in the surveys before 2013

Data source: Data from 2013 to 2020 were obtained from the data website of the National Bureau of Statistics (<https://data.stats.gov.cn>). Data from 2000 to 2012 were obtained from the China Statistical Yearbooks: 2014, 2010, 2008, 2006, 2004, and 2003

ilies to have a sufficient number of children to supply care for elderly individuals. However, the provision of eldercare by adult children is diminishing as the older population continues to increase, while family sizes are shrinking in the new century (Ma et al. 2011). The average number of persons per household dropped from 3.44 persons in 2000 to 2.62 persons in 2020. Although migration brings income to rural families, the *hukou*-based welfare provision has prevented children from living with their parents in local cities, making it difficult for parents to care for their children long-distance. Due to the decline of public childcare services (aged 0–3) since the 1990s, Chinese working mothers, particularly those who cannot afford to use private services or do not receive support from their aging parents, have lower levels of participation in the labor market (Ren and Wei 2022; Du and Dong 2013). Child education services are also largely privatized, and families have received little public support since the 1990s. Approximately 1/3 of family education spending goes to private tutoring. Childrearing spending for children aged 1–6 in large cities rose from 20% of household income in 2009 to 50% in 2017 (China Institute for Educational Finance Research, CIEFR 2018). Studies have also shown that as a result of high spending in raising children, parents with multiple children and families from lower income groups have suffered more as they have to spend a higher proportion of their income on children's education (Lugauer et al. 2019).

In sum, while families do have more resources both internally (growing income and wealth) and externally (social protection and services), they also face greater financial pressures imposed by higher living and education costs and increasing care-related pressures.

Families' responses to daily pressures

Family responses to life pressures in the central planning era varied in different ways. Many people lived in overcrowded conditions with multiple households squeezed into single housing units and managed extremely limited resources to make ends meet. However, some basic social services, such as education and health care, were available to residents in urban and rural areas, although at a minimal level (Kanbur and Zhang 2005). When public resources were available, multiple family members would often take advantage of one person's entitlement; this practice is particularly common in housing (Li 2017) and health care (Li 2012).

In the period following the reform, families adapted to the new market risks in several ways:

1. *Keeping the savings rate high.* For example, Chinese urban residents' net household savings rates climbed from 15% in 1978 to 33.75% in 2019. Studies have confirmed that rising mortgage costs have motivated households to save more money (Wang and Wen 2012; Zhao et al. 2020). Old- and middle-aged households save money to cover future old-age services (Ge et al. 2018), while young households save to ensure education for their children (Bollinger et al. 2022). Researchers have argued that when the social security system does not provide sufficient support, families tend to

save more to safeguard against expected job loss and receiving less income (Zhang et al. 2018).

2. *Intergenerational support.* Multiple generations of family members mobilize, exchange and arrange resources to overcome financial pressure. Parents contribute to housing costs for their adult children (Zhong and Li 2017), while adult children are the second major financial source of the elderly following their pensions, subsidizing elder care and health care services (Du et al. 2016). Family members also directly provide care, e.g., grandparents caring for grandchildren (Chen et al. 2011; Zhang et al. 2019). Nationwide, 60–70% of Chinese children aged 0–2 are taken care of by their grandparents, with 30% of them being solely cared for by their grandparents (China Research Centre on Aging 2014). Data from Report on China’s Child Welfare and Protection Policy showed that grandparents cared for 96% of the 6.97 million left-behind children in rural areas by 2018 (China Philanthropy Research Institute 2019). Over 60% of urban elderly people with disabilities have adult children as their primary caregivers (Li and Liu 2019). Table 3 details the intergenerational support between parents and adult children in 2016.
3. *Joint living arrangements.* There are growing trends in joint home buying, renting or migration to ensure geographical proximity between generations among family members (Izuhara and Forrest 2013). Families may choose to live under the same roof or live separately but nearby for easy support (Zhong and Li 2017). The 2018 CLHLS data showed that 34.4% of older Chinese people prefer to live separately but nearby with their children to secure old-age support (Lu and Gu 2022). The 2008 Chinese Time Use Survey data showed that in urban areas, the proportion of young couple co-live with their aging parents who are under 75 years old is 9.2%, while in rural areas, this proportion is higher, reaching 20.3% (Zhou et al. 2022). Young cou-

Table 3 How often parents and children have helped each other in the past year (2016)

	Gave money		Helped with housework or looking after children and other families		Listened to their thoughts	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
(1) In the past year, have you often offered the following help to your parents?						
Very often	154	7.1	180	8.3	148	6.8
Often	552	25.5	572	26.3	685	31.4
Sometimes	743	34.4	709	32.5	849	38.9
Seldom	388	17.9	524	24.0	400	18.3
Never	326	15.1	194	8.9	98	4.5
Total	2163	100.0	2179	100.0	2180	100.0
(2) In the past year, have your parents often offered the following help to you?						
Very often	96	4.4	139	6.4	88	4.0
Often	275	12.7	428	19.8	502	23.1
Sometimes	464	21.4	488	22.6	835	38.4
Seldom	470	21.6	427	19.8	515	23.7
Never	868	39.9	676	31.3	236	10.8
Total	2173	100.0	2158	100.0	2176	100.0

Missing variables (including “Don’t know”, “Not applicable”, and “Reject to answer”) are not reported. The data show the situation of people in rural and urban China and include people who have parents younger than 60

Data source: CGSS (2017)

ples do so to meet the needs of childcare and housework. Joint living arrangements are often used in conjunction with intergenerational support.

On the whole, higher savings, intergenerational support, and joint living arrangements have facilitated families to take advantage of economic opportunities and use resources more efficiently. This enhances their ability to protect themselves against risk and offer mutual support, thus resulting in higher resilience levels.

Family changes in the long term

As discussed in the theoretical section of this article, while observing the shift in resources at a specific time can provide insights into what is available to families when they need assistance, it does not enable us to judge the actual outcomes. This is because different types of resources may fluctuate in response to the same constraints or shocks. Therefore, it is crucial to examine key indicators of long-term family changes to understand the evolution of family resilience. A societal-level decline in family formation could indicate weakening or unsustainable family resilience, resulting in familial damage, diminished wellbeing, and reduced trust in the family as an effective social institution.

1. *Decreasing fertility rate.* Despite an increasingly relaxed birth control policy, young households have not produced more children as expected. Data from China statistical yearbooks showed that the number of births continued to fall between 2016 and 2021, and the total fertility rate declined to 1.3 children per woman in 2020. Moreover, the middle-aged generation, who are devoted to dual care commitments, has become reluctant to continue to provide grandparenting for their adult children (Zhong and Guo 2017). In return, the withdrawal of grandparental care has further reduced the care resources provided by families (Zhong and Peng 2022).
2. *Reducing family formation.* Data from China civil affairs statistical yearbooks showed that from 2013 to 2022, the number of marriage registrations dropped from 13.47 to 6.84 million, with the crude marriage rate falling from 9.9 to 4.8‰. People now also get married later than they did in the past. In 2010, the largest share of newly married couples (including couples getting remarried) was aged 20–24, accounting for 37.6% of all marriages. But by 2022 it has fallen to 15.2%. On the other hand, in 2021, the 25–29 age group with the share increasing over the last ten years represented the largest share, followed by the 30–34 age group. In the meantime, the divorce rate increased from 0.44‰ in 1985 to 3.36‰ in 2019.
3. *Increasing dysfunctional families.* The occurrence of juvenile delinquency in China has undergone a resurgence since 2020, rebounding from 2016. As found by Lisa Cameron, Xin Meng, and Dandan Zhan (2022), the absence of adult parents and the presence of strained family relationships due to rural-to-urban migrations have been important contributing factors. Furthermore, rising divorce rates, domestic abuse, parental conflicts, and single parenthood are factors associated with child disadvantages and behavior issues in terms of poor subjective well-being (Zhang 2020).

The implication of these long-term trends cannot be overstated. To some extent, the long-term decline in families at the societal level is itself a sign of people trying to avoid assuming roles imposed by the state to support the economy. These indicators should be viewed as signals for a weakened family sector, even if surviving families appear resilient.

Is the COVID-19 pandemic the turning point?

The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on families in China comprise a complex picture according to the literature. A growing body of research focuses on related mental health and care issues. Children's mental health has been found to be closely related to family resilience (He et al. 2022; Zhuo et al. 2022). Despite the difficulties families faced during COVID-19, there has been an improvement in relationships among family members, particularly between parents and children (Zhang et al. 2022). This improvement is related to the fact that parents who used to spend long hours at work did not previously have much quality time to spend with their children. However, home-based schooling and the lockdowns "forced" parents to spend more time with children and support them in adapting to new schooling methods. However, caregivers were also faced with severe stress levels, which affected their mental health (Wei et al. 2023). Families in higher income groups suffered less from mental distress because they had a better supply of daily essentials and productive supplies. They were also less likely to lose their jobs and could enlist more community support (Wu et al. 2021).

Unlike many recent studies that have taken a cross-sectional view to examine the state of stress, one study took a longer-term view, stressing that the short-term demonstration of strong family resilience may have burnout effects in the future (Tang et al. 2023). This view is in line with the argument proposed in this article. The COVID-19 pandemic and the related responses created an extreme scenario, i.e., the termination of employment for a substantial proportion of the population meant that families could not rely on receiving external support or even support from extended family members living nearby for care. During the lockdown period, many families could only count on their own savings and household members' labor. They were left alone to deal with their health and care needs, with no employment, broken food and shopping logistic chains, and limited access to social services. The high level of household savings accumulated over the long years of the previous thriving period helped less well-to-do families survive without earnings and social support during the lockdowns. A telling phenomenon is that after the outbreak of COVID-19, Chinese household saving rates rose even faster in 2022, confirming that family savings respond to people's awareness of the lack of external support when faced with shocks.

However, as discussed earlier in this article, the effectiveness of the productivist approach in enhancing family resilience hinges on its ability to create more employment opportunities and boost family income. When COVID-19 disrupted sustained economic growth, the internal resources available to families became more limited. While high levels of household savings can undoubtedly provide support for families for some time, they can also pose a barrier to increasing consumption, which is vital to stimulating the economy.

Discussion and conclusion

Our examination of the Chinese case offers an in-depth perspective on the evolution of family resilience over the course of seven decades. The dynamics uncovered underscore the centrality of public policy in shaping family resilience within the productivist framework. Scholars have increasingly called for a dynamic lens in examining the productivist regime (Yang and Kuhner 2020; Mok et al. 2017). Complementing this call, our research underlines how Chinese policies, despite their varied thrust across the central planning and reform eras, have persistently sculpted families that support economic imperatives. Even as care services have been sporadically expanded, the overarching productivist characteristics of the state have remained intact.

This research disentangles the dual impact of the productivist regime on family resilience. While the regime fortified short-term resilience, especially during periods of robust economic growth and youthful demographic profiles, a shadow loomed over long-term family sustainability. Several Asian states, including China, have shown that the state's increasing impositions place families under strain (Ochiai 2009; Wu 2015). China's reform era, which was characterized by sustained growth and a demographic advantage, seemed to enhance family resilience momentarily. However, the onset of rapid population aging and unexpected shocks, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, challenged the tenets ensuring its success. As resilience is tested beyond thresholds, evident signs, including declining fertility rates and increasing family dysfunctions, hint at a long-term family sector downturn.

The implications are clear; i.e., China's productivist model, which leverages families primarily for economic growth, is proving unsustainable, heralding a broader family sector decline. A pivotal policy redirection is needed—one that prioritizes families' well-being rather than positioning them as mere economic instruments. Absent prompt intervention, society might grapple with wider consequences, such as escalating crime rates or an economy shackled by care burdens. Supporting families need not be at odds with fostering economic vitality. The outcomes of initial steps that have been taken, such as parental leave extensions and tax relief for working families in 2023, bode well. Nevertheless, a more comprehensive public policy overhaul is vital to harmonize economic pursuits with family-centric objectives.

In summary, our study elucidates the nuanced interplay between welfare regimes and family resilience across temporal spans and at the societal level. By charting the trajectory of family resilience within China's productivist landscape, we augment the role of learned helplessness induced by state-centered policy. Obviously, China is not the only country to have adopted a productivist regime, and it is not the only country that is experiencing a family decline. More research is needed to understand whether the family resilience paradoxes present in other countries share the same driving factors as those found in China. In this sense, this research paves the way for research on comparable welfare systems.

Abbreviations

NBS	National Bureau of Statistics of China
MCA	Ministry of Civil Affairs of China
WTO	World Trade Organization
CGSS	Chinese General Social Survey
OCP	One-child policy

CPC The Communist Party of China
 CRRS China Rural Revitalization Survey
 RDICASS Rural Development Institute of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences

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Author contributions

The first author and the second author (who is also the corresponding author) wrote most of the manuscript. The third author wrote part of the manuscript. The fourth author performed all statistical analyses and prepared figures and tables.

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Availability of data and materials

All data used in this paper are in the public domain. The author does not have exclusive right to them.

Declarations

Competing interests

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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