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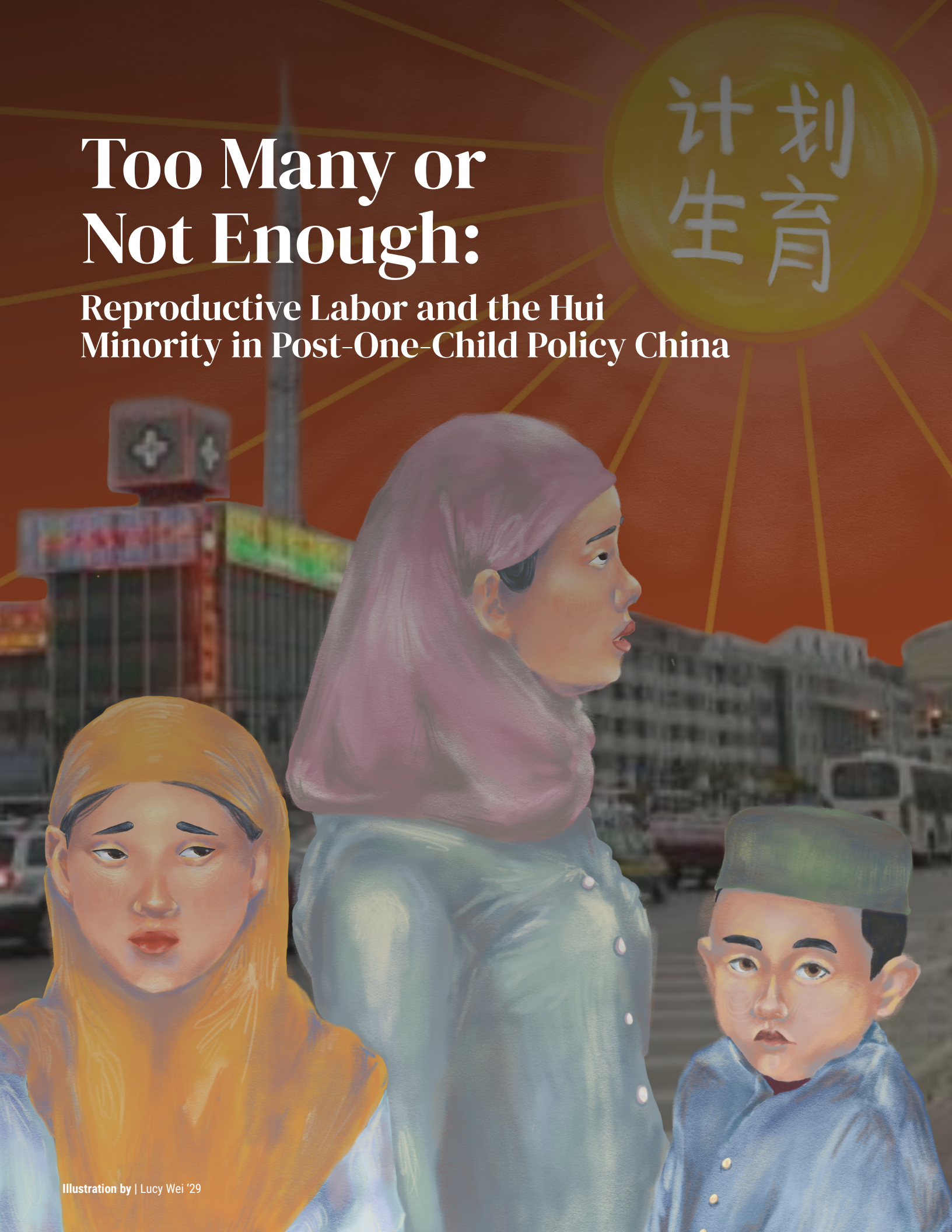
Reproductive Labor and the Hui Minority in Post-One-Child Policy China



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ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Too Many or Not Enough: Reproductive Labor and the Hui Minority in Post-One-Child Policy China

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This paper examines the overlooked reproductive experiences of Hui women, China's second-largest ethnic minority, under the One-Child Policy (1979–2016). Many ethnic minorities were formally exempt from birth quotas, creating complex pressures that disproportionately shaped Hui women's lives. The existing literature focuses on numerical measures such as population growth, poverty, and educational attainment from national census measures, which tend to have limited scope. As a result, ethnic minorities are often described as monolithic, grouped into the "other," while the Han are the focus. Using demographic data, policy analysis, and a transnational feminist lens, I place a new focus on the differential experiences of ethnic-minority women. I argue that exemptions to the One-Child Policy for Hui women did not grant them reproductive freedom but instead intensified gendered burdens by linking women's reproductive labor to state economic logics and community strategies of ethnic preservation. I expand the reproductive justice framework by challenging the preconception that freedoms from coercive population control measures are inherently freeing. Furthermore, I propose a new lens to view cultural and religious traditions as a resource for empowerment rather than a barrier for Hui women. Drawing on cases from the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, I show how Islam-based economic initiatives open pathways for Hui women's public participation. These cases illustrate that reproductive justice in China cannot be measured merely by exemptions from state control, but must instead account for the broader cultural and economic structures that shape women's reproductive lives.

The One-Child Policy is one of the most significant population control efforts in modern history, particularly in its impact on Han families, the dominant ethnic group in China. However, the experiences of ethnic-minority women during this period of population control, and its lingering effects, are often overlooked. China's family planning laws aimed to regulate birth rates through measures such as child limits and financial penalties. Among these, the One-Child Policy emerged as the most far-reaching, continuing to impact gender ratios today (Pletcher, 2025). While ethnic minority groups are given exemptions to family planning laws, a misconception that this "preferential treatment" greatly benefits ethnic-minority women and families continues to circulate in scholarly discourse. This paper focuses on the Hui, China's second-largest minority group, with approximately 11 million members and a unique status as an Islamic minority.

> ***A new reproductive justice paradigm must recognize that neither state-granted reproductive freedom nor adherence to tradition is inherently oppressive or liberatory; their impact depends on context.***

I examine how Hui women navigate both state policies and community expectations, which pressure them to have more children to preserve ethnic identity and "keep up" with the Han majority. The lack of government support in educational and economic spheres in underprivileged communities exacerbates the problems of inequality in combination with reproductive pressures. I further this argument by exploring a new framework that allows tradition to become an essential part of economic empowerment for women. The paper argues that a new reproductive justice paradigm must recognize that neither state-granted reproductive freedom nor adherence to tradition is inherently oppressive or liberatory; their impact depends on context.

Literature Review

Scholars have extensively examined the economic and social consequences of the One-Child Policy, but few have explored its impact on ethnic-minority women. Most discussions of the One-Child Policy, or any family planning policy that accompanied it, operate at a macro level, focusing on national averages of birth rates and fertility. Scholarship on ethnic minorities emphasizes static indicators like poverty, inter-ethnic marriage, and cultural practices. These discussions treat minority communities as timeless or ahistorical. Marginalized communities are seen as culturally different, permitting shallow analysis of uncommon practices as mere reflections of this cultural difference and stripping historical pasts from cultural practices (Nnaemeka, 2005). This mentality neglects the fact that tradition has the dynamic capacity to respond to structural change. This creates two key gaps in the literature:

1) The overlooked consequences of family planning policy exemptions on minority women, and 2) The tendency to use ethnic minority tradition as a catch-all explanation for poverty and patriarchy, which obscures its potential for feminist and economic progress.

The One-Child Policy

Introduced in 1979, the One-Child Policy was designed to curb China's rapidly growing population (Kane, 1999). While its impacts are hard to measure as they continue to shape reproductive norms, research shows that, in 1990, the total fertility rate for most ethnic minority groups ranged from 3 to 4.1, while the Han fertility rate was 2.1 (Jin, 2023). By 2020, the fertility gap had narrowed but persisted; ethnic groups such as the Miao, Zhuang, Bai, Tujia, and Hui had fertility rates ranging from 1.5 to 1.8, while the Han stood at 1.27. This consistent fertility gap illustrates that ethnic-minority women, on average, have more children than their Han counterparts. This paper operates within the demographic and policy context where reproductive patterns are deeply stratified along ethnic lines. Focusing on the period from 1979 to 2016, during which the One-Child Policy was fully enforced, this paper highlights a contrast in its application to the Han majority versus the Hui ethnic minority.

China's Minzu system classifies its population by ethnicity, playing a crucial role in shaping this dynamic. Initially developed in the 1930s, the Minzu system was designed by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to gain political legitimacy by fostering alliances with marginalized groups (Dillon, 2018). After the founding of the People's Republic in 1949, the CCP further solidified its power by recognizing certain ethnic groups' rights within the socialist state structure (Dillon, 2018). However, the Minzu system also compelled individuals to choose a single ethnic identity, erasing mixed or multiethnic heritage (Stroup, 2022). This classification system serves a dual function: formally recognizing diversity while confining it within state-sanctioned boundaries.

Perceptions of Birth Planning Policies and Their Exemptions

It is difficult to obtain an accurate gauge of Chinese citizens' opinions of the One-Child Policy, as any study would likely be impacted by social desirability bias, post-hoc reasoning, or censorship. Reports by the Human Rights Watch describe China as one of the world's most severe censorship regimes. The Chinese government uses tactics such as firewalls and business regulations to prevent information that perpetuates any views of the CCP as anything other than benevolent and uncorrupt (Human Rights Watch, 2024). As discussed later in this paper, ethnic minorities experience disproportionately high levels of poverty and unemployment compared to their Han counterparts—findings that may be interpreted as critical of the government. Still, scholars have managed to trace general attitudes of the Han majority toward ethnic minorities, especially regarding exemptions to population control policies, as these studies tend to emphasize sociocultural perspectives rather than overt political criticism, allowing them to avoid political scrutiny. In *Lesser Dragons*, Michael Dillon notes that many Han Chinese, including educated elites, perceive ethnic minorities as recipients of "preferential treatment." He writes that Han citizens often point to policies such as lower university entrance requirements and exemptions from the One-Child Policy as evidence that minorities benefit at the expense of the Han majority (Dillon, 2018). Xing's study of China's most ethnically diverse province, titled "Prevalence of Ethnic Intermarriage in Kunming," outlines how these "privileges" extend to fewer taxes, greater access to education for children, more lenient employment and promotion opportunities, and protections for religious and linguistic expression (Xing, 2007). It is worth noting that some of these perceived preferential treatments can hardly be recognized as such when using a dominant Western framework of civil rights. Well-established human rights conventions such as the European Convention on Human Rights recognize the freedom of expression, the right to education, and the right to use one's minority language freely (Council of Europe, 1950; Council of Europe, 1995). In China, the right to self-expression, religious freedoms, and employment equality are so seldom granted in ethnic minority communities that they are perceived as luxuries. Yet, the belief that exemptions to population control measures and policies like entrance exam score boosts are viewed as preferential treatments by ethnic minority groups themselves.

In his book *Changing Ethnicity*, Guo examines how ethnic identity and hierarchy are socially constructed and redefined through the One-Child Policy. Among the Yi people of Liangshan, for example, some express pride in their bloodline and view their ability to have more children as symbolic of ethnic superiority. Guo writes that "preferential policies are to some extent making matters even worse", including the "birth-planning policy that allows Yi couples to have two children" (Guo, 2020). By calling it a "preferential policy", the author indicates that allowing more children per household is indeed a "preference" as decided by the state, which is later reinterpreted and internalized by ethnic minorities as a sign of their superiority over the Han majority as a result of increased freedoms.

These examples piece together a general view of One-Child Policy exemptions as positive. In other words, the Chinese perceive having more children, or at least the option to, as inherently good. At face value, they are giving more autonomy back to ethnic minority regions to decide for themselves how many children each household would like to have. The higher birth rates among ethnic minority groups, as outlined in the earlier section, are evidence of this attitude. However, the rest of my paper is aimed at uncovering what this positive perception misses: the impact of these exemptions that are disproportionately felt by lower-class ethnic-minority women and the use of an economic framework by the Chinese government to obscure their manipulation of reproductive labor in a way that advances their population control agendas.

Religion and Endogamy

Religious identity and state policy converge to create additional reproductive pressures on Hui women. In the book *Pure and True*, Stroup details the everyday politics of Hui people, which points to the rarity of inter-ethnic marriages between Hui people and the Han. Hui men and women maintain endogamy—the practice of marrying within one's ethnic or religious groups, as opposed to exogamy, or marriage outside of it—due to religious customs, with women expected to convert to Islam before marrying into Hui families (Stroup, 2022). This expectation of religious conversion is both a personal spiritual decision and a mechanism of ethnic preservation. The official categorization of ethnicity in China, coupled with the Hui people being devoutly Muslim, has encouraged China's ethnic minority communities to "engage in endogamy and [have] additional children as attempts at ethnic preservation" (Stroup, 2022). Ethnic preservation becomes a compelling rhetoric and collective strategy that can only be accomplished with religious conversion. While conversion may appear as a personal choice, it also serves as a gatekeeping mechanism.

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The logic follows that a woman willing to accept the religious and cultural norms of a new community for the sake of ethnic preservation is also likely to accept childbirth as part of her new social role. With exemptions to the One-Child Policy, Hui women face additional pressure to give birth to two or more children.

The asymmetrical pressure on women is further evidenced by Xing's observation that "Hui and Bai men were more likely to marry with other minority women" while their female counterparts were more likely to marry Han (Xing, 2007). This contrast suggests that women face greater social and religious consequences in the case of exogamy. Stroup reinforces this point by noting that even in urban areas with fewer Hui, endogamy is still preferred, and "religion and ethnic differences put up barriers that make exogamy difficult, if not undesirable" (Stroup, 2022). In this context, Hui women carry the dual burden of embodying religious identity and producing children in the service of ethnic continuity. Fertility becomes not just a personal or familial concern, but a religious obligation and a political tool.

Economic Development and Education

The second way Hui women face reproductive pressures as an ethnic minority is through the societal belief that the best way to catch up to the Han majority is by giving birth to more children. Scholars note that ethnic minority groups face higher levels of poverty, lack of access to necessities, food shortages, etc. This is closely linked to the geographical concentration of ethnic minorities on the West side of China, which is less economically developed (Isaksson, 2020). Ethnic minorities are generally less educated and more occupationally concentrated in agriculture than the majority Han (Xing, 2007). With fewer economic opportunities, families need to make a difficult trade-off between sending their children to school and pushing them into the labor market. In their IZA World of Labor article, "The Quantity-Quality Fertility-Education Trade-Off", Liu and Li note that in countries where education is costly and child labor contributes to household income, the child quantity-quality trade-off becomes especially pronounced, with family size directly shaping opportunities for education and economic survival (Liu & Li, 2022). This disparity in socioeconomic opportunities is compounded by the underrepresentation of ethnic minorities in higher education. As of 2012, only 7.05% of ethnic minority students were enrolled in higher education, a figure that had slightly declined after the expansion of the one-child policy to a two-child policy (Xiong, 2020). Despite policies that grant priority admission and tuition waivers to ethnic minority students, these students face significant challenges in gaining meaningful employment due to the culturally specific nature of the education they receive and because their curricula may be taught in ethnic minority languages (Xiong, 2020). In a study on the Gaokao college entrance exam, Zhang and Chen write that although ethnic minority groups are given extra points as a "compensatory" mechanism to the disadvantaged, when ethnicity is used as the sole basis for awarding extra points, the policy obscures more significant social inequalities such as regional, socioeconomic, and urban–rural

disparities, ultimately undermining its goal of promoting educational justice (Zhang & Chen, 2025; Zhang, 2010; Si & Lu, 2013; Huang, Qin, & Zhou, 2013). This shows how higher education has not successfully equalized access to future opportunities like higher-paying jobs, as systemic barriers continue to limit the economic returns of education. For many Hui families, having more children serves as both an economic safety net – since the likelihood of any single child lifting the family out of poverty is low – and a practical strategy to increase the household income. In this context, ethnic minority communities may view having more children not only as a way of preserving their cultural identity but also as a means of economic survival. The lack of viable educational or career paths further strengthens the notion that increased fertility is an economically feasible solution to the pressures of catching up to the Han majority, both in terms of economic development and social mobility.

> ***These opportunities can increase women's visibility and value in the public sphere while remaining anchored in community values, combating the view of tradition as inherently backward.***

Economic Justifications of Reproductive Policies

A transnational feminist lens reveals how economic justifications for reproductive governance are manipulated to mask state control over women's bodies. As Sreenivas explains, post-colonial governments often framed reproductive policies through the lens of development and economic productivity. In her analysis of family planning policies in India, she writes that "the economy was assumed to be a public and thus legitimate site of state governance" (Sreenivas, 2021). This allowed intrusive reproductive policies to appear rational or even benevolent. Similarly, in China, state discourse on population control and minority fertility uses economic rhetoric by linking reproduction to modernization, legitimizing interventions into women's reproductive lives for the sake of national development. However, this framework inherently devalues reproductive labor unless it can be tied to formal economic growth. Economic indicators such as GDP do not consider the informal economy, or essential labor such as childrearing, housework, cooking, etc. (Sreenivas, 2021). As a result, critiques of women being undervalued and overworked can be refuted by the paradigm that this labor is not an economic activity and thus cannot become a government priority.

The economic framing used to justify the One-Child Policy reveals dangerous contradictions when applied unevenly. Initially, the policy was introduced to curb the rapidly growing Chinese population (Kane & Choi, 1999). This goal is grounded in a Malthusian logic that framed population control as essential for economic stability, as there would be an upper limit to the reproductive capacity of the country. This rationale worked for the Han majority, who viewed restricting birth rates as necessary to prevent overpopulation and economic strain. However, the logic does not hold when we examine the exemptions granted to many ethnic minority groups, who were allowed to have more children without financial penalties. Here, the Chinese government reversed its economic argument, shifting from limiting population growth to encouraging it in these communities. I posit that ethnic minority communities were not treated the same as the Han majority because they were perceived as less of a threat to reaching the economic upper limit. Many ethnic minority groups lived in rural areas, far from the urban centers driving China's industrialization. As a result, they were not seen as contributing to the same economic pressures as the Han, who were concentrated in the cities and driving rapid economic growth. Furthermore, the view that housework and childbearing, which were disproportionately burdening ethnic-minority women, were not economic activities, reinforced this different treatment. The government's frame shift reveals how political goals could easily manipulate economic reasoning at the cost of women's reproductive freedoms.

Interestingly, the very existence of the One-Child Policy is internally contradictory. As García shows, the One-Child Policy "functioned less as a blanket restriction and more as an 'individually tailored pricing system'" (García, 2024). Families with the financial means could afford the penalties for second or third children, effectively bypassing the policy. This exposes the deeply monetary nature of population control in China: birth limits were not enforced universally. Rather, they were commodified to reinforce class division. A better reproductive justice framework, as outlined by Loretta Ross and Rickie Solinger, emphasizes three key tenets: the right not to have a child, the right to have a child, and the right to parent in a safe and healthy environment (Ross & Solinger, 2017). The One-Child Policy violated the second tenet by restricting Han women's ability to have children, often through coercive measures like forced sterilization and abortion. Meanwhile, the exemptions for ethnic minority groups violated the first and third tenets. These women were pressured to have more children without the support necessary for their children's well-being, thus infringing on their right not to have a child and the right to parent in a safe environment. The policy failed to provide the resources these women needed to thrive, reinforcing inequality rather than offering true reproductive freedom.

Reframing Tradition as Economically Empowering

Part of the transnational feminist approach to reproductive justice and female empowerment is the recognition that tradition does not necessarily stand in the way of progress. As mentioned earlier in my paper, tradition is sometimes used as a catch-all to explain things like higher birth rates, lower educational attainment, and lower female employment. Hence, through the example of Hui women, Islam may be easily seen as a barrier to women's empowerment. This paper is guilty of that logic, especially in its analysis of how Islamic norms increased reproductive pressures on Hui women. However, I believe that a new framework that views tradition as capable of evolving in ways that support both community values and gender equity can apply to the example of Hui women and other communities as well. One illustration of this is found in the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region. In the South of the region, there is a higher concentration of Jahriyya, a Sufi order viewed as more "radical and aimed at a purer form of Islam." Here, mosques have embraced market reforms and "developed business interests to fund their religious activities," such as hotels and clinics operated by the Nanguan Mosque in Yinchuan (Dillon, 2018). This blending of religious life and economic strategy has even ex-

tended into Islamic financing. The Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region is viewed as a gateway to international commerce with the Middle East, and it has grown into "a fully-fledged Islamic capital market" through support from the Bank of China and e-commerce innovation (Dillon, 2018).

This shift towards market-oriented religious engagement not only strengthens institutional independence but also creates new avenues for Hui women to participate in the economy. Given the higher fertility rates and social expectation to adhere to Islamic traditions, Hui women may face challenges in employment that relate to religious piety; in particular, working for secular companies instead of being a stay-at-home parent carries social stigma, as it may be seen as incompatible with expectations of religious devotion. This tension can prevent women from pursuing work, even when they are willing and able. However, if the framework shifts and more Hui communities invest in Islam-based economic development and education, new pathways could emerge where women can participate in the economy without being viewed as transgressing religious norms. These opportunities can increase women's visibility and value in the public sphere while remaining anchored in community values, combating the view of tradition as inherently backward. While these changes may still occur within the bounds of Islamic custom, they offer a crucial first step in building overlap between tradition and empowerment, allowing women to engage in public life not despite religion, but through it.

Conclusion

This paper speaks only to the experiences of one minority group in one specific context. Other ethnic and religious communities in China are equally worthy of future research. By exposing the ways that reproductive policies differently impact minority women, this case offers a starting point for understanding how reproductive justice must include not only the right to give birth, but also the right not to. It challenges the assumption that tradition inherently hinders economic empowerment. In a world shaped by neoliberal economic demands, neither exemptions from population control nor adherence to tradition are inherently oppressive or empowering; their impact depends on whose voices define empowerment.

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