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The 'Double-Reduction' Education Policy in China: Three Prevailing Narratives

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ABSTRACT

In July 2021 the Chinese Government unexpectedly released what has become known colloquially as the 'Double-Reduction' policy. The policy decreed the reduction of homework pressure on students and greater control of private tutorial companies. In this paper, we set out to understand why the Chinese central government launched the 'Double-Reduction' policy in mid-2021 by using narratives to analyse the three most circulated explanations for the policy and its timing. We use data from a range of formal and informal policy texts. The three narratives, including one policy narrative dominant in the official discourse and two alternative ones, constructed the causal stories about the policy's rationale from multiple perspectives. The combination of multiple perspectives and a narrative approach helps reveal the policy event's complexity and lays a foundation for researchers interested in tracking the development trajectory of this new policy.

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Introduction

A joke widely circulated on China's social media around three years ago asked: 'Is it enough for a 4-year-old to know 400 English words? The answer, "well, it would be enough in the US, but not enough in Haidian District in Beijing". Haidian District is home to China's top universities, e.g. Peking and Tsinghua. The district is also nationally-known for residents who are enthusiastic about their children's academic results; they got labels such as 'chicken blood parents' (jixue jiazhang) or Haidian moms. (Haidian mama)

Since Amy Chua (2012) published her controversial book *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, Chinese parenting with labels such as 'Tiger Moms' and 'Wolf Dads' (*huma langba*) has generated immense international interest and controversy (Li and Xie 2017). Reports about the expanding shadow education in different societies such as Korea (Yung and Bray 2017), Cambodia (Edwards, Le, and Sustarsic 2020), Egypt (Ille and Peacey 2019) and Germany (Ömeroğulları, Guill, and Köller 2020) revealed that strict parents with high expectations of their children were not unique to China. The 2012 PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) data analysis shows that

approximately one third of all 15-year-old students from the 64 participating countries/economies sought fee-paying shadow education (Byun, Chung, and Baker 2018). Shadow education has taken hold worldwide with growing intensity and contributed to a widening gap in educational advantage between those who can afford the service and those who cannot (Byun, Chung, and Baker 2018; Zhang and Bray 2017). Many parents, particularly those from higher SES families are willing to invest in private supplementary tutoring for better academic performance (Zhang and Bray 2017). Such parents have been nicknamed ‘chicken blood parents’ in China in recent years. They push their children academically and enrol them in intensive after-school tutoring classes and competitions such as the Mathematical Olympiad and English speech contests.

The all-too-common spectre of children competing fiercely with each other was officially called to account in July 2021 when the General Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CCP) and the General Office of the State Council issued the ‘Opinions on Further Reducing the Work Burden of Students in Compulsory Education and the Burden of Off-campus Training’ (Ministry of Education 2021b). The ‘Opinions’, colloquially dubbed as the ‘Double Reduction’ (*shuangjian*) policy, stated that mainstream schools at the compulsory education stage (Grades 1 to 9) need to reduce student homework and provide more after-school care for students. It also stipulates that subject-based off-campus training institutions for students in the compulsory education stage could no longer operate on national statutory holidays and weekends; such institutions could no longer be listed as private and profit-making.

The release of the policy in the summer of 2021 stretched beyond the expectations of many stakeholders, drastically changing their lives and leaving considerable room for interpretation. The policy was hailed in the mainstream Chinese media and Chinese-language education journals as essential to ease educational inequality and improve school education quality (e.g. Long 2021). The international media and the financial sector saw the policy as a crackdown on private and international investors and as a means of recentralising power (e.g. Reuters, 26 July 2021). At the same time, sociologists and economists tended to relate the policy to population issues. They pointed out that ‘Double Reduction’ responded to the dropping birth rate and the latent population crisis (e.g. Van Gerven 2019).

Public policy as a discursive construct always turns on multiple interpretations (Fischer 2003). Different stakeholders suggested different explanations for the policy as they struggled to ‘make sense’ of its rationale from their perspective (Malen and Knapp 1997, 419). In other words, disagreements arose about what led to the government’s policy solution, or in Bacchi’s (2009) terms, What’s the Problem Represented to be (WPR). While the government discourse framed the problem as heavy student workloads and threats to education equity, other stakeholders questioned ‘... the taken-for-granted assumptions that lodge in government policies and policy proposals by interrogating (problematizing) the problem representations’ (Bacchi 2009, xv). For example, the international media saw the problem represented as expanding global investment in education in China and its possible threat to central government control. Various groups framed the problem differently and constructed separate ‘causal stories’ to explain the rationale of the policy (Stone 1989; Van Gerven 2019).

In this article, we use ‘narratives’ to refer to the causal stories different policy actors and analysts constructed from their perspectives about why the policy was

issued. The power of narratives is that they can shape people's beliefs and actions (Jones and McBeth 2010). When individuals and groups are exposed to a narrative, they are transported into the story, become involved with the protagonists, 'get lost' in it, and accept the constructed facts (Jones 2014). An initial analysis of media reports, opinion papers and published literature suggests that at least three prevailing narratives emerged as people attempted to disentangle the reasons driving the 'Double Reduction' policy. 'The Problem Represented to be' varied from in each of these three narratives:

- *The burden-reduction and learning quality narrative.* This narrative is the most widely circulated causal story in Mainland Chinese government documents, media reports and scholarly work. In this narrative, the problem is construed from a social-educational development perspective as unhealthy obsession with exam results and widening achievement gaps between different segments of society. 'Double Reduction' is seen as strengthening existing policy efforts to address inequities while facilitating healthy student development. The dominant vocabulary in this causal story includes high-quality and well-balanced education (*youzhi juncheng*) and a healthy learning environment.
- *The global power struggle narrative.* This causal story was favoured by many international media outlets and financial analysts' reports. From the social-political perspective, advocates of this narrative believe the policy was launched to attack US-listed education groups and capitalised operations. The growing participation of foreign companies and investors in the Chinese market, including the education sector, posed a potential threat to the social cohesion and legitimacy of the party-state. The policy was thus released partly as a response to the growing influence of Western ideologies on school education and reflected a renewed determination to promote Chinese discourse internationally. The widely adopted vocabularies within this narrative include socialist core values and China's discourse power.
- *The demographic change narrative.* This causal story can be found in both Chinese and international media reports and interviews with economists and sociologists. People who believe in this causal story see that 'Double Reduction' was triggered by concerns about the low birth rate against the backdrop of the new three-child policy. Therefore, the intention is to erase young parents' worry about the cost of having children and to ease their stress about the untamed competition for quality education resources. Commonly used vocabularies include defusing student and parent anxiety about *neijuan* (meaning involution or predatory competition, a word very popular in China over the past few years), and people's sense of happiness (*xingfugan*).

Since the publication of Roe's (1994) influential book *Narrative Policy Analysis (NPA)*, the role of narratives in the policy process has been studied at different levels (e.g. Gupta, Ripberger, and Collins 2014; Shanshan et al. 2018). According to Roe (1994), NPA occurs in four phases:

- In policy areas of high uncertainty, complexity, and polarization, policy narratives and arguments ‘... that underwrite the policy assumptions of policymaking’ are identified (155).
- Alternative narratives that do not conform to the dominant policy narrative(s) defined in step 1 are identified.
- The two groups of stories identified in steps 1 and 2 are compared, and a grand policy metanarrative is derived from the comparison.
- The policy analyst determines how the new metanarrative ‘recasts the policy problem to make it more amenable to conventional policy-analytical tools’ (155).

Given that ‘Double Reduction’ was released recently, it seems impractical to derive a metanarrative or empirically measure the narratives at this stage. Therefore, we focus on Roe’s steps 1 and 2 in this article. We suggest that the exploration of dominant and alternative narrative stories can reflect the complicated and subjective reality of the policy-making process (Ertas and McKnight 2020). This also provides a much-needed account that adds to the understanding of ongoing social change in China. Each of the three perspectives shaping the narratives provides a unique focus on the same event. The juxtaposition of the narratives allows the integration of separate foci to offer a fuller picture of the reasons behind the policy. For several reasons, it is important to understand the ‘Double Reduction’ policy from multiple angles. First, it is perhaps the most critical policy paper released in China over the last decade, with the intention and potential to shape education development for many years. It can be seen as a turning-point policy, the impact of which will seep into every corner of the education system.

Second, the policy not only seriously impacts public sector education but encroaches heavily on private providers, something not done before. Therefore, it seems essential to understand how both sectors of the Chinese education have been positioned by the policy, how this may impact education development, and the differing power each may or may not hold. Third, varying interpretations of the Government’s motivation will impact how institutional, political, and business stakeholders at different levels approach and enact the policy. While policy enactment is not the paper’s focus, we aim to lay a foundation for researchers interested in tracking the policy development trajectory of the policy.

This article has four main sections. The first outlines the foci, purposes, and strategies included in the formal ‘Double Reduction’ policy text; the second section briefly discusses why we adopt multiple perspectives and use narratives to construct the causal stories behind the release of the policy. The third section presents the three narratives. The narratives track the trajectory of the ‘Double Reduction’ policy from the social-educational, social-political, and social-economic perspectives. Based on the three narratives, the final section pulls the analysis together, discusses common underlying issues and attempts to depict a more integrated and complementary picture. As the policy rollout is ongoing, we may be unable to reach any definitive conclusions so early in the policy process. However, we hope a preliminary analysis can reveal the complexities of policy activities and perhaps engender deeper understandings through applying the multiple perspectives.

The ‘double-reduction’ (*shuangjian*) policy

Reducing educational pressure on students (*jianfu*) is not new in China; it has been a theme of national education policies since the 1950s (Xie 2005). The first burden-reduction (*jianfu*) policy was issued in 1955 and pointed out that ‘an increasingly serious problem . . . is the excessive homework and too many exams for students’ (Xiang 2019). In 2018, the Ministry of Education and eight other government ministries issued 30 measures to reduce the burden on students (Ministry of Education 2018). Despite a raft of policies addressing excessive expectations of students, a widely-shared view in China is that each round of measures designed to address the issue has resulted in an even greater burden for students (Xiang 2019; Xie 2005; Xiong, 2018).

While previous policies mainly targeted students’ homework burden, the ‘Double reduction’ policy has two foci. The first is its emphasis on lowering excessive homework, and the second is to reduce the prevalence of off-campus subject-based training. It is noteworthy that the policy aims to address the burden of students during the compulsory education stage only, that is, students between Grades 1 and 9. While there is general acknowledgement that senior secondary students (Grades 10–12) face the most exam-driven pressure as they prepare for the highly competitive High Exam (College Entrance Exam, *Gaokao*), the ‘Double reduction’ does not address the senior secondary sector.

This section briefly explores the stated foci, purposes, and suggested policy implementation strategies. The policy emphasises that schools should be the major education providers and that private, after-school tutoring institutions require further regulation.

Given the complexity of the policy, it is impractical to list all its facets in detail. We, therefore, focus on its central thrust and categorise this under two headings – school education (including two sub-categories of within-school burden and overall quality of school education) and off-campus tutoring (Ministry of Education 2021b).

School education

Within-school burden

- Homework needs to be carefully designed. The difficulty level cannot extend beyond the national curriculum standards. Schools cannot ask parents to check or correct students’ homework (Point 4 in the 2021 policy).
- The amount of time spent on homework needs to be regulated. No written homework is permitted for first and second graders, and homework for third to sixth graders cannot exceed 60 minutes per day. For middle school students (Grades 7–9), the time spent on homework is restricted to 90 minutes (Point 5).
- Schools will offer after-school activities such as popular science, arts, reading, or student clubs. Schools can give tutorial support for students with learning difficulties (Points 9 and 10).

Overall quality of school education

- The high-quality, well-balanced development of compulsory education needs to be promoted (Point 16).
- Schools need to improve classroom teaching. Each school cannot add or reduce teaching sessions or teach ahead of the teaching schedule. (Point 17).

- Deepen the enrolment reform of senior secondary schools. Increase the quota of quality high schools assigned to each middle school and avoid overt competition (Point 18).
- ‘Double Reduction’ needs to be integrated into the evaluation system of district/county education bureaus and schools. (Point 19).

Off-campus tutoring burden

- New subject-based off-campus training institutions for students in the compulsory education stage will no longer be approved. After-school tutoring companies must now register as not-for-profit organisations, and private education companies are prohibited from raising capital in the stock market (Point 13).
- After-school tutoring institutions cannot offer academic tutoring classes on public holidays, weekends and summer/winter vacations (Point 14).
- All tutorial classes offered by tutoring companies on weekday evenings must end before 9 pm. Foreign teachers located outside of mainland China cannot be employed in after-school training courses (Point 15).

The policy also listed several cities, including Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Chengdu, as national pilot cities for the new reform strategy. Following the release of the national guidelines in July 2021, different regions and provinces issued their own more localised plans. For example, Beijing strategies included localised policies such as rotating quality teachers across high-performing and low-performing schools to distribute quality resources more evenly (Beijing Municipal Education Commission 2021). Since the summer of 2021, the whole country has entered a new ‘*Shuangjian*’ movement, and each school, city, and province must show evidence that they are closely adhering to the new policy.

None of the above policy edicts exists in a social or institutional vacuum; all policy texts have an ‘interpretational and representational history’. All policy is ‘both contested and changing, and the ‘plurality of readers must necessarily produce a plurality of readings’ (Codd 1988, 239). It is also important to note that a new policy, such as the ‘Double Reduction’, enters an arena brimming with other active policies and texts (Ball 1993). The following section briefly discusses the need for multiple perspectives to examine the policy and the selection of different policies and texts comprising the narratives.

The adoption of multiple perspectives and narrative approach

We use multiple perspectives to better understand the roots of the policy – each narrative provides an opportunity to explore policy texts from a different angle. As Malen and Knapp (1997) contend, a multiple perspective approach ‘exposes the complexities of policy activities and encourages the consideration of rival interpretations of policy development’ (435).

In a world of multiple realities, politicians, interest groups, and citizens hold numerous and changing social meanings and assign meanings to different political and social events, in this case, the release of ‘Double Reduction’ (Fischer 2003). Given the newness

of the policy, its sudden and surprising release, and that it remains in motion, mapping multiple perspectives may allow analysts greater latitude to unearth the intricacies of policy development. Using multiple perspectives to analyse policy is well-established in western policy literature. This can be traced to Graham Allison's (1971) analysis of the Cuban Missile Crisis using three decision-making models and its subsequent application to education policy. This paper uses the three narratives as lenses to analyse the reasons behind the 'Double Reduction' policy to provide a broader, richer base for understanding the policy's roots.

The meaning-construction of a policy often involves building the connections between the policy and its contexts. A policy text relies on surrounding texts to assist in the determination of its meaning. In this sense, policy 'con-texts' . . . are texts which are "woven together" to form "connections" (Gale 1999, 399). Any one policy text takes its meaning from its relationship – its relative positioning and emphasis – with other texts (its context) and from how these are discursively 'storied' (Gale 1994). Stone (2002) believed that 'definitions of policy problems usually have narrative structure' (138).

This article presents three separate but interrelated 'storied' narratives (educational, social-political, and demographic). Each narrative has advocates who favourably interpret issues to advance their goals (Van Gerven 2019). To do this, they need to carefully select some 'aspects of a perceived reality' to build the connection between these aspects and the policy (Entman 1993, 52). These mainly include documented and codified artefacts such as formal policy papers (e.g. Three-Child Policy) and those unwritten, widely shared understandings such as traditional emphasis on good examination results (Levinson, Sutton, and Winstead 2009).

This article analyses how different narrative advocates selected different texts as evidence to support their construction of the causal stories behind the policy. We followed the following data collection procedure to map how the advocates framed the debate.

- We used the Chinese character '*shuangjian*' as the keyword to search the Ministry of Education website (www.moe.gov.cn) and Baidu (the Chinese counterpart of Google). This search generated central and regional policy documents and news reports about the *Double Reduction*.
- We also used '*shuangjian*' as the keyword to search the Chinese academic database CNKI and selected papers published in core journals. The search generated articles on how various educators (e.g. Long 2021) interpreted the policy; and how local education bureaus implemented the policy (e.g. Dong and Song 2021).
- We used 'double reduction'/'*shuangjian*' as a keyword to search in Google. The search results were mainly news reports in the international media. We further confined our search to more widely recognised media outlets such as Reuters and *South China Morning Post*.
- After an initial reading of the documents, we identified some key policy documents (e.g. the Third Child Policy) and key policy events mentioned in the international media. For triangulation, we then searched these on the Chinese Government website (www.gov.cn) and Baidu.
- We also used 'Double Reduction' as a keyword to search international academic journals. Given the newness of the policy, very few papers have been published.

Among the papers identified, we found Xue and Li's article (2023), which located the policy within the history of China's education development. The paper tended to echo the government's stance on why the policy was issued. We also found a small number of newly-published pieces that had started discussing the policy's impact (e.g. Guo 2022).

At the end of the search, the pool of documents comprised, for example, 7 relevant central and regional policy documents and Chinese official media reports; 3 English papers published in international journals and 16 English reports retrieved from recognised international media. Therefore, newspapers and other media reports formed the most common source for the different narratives. Given the newness of the policy, newspapers are probably 'the best early source for policy narratives' (Shanahan, Jones, and McBeth 2018, 10). We coded each piece of text to categorise data. The codes used were the key issue (defined problem), other policy events/documents mentioned in the text, and significant policy actors (victims and villains). After the search, three narrative stories emerged across the international and Chinese discourses. The first mainly represents how the Chinese government framed the problem and how the causal story was constructed in Mainstream media and Chinese academic writing. The second related this to other anti-private sector policies in China and almost exclusively came from the international discourse. The third connected 'Double Reduction' with Chinese population policy; the advocates of this narrative came from both within and outside China.

The main point of divergence across the three narratives addresses the critical question raised by Bacchi (2009, 2012), 'What's the Problem Represented to be'? Bacchi argues that because policy proposals detail what needs to change, they contain implicit representations of the issue or 'problem' they aim to address. Among the three narratives, the first is how the official stance frames the problem. The two alternative narratives challenge the official stance. In doing so, they respond to the questions, 'what is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Can the "problem" be conceptualised differently?' (Bacchi and Goodwin 2016, 20).

The narratives

In academic terms, a policy narrative is a story that uses characters (victims and villains), a plot, and a moral (policy solution) to construct a reality around a particular policy issue (Stone 2002). Given the paper's focus is on the different interpretations of the policy's rationale, each narrative seeks to answer this question: what is constructed as the problem that the policy intends to solve?

The burden-reduction and learning quality narrative

The first narrative is told mainly in China's official discourse and mainstream media. The dominant view applauds the policy as signalling government resolution to reduce student workload and pressure and close educational gaps caused by differences between geographic, school and family resources. The narrative mainly focuses on education inequity and holds that Chinese students lack a healthy learning environment.

Those who adopt this interpretive narrative locate the policy within a series of Centrally driven educational reforms implemented since the 1990s. Their argument builds on a clear policy trend shifting from improving quality as the single purpose of education reform to the dual goals of building quality while enhancing equity. However, despite policy efforts, students in China still learn in a worrying competitive environment where quality education resources are not sufficient. Therefore, the ‘Double Reduction’ policy was released to challenge and rectify this unhealthy education ecology. The most recent policy vocabulary labels this as high-quality, well-balanced education (*youzhi junheng*).

Since the 1990s, ‘quality education’ (*suzhi jiaoyu*) has formed the guiding principle and acted as a broad framework for many education reforms (Chen and Day 2015). The term ‘quality education’ was initially the antithesis of ‘examination-oriented education’. To increase global competitiveness, the national government strongly promoted initiative and creativity in schools and attempted to promote holistic student development (Qian and Walker 2013).

The New Curriculum Reform launched in 2001 was one of the earliest, highest-profile initiatives designed to shift China’s singular focus on tests (Walker and Qian 2018). The reform demanded significant changes, including a shift from pure knowledge transmission to fostering learning attitudes and values; from repetitive and mechanistic rote learning to the ability to acquire new knowledge and to analyse and solve problems (Ministry of Education 2001).

Similar language is apparent in the new ‘Double Reduction’ policy. This seems to signal that previous curriculum reforms have failed to fundamentally change ‘examination-oriented education’. What made the changes ensconced in policy even more challenging is that quality education resources in China were traditionally distributed unevenly across different geographical regions, schools with varying popularity levels, and students from different socio-economic backgrounds (Walker and Qian 2018). As a legacy of a ‘key-point’ school (*zhongdian*) classification system implemented in the 1950s, some schools were assigned greater financial resources and better teachers, recruited academically more capable students and, not surprisingly, produced better student outcomes (Cheng 2010). In short, the key school policy channelled a disproportionate share of resources to a small number of highly selective schools. Although key school titles have been officially eliminated, a school’s status, specifically its academic performance, continues to determine its attractiveness to parents (Walker and Qian 2018). Parents were willing to invest considerable time and money, including buying expensive real estate close to high-performing schools and sending their children to after-school tutoring to get a higher quality education.

Thus, the national educational plan, *National Guidelines for Medium- and Long-Term Educational Reform and Development 2010–2020* issued in 2010 (Ministry of Education 2010), proposed ‘improving quality’ and ‘enhancing equity’ as the twin goals of national educational development. The long-term goal was that every child in China would receive a quality education. Since 2010, policy priorities have focused on strategies, including improving teacher quality in rural schools (Mu et al. 2013), widening education access for migrant children (Xu and Dronkers 2016) and ending the privilege held by private schools to select students ahead of public schools (Fan and Luo 2021).

However, a major threat to education equity was the rapidly expanding private tutoring industry. The wide-spread tutoring made Chinese parents believe that if they did not invest in after-school tutoring, their children might be underperforming (Schaub et al. 2020). Socioeconomic status (SES) played a significant role in private tutoring participation; consequently, the expansion of private tutoring further disadvantaged students from low-SES families (Wiseman 2021).

Following this chain of arguments, advocates of this narrative concluded that despite decades of reform, students in China continued to be overburdened and under constant pressure. Evidence for this stance cited PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) results. PISA 2012 indicated that students in Shanghai spent approximately 13.8 hours per week on homework, against the OECD average of 4.9 hours (OECD 2014). Moreover, Shanghai students spent an average of 3.3 hours per week additionally on after-school learning (OECD 2014). It was not uncommon for students to wake up at 7 am and continue studying until past 10 pm to attend private tutoring and finish their homework (Tan 2019). Such an onerous burden was seen to carry a long-term negative influence on the next generation's health. President Xi Jinping commented in a national education meeting in 2021 that an urgent priority was to 'help students learn well and have a strong body' (Zhou and Qi 2021). The public discourse is that reducing student burden is key to the implementation of the educational ethos of the Communist Party and aligned with the national goal of common prosperity (*gongtong fuyu*) (China Education Daily 26 July 2021).

The global power struggle narrative

This interpretive narrative doubts that educational inequity is the key issue the 'Double Reduction' policy aims to address. Instead, the narrative locates the policy among a series of policies and texts with the underpinning intention to strengthen the party state's legitimacy and to gain more 'discourse power' (*huayuquan*) on the international stage to promote China's brand of modernity (Xu 2021).

The advocates of this narrative interpret the policy as a strategy to strengthen China's position globally. They suggest that the government's concern was the perceived irrational expansion of international capital investment in private, after-school tutoring companies. The narrative framed this expansion as a potential threat to the central authority's education control of education. Advocates of this narrative provide three evidence points to support their reasoning. The first is the timing of the policy. The policy was launched as billions of dollars were being invested into private tutoring firms. Before the release of the policy in the summer of 2021, the size of the after-school tutoring sector reached upwards of RMB100 billion (including RMB40 billion for online tutoring services). The belief was that the bulk of this money flowed into China from outside through different global investor pathways as Jane Li published on QUARTZ on July 26, 2021. On 4 August, Wendy Ye reported on CNBC that, three tutoring giants, *Gaotu*, *New Oriental* and *TAL Education*, listed on the US stock market between 2006 and 2019, rode a massive business boom during the COVID-19 pandemic – mainly through the acceleration of online tutoring. For example, New Oriental recorded a 29% year-on-year increase in net revenue (\$1.19 billion) between 2020 and 2021. In short, private tutorial

companies and international investors made huge profits from the tutoring business in China, but the government had little control over their operations or curricula.

The second argument was that the crackdown on private tutoring companies followed the regulatory campaign against Chinese ‘big tech’ companies, including Alibaba and Tencent. In December 2020, an antitrust investigation was launched into the Alibaba Group following the dramatic suspension of its USD37 billion initial public offering plan of its payment affiliate, Ant Group as reported by CNBC on 7 February 2021. Ant Group’s world record-setting initial public offering was suspended and Ant Group’s controller, Jack Ma, was summoned and interviewed by Chinese regulators. As Cadell and Goh wrote on Reuters on 7 February 2021, new anti-monopoly guidelines targeting the tech giants were released by the *State Administration for Market Regulation*, stopping companies from using data to manipulate the market. International media interpreted these as signs that ‘the government is ready to do whatever it takes to rectify perceived social, economic issues’, as Abigail Ng wrote on CNBC on 1 August.

Third, in line with the crackdown on private tutorial companies, the Central government imposed tougher curbs on school curricula and ownership of private schools, particularly those using international curricula during the compulsory education stage (Wright, Ma, and Auld 2022). On 18 March 2021, six ministerial departments, including the Ministry of Education and the Organization Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, jointly issued the *Guidelines for Evaluating the Quality of Compulsory Education* (Ministry of Education 2021a). Part of the guidelines evaluated private schools bearing bilingual or international titles and enrolling Chinese passport holders. On 14 May 2021, Premier Li Keqiang signed the *Regulations for the Implementation of the Private Education Promotion Law*. The Law reiterated the Chinese Communist Party’s leading role in education at multiple points. These included adhering to the Party’s leadership, strengthening the instruction of core socialist values, prohibiting foreign-invested enterprises from establishing or operating private schools, and forbidding foreign teaching materials during the compulsory education stage. The document was seen as a brake on private education and taking tighter control of international or bilingual schools, which attracted large numbers of wealthy Chinese parents planning to send their children to overseas university studies.

In essence, many commentators interpreted this series of policies, including ‘Double Reduction’, as a sign of ‘ideological vigilance’ (Xu 2021, 3). The government deemed the largely unfettered incursion of private capital into sensitive areas like education, high technology, and finance a possible challenge to the central authority. The rapid development of private education and the off-campus tutoring industry could disrupt the dominance of orthodox education within the state school system. The government thus wanted to reassert its traditional authority in the education sector and impose a stronger domestic focus.

Beneath the restated dominance of Party leadership and reassertion of socialist values in the education sector was the broader contest for global influence between the US and Asia, specifically China (Heath and Thompson 2018). China attempts to rejuvenate itself, enhance its soft power (*ruan shili*), and increase its discourse power internationally (Xu 2021). Therefore, the proper education of the younger generation is vitally important as it will influence how they view the relationship between China and the world and their continued loyalty to the country. As cited in an SCMP report written by Zhou Xin on

21 June 2021, the government saw an urgent need to act, ‘With ignorance or indifference, it has allowed private capital to play an active role in the last decade, but it has now decided to tame it’.

The demographic change narrative

The third narrative links ‘Double Reduction’ with the recent three-child policy. This policy sought to incentivise young parents to have more children. The narrative frames the problem as the rapidly falling national birth rate and an ageing population, which could unsettle all segments of society. The release of the policy was a way to ease the concerns of Chinese parents and address the looming population crisis.

This narrative cites the changing population policy in China to explain the release of the ‘Double Reduction’. For many years, population policies in China aimed to reduce the population by controlling the birth-rate. The most telling and contentious demographic policy was the one-child policy introduced in 1979 (Zhang 2017). This policy was strictly enforced and supervised for 25 years until, in November 2015, the government lifted the one-child policy and released a two-child policy (Wang 2017). The two-child policy reflected growing concerns about low birth-rates and an ageing population across the country. However, the two-child policy had little impact on the nation’s population structure to cater for an ageing population, as Andrew Mullen wrote in *South China Morning Post*, on 5 June 2021. The National Bureau of Statistics of China (2022) reported that the 12 million babies born nationwide in 2020 represented an 18 per cent decline from the number born in 2019 (14.65 million). In 2020 the fertility rate was 1.3 per woman, well below the replacement level of 2.1 needed for a stable population (Yang, Jiang, and Sánchez-Barricarte 2022).

On 31 May 2021, authorities announced an end to the policy limiting couples to two children and released a new policy allowing up to three children. However, few were convinced that the new policy alone would have the intended effect of increasing birth rates. The most widely cited obstacle to having more children was the considerable cost of raising children. The escalating cost of education and medical care, and housing, has been labelled ‘three big mountains’ (*sanzuo dashan*) by Chinese netizens, according to Jonathan Cheng’s words on *The Wall Street Journal* on 3 February 2022. The cost of living and educating a child in China, particularly in the large urban cities, can be prohibitively expensive. Commenting on the three-child policy, Dr Li Yifei, a sociologist at New York University Shanghai, wrote on Reuters on 31 May 2021, *‘I feel the proposal fails to recognise the reasons behind the decline in fertility . . . People are held back not by the two-children limit, but by the incredibly high costs of raising children in today’s China . . . The challenges are so multi-faceted that it requires carefully coordinated actions in multiple policy areas to rebuild people’s confidence in the future’*.

The government launched the ‘Double Reduction’ policy within this context. The logic was that the policy could address the cost issue by eliminating, or at least reducing, what parents had to spend on after-school tutoring. According to Ni Dadan’s writing on *Sixth Tone* about Macquarie Research on 27 August, Chinese parents spent over 619 billion yuan (about USD96 billion) on after-school tutoring in 2019. This figure was projected to double by 2023.

In addition to the financial cost, Chinese parents were also under immense pressure to compete for quality educational resources for their children. The falling fertility over the previous two decades coincided with the fastest growth of urbanization, expansion of higher education and improved living standards in the nation's history (Wang 2017). The hyper economic growth generated intense pressure on families to 'get ahead', promoting fierce competition across all facets of society. This competition flowed strongly into the education sector and, most intensely, into public exam performance and admission to the best schools and universities. Young parents felt pressured to spend vast amounts of time supporting their children's studies to help them access the best schools and universities and buy expensive real estate in the catchment areas of high-performing schools. Given these pressures and costs, the general level of happiness (*xingfu gan*) and satisfaction with education remained low.

For advocates of this narrative, the 'Double Reduction' policy is a government attempt to lighten Chinese couples' childcare burden and boost the country's ebbing birth rate. On 26 July 2021, Jane Li wrote on QUARTZ that the major obstacles for families to having more than one child are the cost and difficulty securing quality education. The purpose behind the policy clamp-down on homework and after-school tutoring were to ease parents' anxieties and spending on education, so they are more confident about the prospects of their future livelihood.

Discussion

This article adopted a multiple-perspective approach to detangle the reasons underpinning the release of the 'Double Reduction' policy. We presented three narratives, each framing the policy's rationale as to build a healthy learning environment, to strengthen the nation, and to boost the birth rate. The three narratives appear to be the most recounted interpretations of why the policy was issued. Each lens has the potential to 'unearth aspects and intricacies of policy that would be easily missed with a single lens look' (Malen and Knapp 1997, 435).

Different narratives of the same policy issue highlight different constructions of reality (McBeth, Donna, and Lybecker 2016). Individuals are persuaded by the different narrative messages and accept the constructed facts (Jones 2014). This final section attempts to juxtapose the three narratives and discuss the timing of the policy launch, the clusters of policy actors, and how the three narratives intersect and complement each other.

Common concern – why now?

All three perspectives ask why the government released the 'Double Reduction' policy in July 2021. The timing of the policy launch was the primary factor triggering the 'why' question and subsequent interpretations. The excessive work pressure facing Chinese students was undoubtedly not a new problem; it has endured and attracted active policy attention for decades. Likewise, over-demanding exams, students' attending tutorial classes and parental concerns for a better future had long been on government and societal agendas. Therefore, the narratives looked to interpret not just what and why, but 'why now? – or why an enduring problem became 'worthy of the interest of the state' (Watts 1993, 119) in the summer of 2021.

Whereas the three narratives offer analysis of the reasons driving the ‘Double-Reduction’ policy from different angles, their messages concur that it was not high student burdens per se that triggered the policy. Instead, the different narratives suggest that the problem has recently resurfaced, much more visibly, because of several perceived crises. Those viewing the situation from an educational perspective believed that students’ ‘healthy learning’ was threatened by expanding educational competition anxiety, the traditional emphasis on examinations, the legacy of elite education and ingrained school stratification reality. Those adopting the social-political perspective saw the crisis stemming from the increasing incursion of foreign companies and investors into the Chinese market and the subsequent potential threat to social cohesion. To those viewing the policy through a social-economic lens, the crisis is the continually deteriorating birth rate and ageing population and the subsequent high cost and anxiety associated with providing quality education for children.

Clusters of policy actors

The application of the three perspectives to the ‘Double Reduction’ case directs attention to underlying reasons for the policy and offers alternative ways to understand its main events. Applying multiple perspectives also helps uncover the prominent policy actors represented in different ways in the policy and how they may influence the ongoing policy implementation.

The first cluster of policy actors is the policy-makers themselves, i.e. the different levels of government. Renwick and Cao (1999) highlight that Chinese political discourse contains three strategic features, namely ‘building a consensus (*gongshi*), a drive for solidarity (*tuanjie*), and a need for promoting this ‘consensus’ through education (*jiaoyu*), with consensus-building ‘the highest priority and first step’ (121). To build the consensus necessary to implement the ‘Double Reduction’ policy, the government uses various strategies to connect the policy with the values of common prosperity (*gongtong fuyu*). ‘Common prosperity’ has been stressed as ‘an essential requirement of socialism and a key feature of Chinese-style modernisation,’ as President Xi Jinping mentioned on 17 August. Private tutoring is believed to widen rather than narrow wealth gaps and children’s educational opportunities, which works against the goal of common prosperity. Families with different levels of resources have different access to high-performing schools. The Central Government sees this as a central challenge to equity and solidarity.

Private tutorial companies and international investors represent another cluster of policy actors. As shown in the second narrative, they were the primary targets of the ‘Double Reduction’ policy, their position and visibility had to be reduced, and their interests severely curtailed. They were portrayed in the other narratives as the main reason for students’ heavy workloads, making them responsible for the unhealthy learning environment. Given that the major private players’ companies were listed on the US market, they were too closely associated with Western ideologies and greedy financial market. The official discourse is driven by the need to explore China’s indigenous pathway of educational development, with ‘Chinese characteristics’ and ‘the Chinese style’ (Li 2019; Xu 2021).

A third cluster of policy actors is parents, often referred to in the policy paper as ‘the people’ (*Renmin*). A stated purpose of the ‘Double Reduction’ is to enhance the satisfaction of ‘the people’ with education (*Renmin manyi*). Parents with access to different resources often have different educational expectations. However, they are represented in the policy by a single voice; parents are victims of the expanding after-school tutorial businesses and an increasingly competitive learning environment. Parents are portrayed as having one collective hope: to reduce the burden on their children. The assumption behind the third narrative is that once people’s sense of happiness is enhanced, they will be more willing to have more children. Therefore, the government must design policies to respond to their needs.

A complementary story

The juxtaposition of the three narratives helps us develop a more comprehensive, ‘composite’ description of the reasons underlying the ‘Double-Reduction’ policy and generates a more complete understanding.

Some perspectives can provide more compelling accounts of events than others (Cuban 1990; Weiler 1990, 1993). In the case of ‘Double Reduction’ in China, a political perspective seems embedded in every narrative that provides a compelling account. As Grace (1987, 195) commented, ‘education policy can be seen as a series of crises and settlements. The crises occur when the power and interests of dominant groups are challenged or threatened by the strategies of subordinate groups’. From a political perspective, policy aims to regulate social conflict and retain institutional legitimacy (Malen and Knapp 1997). With the expansion of private and international capital and private education, the government perceived a threat to its legitimacy, i.e. an important part of education was slipping out of government control.

Furthermore, by cracking down on private tutoring companies and adopting the slogan of ‘reducing student burden’, the government has gained legitimacy by responding to the people’s needs. After all, the cost and stress of raising children, as one of the ‘three big mountains’, needs to be addressed. By addressing the parental cost and anxiety issues and seeking quality education for all, the policy may also partly solve another long-term crisis facing China – the declining birth rate. Therefore, using the neutral language of ‘reducing student burden’, the ‘Double Reduction’ policy may be captured as ‘one stone, many birds’ (*yishi duoniao*).

Conclusion

This paper aims to understand why the central government launched the Double-Reduction Policy in mid-2021. We identified three most cited explanations for the policy and its timing and accessed available policy and media texts to explain these three perspectives. We wove each perspective into three separate narratives and then analysed these to identify common patterns or complementarities.

In the face of the common challenge as many other Asian societies – increasing student burden and the offset of education equalisation policies by shadow education (Zhang and Bray 2017), China chose to ‘push the pause button’ on the excessive burden and after-school tutorials. This paper is one of the first

attempts to adopt multiple perspectives and narrative policy analysis to examine this rare policy event in China. Doing so demonstrates that reality is socially constructed in different ways by many individual stories (Jones and McBeth 2010).

That debate around the 'Double-Reduction' policy is likely to continue as different policy actors, from provincial government agencies to school principals to tutorial providers, interpret and enact the policy within their contexts. The reasons they attach as driving the policy will help determine the shape of their response. The complexity of the policy event and how different bodies react to government policy in China calls for further research. Such research will add to the current understanding of relationships between education, politics and power in China as the country continues to reshape international relationships, struggles with demographic shifts, attempts to regulate the capital market further and reassert the centrality of Chinese socialist principles to education.

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