

# Unravelling China's Demographic Structure and Beyond: An Exploration Through the Lens of Existence Theory

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**Abstract.** This treatise introduces the "Existence Theory," a groundbreaking sociological paradigm emerging in 2022, challenging conventional perspectives on social order. Unlike structuralist viewpoints emphasizing external societal influence or neoclassical economics advocating individual rational choice, Existence Theory offers a synthesis. Drawing inspiration from European existentialism and phenomenology, it employs concepts like anxiety, intentionality, and temporality to depict individuals dynamically interacting with their social milieu. Central to this theory is the concept that individuals navigate life-based on cultural expectations, forming distinct existential milestones. Failure to meet these milestones within an accepted timeframe invites societal sanctions. These milestones, inherently sequential, give rise to what may be termed an 'existential ladder'. As time progresses, individual anxieties intensify, leading to "existential urgency." Combining rationalism with Popper's falsification ethos, this paper applies Existence Theory to analyze key social phenomena in contemporary China, including shifting male-female demographics, urbanization trends, and generational dissent against entrenched norms. Through this lens, the paper offers insights into the potential future trajectory of Chinese society. This exploration of Existence Theory sheds new light on how the interplay between individual experiences and cultural expectations shapes the dynamics of societies in the modern era, with a particular focus on China's evolving social landscape.

**Keywords:** Existence Theory, demographic structure, male-female demographics, urbanization trends, generational dissent

## 1. Introduction

The concept of Existence theory, as put forth by Baert, Morgan, and Ushiyama, introduces a fresh approach to understanding the fundamental principles that govern social order. At its core, this theoretical framework revolves around the idea that individuals consciously structure their lives around specific existential milestones, which, upon achievement, signify a complete and fulfilled existence. These milestones manifest as emblematic events that punctuate an individual's life trajectory, encompassing achievements like obtaining a university degree, securing gainful employment, and entering into matrimony [1]. Each of these milestones holds profound symbolic significance, signifying an individual's unique place within the overarching timeline of life. Through the pursuit and realization of these milestones, individuals not only affirm their existential presence but also navigate the intricate web of social norms and expectations.

One of the most distinctive and audacious aspects of this theory lies in its emphasis on how human aspirations regarding the future wield significant influence over concrete decisions, subsequently shaping authentic social dynamics [1]. The theory of existence is deeply concerned with the impact of temporality on decision-making processes and the formation of life perspectives. Within its scope, it outlines three keyways in which time assumes significance: the construction of future perspectives, the perception of life trajectories, and a heightened awareness of temporal constraints. As per the theory's hypothesis it elucidates two fundamental concepts: the existential ladder and existential urgency. The former posits a complex interrelation of existential milestones sequenced along an irreversible temporal continuum. This continuum suggests that the realization of a particular existential milestone depends on achieving its preceding, more foundational counterpart [1]. For instance, an individual's attainment of employment relies on their educational qualifications, which,

in turn, pave the way for starting a family. The latter concept, existential urgency, underscores the time-sensitive nature of achieving certain milestones, a consequence of irreversible temporality [1]. This urgency, in turn, motivates individuals to pursue these milestones actively.

Simultaneously, the theory emphasizes the importance of social norms in shaping the agenda for these pivotal existential milestones. While individual aspirations and visions undoubtedly influence choices, it is evident that the dominant influence shaping the array of available milestones originates from the interconnected forces of society and education [1]. However, the societal expectations underpinning these norms are subject to change. A diminishing faith in these norms implies the potential unraveling of the social fabric, resulting in demographic shifts, alterations in labor markets, or even the erosion of traditional culture. Using China as an illustrative example, the pervasive presence of geographic and educational discrimination propels a significant influx of the population toward major urban areas, with a notable emphasis on the vigorous pursuit of higher education [2]. In this context, China's distinctive household registration system exacerbates existing disparities in societal power dynamics. The arduous and protracted process, spanning over a decade, for a typical rural resident to secure an urban household registration (Hukou), granting access to property ownership, urban healthcare, and educational resources, further widens prevailing inequities [3-4]. In contrast, offspring born in major cities are inherently endowed with this significant milestone achievement. Unfortunately, such power imbalances are perpetuated through successive generations due to the continuation of the household registration system. This work employs Existence Theory to analyze fundamental social phenomena in contemporary China, including shifting male-female demography, urbanization patterns, and generational protest against entrenched norms, by combining rationality with Popper's falsification ethos. The report provides insights into the likely future trajectory of Chinese society through this lens.

## 2. Urban Myths and Rural Curses

The application of existential theory in comprehending the gender imbalance within China's rural population presents a considerably elucidating perspective compared to conventional structuralism. By employing this theoretical lens, a more profound understanding emerges, elucidating the fundamental drivers compelling women to migrate from rural regions.

The prevailing disparity in existential milestones between rural men and women has engendered a pronounced and concerning gender imbalance within China's rural communities. According to the recently published China Statistical Yearbook 2021, the sex ratio in China's rural areas is notably skewed, with 107.91 males for every 100 females [5]. This imbalance is more pronounced in certain provinces, where 14 out of the 31 provinces have a sex ratio exceeding 110. This phenomenon is mainly attributed to the lack of favourable educational opportunities and attractive job prospects in rural regions, which leads to an aspiration among women for better prospects in urban areas.

An analysis conducted by the Guizhou Provincial Bureau of Statistics revealed that within the floating population of Guizhou, the sex ratios of young adults aged 20 to 29 are lower than 90, indicating a surplus of females in this working-age group [6]. This trend is directly related to the declining number of marriageable age females in rural areas. In contemporary Chinese society, achieving an urban household registration, pursuing work opportunities, and getting married in a major city symbolize significant milestones for Chinese women.

Contrarily, rural males, who adhere to traditional values, tend to make more conservative existential milestones, often staying within their family's agricultural activities. Looking at China's rural population sex ratios across different age groups in 2020, only the population aged 70 and above exhibits a sex ratio below 100, indicating a surplus of women. In all other age groups, there is an excess of men. Notably, the sex ratios for the marriageable age groups (20 to 24 and 25 to 29) significantly exceed 120, standing at 123.09 and 120.87, respectively. Even for age groups (30 to 34 and 35 to 39) the sex ratios remain high at 116.82 and 115.77, respectively [5].

In comparison, the sex ratio of the marriageable age population is relatively balanced at the city and township levels, mainly due to the higher influx of young women into urban areas. In large and medium-sized cities, the sex ratios for the 20-24 and 25-29 age groups are 107.01 and 106.79, respectively, while for the 30-34 and 35-39 age groups, they stand at 103.26 and 103.15, respectively [5]. This suggests that in urban areas, there is a more even distribution of young men and women.

Urban dwellers' life trajectories appear to be more uniform, with a strong emphasis on urban education and employment. Reports on rural research in Zhejiang highlight the low number of highly educated individuals returning to their hometowns, resulting in a disproportionately higher female-to-male ratio. Economic and educational advancements have encouraged a significant number of young men and women to migrate to first-, second-, and third-tier cities in search of educational and professional opportunities. Consequently, a considerable proportion of these individuals are reluctant to return to rural areas once they have adapted to the modern urban lifestyle.

The existence theory offers a compelling explanation for the pronounced demographic disparities observed between men and women in rural and urban China. Both genders in these regions exhibit a heightened propensity to subscribe to urban legends. As individuals immerse themselves in envisaged futures of urban and rural existence, they engage in introspective comparisons. Such anticipatory reflections, in turn, exert tangible influences upon the fabric of society. Undoubtedly, a clear dichotomy exists between the urban myth and rural way of life. Notably, women, when confronted with the decision of lifestyle, are steadfastly choosing the urban path. This preference can be attributed not solely to the fulfilment of their future imagining in urban settings but also as a means of expressing their discontent with the existential milestones provided by the countryside.

Subsequently, in the forthcoming sections of this discourse, this paper shall expound upon the profound dissatisfaction prevalent in contemporary society regarding prevailing social norms. Furthermore, this article shall delve into the distinctive methods through which people have actively contended against these norms. Indeed, the emergent expectations of societal norms, stemming from prevailing discontent, have critically interrogated the extant social structure. The repercussions of these shifts are not confined to sociological boundaries but resonate profoundly in economic and cultural spheres.

### **3. A rebellion against social norms**

In recent years, China has undergone rapid urbanization and societal pressures, resulting in a highly standardized and pressurized urban lifestyle. This has left the younger generation disillusioned with traditional existential milestones, as the once-idealized notion of a perfect cityscape has gradually given way to harsh realities that challenge their once-imagined life trajectory. Commencing from the year 2015, China grappled with a formidable surge in property prices, coinciding with a surplus of university graduates entering the labor market due to the widespread availability of higher education [7-8]. Unfortunately, the absence of robust labor unions in the nation has played a part in wage stagnation or even decline for college graduates [9], thwarting their dreams of homeownership. In accordance with the theory of the existential ladder, many young individuals have been compelled to delay their plans of homeownership, consequently leading to postponed marriages and family beginnings.

This trend is especially pronounced in the esteemed first-tier metropolises, traditionally favored by the younger cohort, where property prices have experienced a staggering elevation of 40%. Most remarkably, in a city like Shenzhen, this increment has ascended to an astonishing 80% [10]. A 2023 poll conducted by Reuters has discerned the prevailing sentiments of the public, driven by an acute sense of existential urgency, leaning predominantly towards a rather bleak prognosis for the sustained augmentation of housing prices [11].

A noteworthy phenomenon has emerged among contemporary Chinese youth as they grapple with questions about the meaning and significance of societal expectations and traditional milestones. Disenchanted with established symbols, they have actively begun to challenge social norms,

encountering numerous prejudices that further dampen their sense of agency. A poignant meme, rich in somber implications, has recently gained traction within the Chinese digital sphere, known as "The Last Generation [12]." This meme has its origins in an incident during the pandemic lockdown when a civilian, after receiving a stern warning from law enforcement about repercussions for his offspring, responded with a gravely measured, "We are the last generation, thank you." This utterance, marked by a sense of resignation and desolation, has struck a deep chord within the younger generation. The convergence of pronounced societal discontent and skyrocketing property values has impelled this generation to challenge prevailing cultural paradigms willingly. They are now eschewing traditional rites of matrimony and procreation, thereby delineating new existential milestones. This cultural shift is evident in China's declining fertility rate since 2016, which has ultimately resulted in negative population growth by 2022 and the shrinking of cities [13-15].

In response to their discontent, young people have turned to the internet to express their dissent, using elaborate and metaphorical memes to ridicule the government, tradition, and structural inequalities. Contrary to the quintessential cultural expectations of Chinese society, which revolve around establishing a family and achieving career success, the emerging generation has conceived the antithetical notion of "Bai Lan" [16]. This younger demographic in China has introduced "Bai Lan", symbolizing a negative stance towards all external impositions. A parallel sentiment is encapsulated in the term "Tang Ping," which predominantly criticizes the government's perceived passivity in safeguarding employee rights. Remarkably, discussions surrounding the "Tang Ping" ideology have garnered a staggering 91 million views on Chinese digital platforms. Their approach can be likened to a rebellion that combines elements from Gandhi's non-violent resistance and the counter-cultural ethos of the hippie movement. This contemporary revolution represents a collective stand against oppressive societies and the inherent structural imbalances in China.

The examination of this series of phenomena through the lens of existence theory aptly illustrates the intricate interplay between social actors and social structures. While the social clock and the underlying social structure continue to function, it is imperative to acknowledge the profound impact of individual intentionality, acting as an antithesis, in shaping the ultimate social outcome.

The takeaway for public policymakers is to transcend mere reliance on conventional economic metrics in policy formulation. Instead, they should emphasize the crucial role of public expectation management and social psychology as pivotal factors in this process. Enhancing the provision of substantive humanistic care, investing in public mental health, and bolstering social welfare represent promising avenues to rekindle the social cohesion of the younger generation. It is imperative to recognize that addressing the crisis of modernity cannot solely rely on economic determinism; it necessitates a nuanced understanding of the consciousness of social actors.

#### 4. Discussion

In light of historical observations regarding the proactive responses of social actors to pivotal existential milestones, it is evident that these very societal expectations have exerted a profound influence on the unfolding trajectory of future events. Notable illustrations include the transformative belief in the accessibility of higher education within Chinese society, which has engendered an oversupply of university-educated individuals in the contemporary Chinese labour market. Similarly, the theological conviction in the perpetual ascent of China's property market has precipitated an expansive market bubble, culminating in the subsequent downturn of the housing sector.

These instances underscore the necessity for existential milestones to shed their inherently teleological attributes, thereby liberating the populace from being singularly directed by utilitarian objectives. Only through this recalibration can the existential urgency be effectively ameliorated. Present-day China offers a compelling case study, as the imperative of the Civil Service Exam has supplanted higher education and property investments as the next focal existential milestones fervently pursued within Chinese society. Industries driven by the pursuit of success in these

examinations are flourishing, reminiscent of the earlier booms witnessed in the education as well as real estate sectors.

While this discourse refrains from making definitive claims regarding whether the emergent existential urgency surrounding "civil service mania" will manifest akin to the previous milestones in terms of market expansion and subsequent disillusionment, it underscores the efficacy of diversifying prevailing homogenized societal expectations as a pragmatic means to alleviate the contemporary crisis of modernity in China. This recommendation aligns with the fundamental tenets and methodologies espoused by existential theory, demanding a comprehensive overhaul of social policy as an imperative step in addressing the crisis of modernity.

## 5. Conclusions

In conclusion, the application of existence theory in analyzing the structure of the Chinese population has revealed a methodological approach that effectively balances subjectivism and objectivism. This framework emphasizes the dynamic interplay between individuals and social structures, a dimension previously overlooked in earlier theories. Central to this paradigm is the recognition of individuals as proactive agents who actively engage with the societal fabric and project their intentions into the future, guided by important existential milestones. These milestones shape their behaviors and decisions within the societal context. In China, what can be observed is how temporal reverie profoundly influences the nation's societal fabric, particularly in the aspirations of women who seek to leave their rural origins and explore the vast metropolises. These aspirations, born from everyday experiences, transform into existential imperatives that drive these women towards the self-reliance and autonomy.

However, it is essential to recognize that not all reveries lead to positive outcomes. A growing disillusionment among the youth, combined with anxiety about their future, often results in a pessimistic worldview. This has numerous consequences, including a declining interest in property ownership, a decreasing birth rate, and exacerbated demographic challenges.

It is clear that traditional Chinese values are undergoing significant erosion. Long-standing institutions such as marriage and procreation are no longer considered obligatory, contributing to a growing number of individuals leading solitary lives and reflecting an increasingly atomized society. The potential consequences of this trend are vast, ranging from increased criminality to the challenges posed by an aging population and a limited labor market. As China navigates this complex socio-cultural landscape, it faces several pressing questions. How can the country address the mounting anxieties of its youth? How can a society be experiencing cultural disintegration transition to a more stable era? Most importantly, what strategies can be employed to restore societal confidence? The decisions made in response to these challenges will undoubtedly shape China's future trajectory.

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