

# The “Fragmented” Age: The Cause of “Fragmented” Social Life and the Consequences of it Resulting in the Decrease in Birth Rate in China from 2001 to 2021

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**Abstract.** During 2001 and 2021, the country of China experienced a clear decrease in birth rate. There should be the main reason, which leads to this result. It can be inferred that the downward sloping of birth rate is the consequence of the “fragmented” social life, which started to form in the millennium. “fragmented” social life” in this paper is mainly referring to a lifestyle in China since the beginning of the 21st century. This social lifestyle is motivated by the economic change and the policies since 2001, combined with China joining WTO (World Trade Organization). The concept of “fragment” in sociology was first presented by the author Bell Hooks when addressing the problem of the “hierarchy of oppression” within the feminist movement. I define the lifestyle as “fragmented” mainly because of some characteristics of the change are engaged with fast business mode and the rapid growth of a fictitious economy. This change made Chinese society more separated both physically and mentally, which will be further illustrated in the following paper.

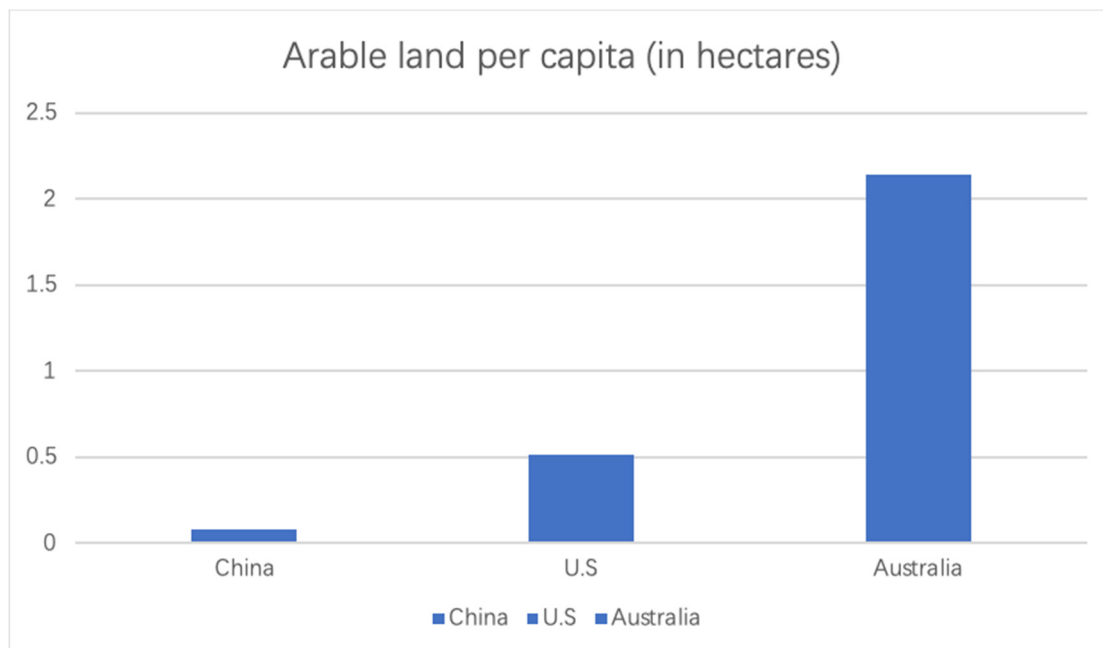
**Keywords:** “Fragmented”; Birth Rate; Chinese Social Life and the Consequences.

## 1. Introduction

During 2001 and 2021, the country of China experienced a clear decrease in birth rate: from 1.403% (2001) to 0.752% (2021). It is worth mentioning that from 2020 to 2021, the birth rate drops slightly from 0.852 to 0.752, which is rarely seen in a developing country according to the data supported by State Statistical Bureau of China in 2021. As developing countries such as India (from 1.76% in 2020 to 1.74% in 2021) or Vietnam (from 1.58% in 2020 to 1.55 in 2021), with data provided by United Nations, we can see the trend of declining birth rate but comparing these data with the data of China, it can be easy for us to see the abnormal declining rate of the birth rate in China. According to an estimate published last month in a peer-reviewed Chinese journal, *Social Science Journal*, Wei Chen, a demographer at Renmin University in Beijing, concluded that, based on national census data released in 2020, China’s population might have already peaked in 2021 (Wei, 2022).

This abnormal phenomenon must be the consequence of various reasons, including social events or economic situations.

Since the year of 2001, the emergence of various companies and factories powered by China joining in WTO made a huge amount of population from rural areas move into big cities. Up to 2005, there are 581 million foreign population in Shanghai according to Shanghai Statistical Bureau, mostly moved from rural areas in inland provinces of China. After interviewing several “new Shanghainese”, who had experienced the period of moving into big cities, it can be clearly concluded that the motivation of the movement toward the cities is jobs. The result is so simple that we may have doubted its authenticity, however, it is all about the new jobs provided in big cities due to the expansion of new factories. It is worth to be mentioned that arable land per capita of China is 0.083 hectares in 2011, while the US has the number of 0.514 in the same year, and Australia is 2.14. From these data provided, it can be easy inferred that Chinese farmers has much less land to guarantee their daily income than in some developed countries such as the US and Australia. This marvelous comparison is showed in Figure 1 below. The population problem vast mountainous landscape in China has caused little land for each household to cultivate, so young people in rural areas must find another way to earn their livings.



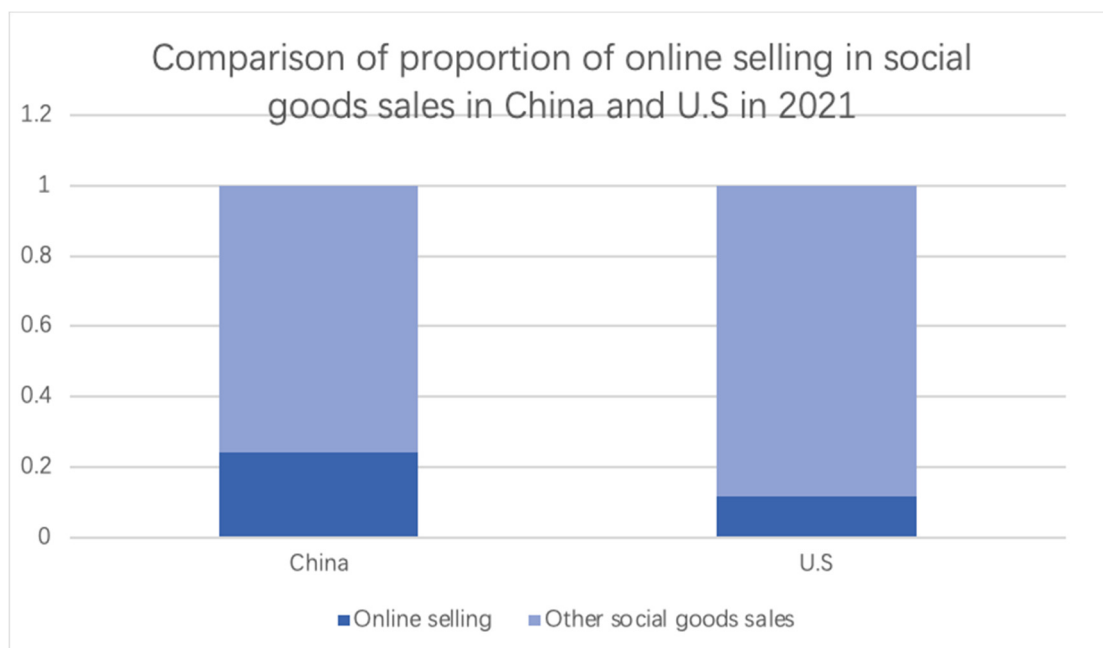
**Figure 1.** Arable land per capita (In hectares)

Working in factories in cities turns out to be a good choice as it requires less education level and can offer a comparatively stable job. Young people in rural areas of China, finally, head to big cities to seek for jobs in groups. Most of the people stayed in factories, while few of them started to find gigs to do. During the process of the mass urbanization, the house prices of the main cities experienced a rapid expansion due to the government selling lands to the real estate companies, of whom started to build housing estates of high-rise residential buildings. Average house price of China increases from ¥2000 per square meter (2001) to over ¥10000 per square meter (2021) which is informed by State Statistics Bureau in 2022, it has multiplied five times in 20 years. When moving from countryside to cities, previous rural cultures started to fade out as well.

In most cases, people’s social ties between each other start to disappear, while the social ties with each other in rural areas of China are usually tighter, and people are closer to each other. So there is no doubt that the movement to cities changed the rural culture in many people’s mind, leading them to be more “fragmented”. However, the “fragment” caused by three main reasons: economic change, cultural change, and policies. The “fragmented” society has made it more and more hard to raise a child in a separated society without or with loose social ties.

## 2. Economic Change Which Leads to the “Fragmented” Society

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, since 2001, electronic commerce platform started to thrive. Alibaba, established in 1999, started its business of Taobao in 2003, followed by JD.com in 2004 on selling goods online in China. The emergence of a group online merchants has, in some degree, changed the economic structure of China. In 2021, online selling occupies 24% of social goods sales in China according to State Statistical Bureau of China, which is two times of America’s data: 11.8% according to U.S. Census Bureau. The comparison is showed in the Figure 2. Compared to US, we can see the huge online market in China without difficulty. The changes the online market makes are also impactful to the process of fragment.



**Figure 2.** Comparison of proportion of online selling in social goods sales in China and U.S in 2021

The huge online market has caused a large number of courier companies' appearance. As we all know, a huge number of online purchases also need effective and massive delivery systems, which require a large number of workers to allocate the packages. Due to the condition previously stated, being deliverers can be a choice as good as working in factories to newcomers arrived in big cities. The unexpected thrive of takeaway platforms after 2015 has also provided more jobs of deliverers, and being a deliverer starts to be the one of the dominant choices of migrant workers in cities. In 2021, the number of delivery workers reaches 13 million, we have no choice but to consider them a dominant power of labor, as the data shows. According to the platform rules, deliverers who deliver more parcels can get the wage of ¥3 for each item without basic salary. According to the data presented by the State Statistical Bureau of China, each Chinese works 46.7 hours each week averagely, leading to "fragmented" lifestyles and fast social pace. Of this principle, deliverers should make sure they can deliver more packages in the same period of time in order to earn more.

As Karl Marx stated in the book *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (1932), alienation occurs when people have nothing to do except working for more hours to earn more money, just as what the deliverers are experiencing. These workers may likely to develop social alienation, which can cause them disconnected from the society, which leads to "fragment". The burden of daily consumption can also make their social life faster and faster; the situation of "fragment" can be even aggravated.

### 3. "Fragments" Leading Cultural Changes

Before discussing the cultural changes, we should first make the characteristics of culture in small towns and rural areas in China clear. Except the big cities in China, the relationship between people can be extremely close in communities. The interpersonal ties in these areas can be extremely tight, so that people may often discuss on someone in the same community. These communities constructed in China are usually known as villages in rural area and street communities in small town or cities. As Shucaï Yang, Quanbao Jiang & Jesús J. Sánchez-Barricarte (2022) have stated that "The traditional norm of universal marriage and childbearing for Chinese women is changing." (Yang, Jiang & Sánchez-Barricarte, 2022) So, for most Chinese people that do not live in big cities, their neighbors' attitudes can also determine one's choice.

In most of the Chinese communities, extra pressures are put on people to do things satisfying their neighbors to keep their mouth close. In addition, the pressure from family members can also not to be overlooked. As Fei Xiaotong stated in his book *From the Soil* (1947), traditional Chinese families are built for business, so families cannot endure individual activities. Therefore, there's another kind of pressure put on individuals by families (Fei, 1947).

However, as the migration to big cities occurs, these rural cultures can be completely disappeared and do not influence them anymore. The process of "fragment" starts to develop. Without those tight ties with their communities and families, social life may be significantly altered. Many Chinese cultural requirements to people can be thrown away if they make it not efficient to earn money, a great aspect of it is raising children.

According to Fei's theory, traditional Chinese families are strongly disciplined, all the things are about efficiency, including raising children. So, raising children in traditional Chinese societies is more like a duty than a choice. But things go different when it comes to big cities, according to the working structure illustrated in the previous passage, workers are more likely to use all their time for salary rather than considering their cultural duties of raising children. It is mostly because in the city society, interpersonal ties are no longer tight according to the "fragment" theory previously stated, nobody cares what do you do and have you fulfilled your cultural "duties" anymore. Lead by the fragrant lifestyle, people no longer care about people around them.

#### 4. How do Various Social Changes Affect the Birth Rate

In the previous paragraphs, various changes which take place between 2001 and 2021 are well introduced. Including economic changes which leads to "fragmented" social condition, changes of life modes caused by the "fragment" condition, and cultural changes caused by these changes. In this paragraph, research is taken to find out how these changes cause the rapid drop of birth rate from 2001 to 2021.

Beside these significant social changes, policies also play an important row in the decreasing birth rate. In 2002, big cities represented by Shanghai has stopped offering registered residence qualifications even one buys houses in Shanghai. Lack of residence qualifications makes it harder for migrant workers to raise children because their children cannot receive local compulsory education in this situation. The only solution is leaving their children in hometown, but it is not a good choice when considering children's growth.

As the urbanization take place in China, housing price in main cities grows as it has exploded. In 2001, the average housing price of Beijing is ¥5062 per square meter. One of the main reasons is the "fragmented" society need to buy properties to prove or maintain their wealth as they do not have much leisure time to spend their money. However, in 2020 the average housing price has raised to ¥37665 per square meter according to State Statistics Bureau, which is more than seven times of the price in 2001 of Beijing. Since most Chinese people think housings are necessary for wedding, people working in cities are less likely to get married due to the expansion of the housing price. Which is also caused by "fragment", less wedding obviously means less babies born. As stated in paragraph 2, high working hours can make parents have no time to take care of their children. So many married couples give up the thoughts to raise kids because of the working condition causing "fragmented" life modes.

Education burden can also have impressive effects on abandoning the thought of raising kids. According to China Raising Costs Report 2021 version, the average raising cost from 0 to 17 years old in China is as high as ¥485218 in 2021, while the average annual salary of 2021 is only ¥100000 presented by State Statistical Bureau of China in 2022. Because every middle-class parent wants their children to get to good universities in order to survive the "fragmented" world. From the data, it can be concluded that raising costs are too high for normal workers to afford. Therefore, less and less people decide to raise children on this circumstance.

## 5. Conclusion

As the whole research paper illustrates, it can be finally concluded that the special economic conditions since 2001 have stimulated the changes of the whole economic structure of China. It is this structural change leads to the change of social life and make the society more and more “fragmented”. The “fragmented” lifestyle then caused cultural changes, which is the rudimentary reason for the dropping birth rate. The “fragmented” lifestyle also causes the birth rate to drop by itself, forming barriers on raising kids. In the end of the paper, we can conclude that it is the “fragmented” social mode, which causes the decrease of birth rate in China from 2001 to 2021.

At the end of the conclusion, we have made it clear that this research paper has discussed how various causes lead to the “fragmented” social life, and how the “fragmented” social lifestyle leads to the constant decrease in birth rate in China from 2001 to 2021. And these causes finally include economic changes and social changes, which lead to the result of the “fragmented” social life and falling birth rate.

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