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# Philanthropic Foundations and Institutional Change under Rigid Authoritarianism: Exploring the Ford Foundation's Historical Grantmaking in the Chinese Family Planning Field (1991–2005)

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## Abstract

Philanthropic foundations are important agents of global policy transfer. While scholars have explored foundations' policy roles in a range of contexts, we know relatively little about how they transfer policies and instigate institutional change under rigid authoritarianism – fields in which the state maintains centralized control and excludes other actors. This paper seeks to bridge this gap through analysis of a case study of the Ford Foundation's grantmaking in the Chinese family planning field during a period of rigid authoritarian control (1991–2005). We find the Foundation stimulated the transfer of the Western “reproductive health” policy through two mechanisms: 1) incentivising elite researchers to conduct scientific research on rural women that was previously left “undone”; and 2) partnering with peripheral state actors for localised experimentations and gradually gaining access to central policymakers to encourage national policy innovation. We also discuss the contingencies and ambivalences of the Foundation's influence under rigid authoritarianism.

**Keywords:** Philanthropic foundations; authoritarianism; policy transfer; reproductive rights; China

## Introduction

Philanthropic foundations' role as prominent policy actors arguably began at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, following the rise of big American foundations (such as the Ford, Carnegie, and Rockefeller), which used strategic grantmaking to instigate policy change (Leat, 2016). With this institutional model having been emulated by foundations across Europe and other regions (Anheier and Daly, 2007), and a new generation of “Silicon Valley philanthropists” emerging that has started grantmaking to drive their policy agendas, scholars are now calling for more in-depth

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investigations of foundations' processes in global policymaking (Bartley, 2014; Lambin and Surender, 2021; Stone, 2010; Stone and Ladi, 2015). These processes have been criticised for being unaccountable to either the market or society (Anheier and Leat, 2018), for boosting the American hegemony (Parmar, 2002, 2012), supporting capitalism (Roelofs, 2003, 2015), and for hyper-agency – exerting disproportionate political influence through their financial wherewithal and networks, in some cases, bypassing weak governments in development contexts to further their policy positions (Jung and Harrow, 2019; Lambin and Surender, 2021).

Foundations, however, face significantly more constraints when working to influence policies in authoritarian regimes. Studies that have been conducted on grantmaking in authoritarian countries mostly focus on fragmented or hybrid regimes, in which foundations support local civil societies to contest the state and advance alternative policies (as examples, see Korey, 2007; Toepler *et al.*, 2020; Zunz, 2012). Nevertheless, research suggests that in more rigid authoritarian contexts, where a strong state imposes encompassing control, international foundations have primarily funded state and state-affiliated actors rather than grassroots-level actors (Spires, 2011). Scholars have also noted that, in such contexts, the paths to working with civil societies to challenge the state are not particularly effective, because of local nonstate actors' weak capacity and low access (Noakes and Teets, 2018).

A burgeoning body of research on social policy reforms in authoritarian contexts has highlighted the implications of states' exclusive control of policy processes. For instance, the Chinese state's hierarchical dominance in the field of care for older people created multi-layered barriers for institutional change (Wenjing Zhang, 2022); when promoting community governance reforms, the Chinese Communist Party's dominant network in urban communities prevented authentic implementation of residents' self-governance (Howell, 2016). In a similar vein, the authoritarian Mexican Government (1995) was found to have enacted unpopular pension policies through a process of controlling the policy discourse and stifling the opposition (Marier and Mayer, 2007). Nonetheless, research also acknowledges that even under strong authoritarianism, Western policy actors, including foundations, have been able to influence some policy fields (Béland and Yu, 2004; Noakes and Teets, 2018), although detailed accounts of how such policy influence was exerted are lacking.

This raises the question: how can foundations promote alternative policies and institutions when the authoritarian state has encompassing power? Specifically, how do foundations advance a policy discourse that runs counter to that of the state, when they are unable to openly challenge the state or support civil society advocacy? How do foundations drive the innovation of alternative policy instruments when they have to work through the authoritarian state? Additionally, how does the broad policy environment interact with the foundation's work in such contexts? Answering these questions can provide us with a glimpse of how foundations facilitate change through supporting and influencing state actors (when such actors dominate the policy process). Because this approach is distinct from the conventional route of exerting policy influence through supporting civil society and other non-state actors, a detailed examination can expand our understanding of

foundations' roles and processes as agents of global policy transfer (Lambin and Surender, 2021; Stone and Ladi, 2015).

Policy transfer, defined by Dolowitz and Marsh (1996, p. 344) as "a process in which knowledge about policies, administrative arrangements, institutions etc in one time and/place is used in the development of policies, administrative arrangements, institutions in another time and/or place", is a leading mechanism for policy innovation and institutional change (De Wispelaere, 2016). It can include the "hard" transfer of policy instruments and institutions as well as the "soft" transfer of ideas and discourses (Benson and Jordan, 2011). Some scholars argue that hard and soft transfers are both important and often interwoven (Ladi, 2005). Overall, this literature has evolved from its narrow, state-centred roots to increasingly emphasise non-governmental mode of policy transfer via philanthropic actors, NGOs, think tanks and scientific and experts' groups (Stone and Ladi, 2015). For example, think tanks disseminate policy ideas (such as privatisation) through their access to domestic and transnational networks as well as their specialised expertise in policy issues (Stone, 2000). Similarly, the Open Society Institute (OSI), a private foundation, enabled "soft" transfer of "open society" values (such as human rights and democracy) to post-communist countries by building coalitions with international intellectuals (Stone, 2010), who are often referred to as "epistemic communities" – groups of professionals influencing political agenda with their intellectual expertise and by way of articulating cause and effect relationships of issues and policies (Dunlop, 2012; Haas, 1992). Other scholars point out that the vast majority of transfer studies focuses on the industrialised world, thus underscoring the need to unpack how other kinds of political structures may influence and facilitate the transfer process (Benson and Jordan, 2011; Bulmer and Padgett, 2005). Notably, the mode of promoting alternative ideas (Ladi, 2005; Stone, 2000) and the approach of getting attention and mobilising elites (Evans, 2009) may be quite different in highly authoritarian contexts, in which the state has unique power to frustrate transfer mechanisms widely observed in contexts where the transfer agent enjoys more access and more options.

We contribute to the foundation literature and the policy transfer literature through a case study of the Ford Foundation's grantmaking in the Chinese family planning field (1991-2005). We chose this context because it represents a research period in which we can observe the entire trajectory of a line of a foundation's work that addresses our research questions. Practically, access to archival data is invaluable for understanding foundations' work under rigid authoritarianism. Such work, due to its political sensitivity, can be challenging to access, but the Ford Foundation opens its archive to researchers after a ten-year embargo. We triangulated archival data using extensive secondary data gathered from sources outside of the Ford Foundation's archive.

Our study reveals two mechanisms through which the Foundation facilitated the transfer of the reproductive health (RH) policy: 1) incentivising elite researchers to conduct "undone" science on rural women; and 2) partnering with peripheral state actors for localised experimentations, and gradually gaining access to central policy actors for national policy innovation. Through the first mechanism, the state policy was subtly problematised, and the alternative RH discourse was disseminated. The second mechanism suggests that Ford took a graduated approach in

enrolling various actors in the state system to implement RH instruments. Insights from our study are salient as stronger forms of authoritarianism are on the rise in the likes of Russia, China, the Middle East, and a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan (BBC News, 2021; Mitter, 2020), posing challenges to global policy transfer.

## Background

In the historical backdrop of China's opening-up, in 1979, the Ford Foundation began awarding grants to China, grasping the "historic opportunity to contribute to the improvement of welfare in a country that accounts for a quarter of the human race, and to facilitate its integration into the comity of nations" (Bresnan, 1978, p.1). The first few years were spent on supporting academic exchanges in social sciences, chiefly through a partnership with the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS). Having earned CASS's trust, in 1988, through CASS Ford obtained special permission from the Chinese State Council to open an office in Beijing. Its initial programs covered rural development, economic reform, and legal reform. In 1991, when the Ford Foundation headquarters decided to make strategic investment in a global "reproductive health" program, the Beijing Office launched the same program in China.

In the early 1990s, the Chinese family planning field revolved around the state discourse of population control at all costs. The state restricted most couples to one birth – known as the "one-child" policy. Under state policy, severe contraception methods were prescribed without consultation, pregnancy and birth permissions had to be obtained from the state, and unauthorised pregnancies needed to be aborted (Bongaarts and Greenhalgh, 1985). In contrast to the Chinese policy, Western donors connected population issues to women's rights and wellbeing. For example, the policy paper by the Ford Foundation (1991, p.18) on reproductive health (RH) states that "women should not be seen as a means to an end, but rather as individuals whose reproductive rights are decisions that must be respected in their own right". Table 1 compares the two models of family planning during the 1990s. From the table we can see that the RH model, which Ford intended to promote globally, ran counter to the Chinese state's policy model in several fundamental ways; for example, while the RH discourse prioritised women's health and rights, the Chinese state discourse was solely oriented towards achieving state-stipulated demographic quota (with no consideration of women's rights).

During 1991 and 2005, Ford worked with diverse Chinese state and state-affiliated organisations on RH initiatives. From the early 2000s, China gradually institutionalised the RH discourse and instruments. Our study aims to provide a historical account of the Ford Foundation's grantmaking trajectory (1991-2005) so as to explicate whether, and how, the Foundation had been instrumental in stimulating such policy changes.

## Methods

Extensive primary data were collected from the Ford Foundation archive, including: 1) four memos (60 pages in total) by three successive Chinese RH program officers (1994, 2000, 2003, 2007); 2) two discussion papers submitted to the Board of

**Table 1.** Two Models of Family Planning

Two models	Family planning in China (1990s)	Reproductive health (1990 onwards)
<b>Field discourse</b>	Population control; oriented solely toward demographic quota	Women's health and rights; Achieving population control through education and high-quality service
<b>Field control</b>	Top-down control by one dominant government agency	Cross-disciplinary area involving multiple agencies (family planning, public health, poverty-alleviation, women's rights)
<b>Modes of contraception</b>	Mandatory	Informed choice through the provision of counselling
<b>Number of births</b>	Decided by the family planning agency which is then broken down to provincial, township and county levels; one child for most couples	Decided by couples, with information and counselling provided by healthcare professionals
<b>Women's health and rights</b>	Not relevant to policy	Quality of care and gender equality as key policy components

Trustees (1997, 2007, 57 pages in total); and 3) files related to 32 Chinese grants in family planning (over 1200 pages). For each grant file, we collected officers' reports requesting funds (Request for Grant Action, or RGA), and reports by grantees accounting for grant money disbursement.

To the best of our knowledge, we are the first to systematically use the Ford Foundation archive to study its RH work in China. Previous studies used this archive to examine the Foundation's early history (Macdonald, 2017; Sutton, 1987), its domestic grantmaking (Ferguson, 2013; Hauptmann, 2012; Khurana *et al.*, 2011; Negley, 2017), and its work in Indonesia and India, where it enjoyed privileged access to top elites (Bresnan, 2006; Brooks, 2015; Wintle, 2017). The archive was also leveraged to investigate shifts in Ford's international development strategies (Micinski, 2017).

Organisational archives are widely recognised for their ability to enrich qualitative research, and can be read both "along the grain" and "against the grain" (Basu and De Jong, 2016, p.9). When reading along the grain, archives allow researchers to deepen their understanding of actors' motives and actions from the inside. When reading archives against the grain, researchers maintain analytical distance by questioning why and how such accounts were provided in the first place, and by triangulating these accounts with outside sources (Kipping *et al.*, 2014). For this purpose, we collected secondary data that provide perspectives independent of Ford. In addition to collecting documents published by the United Nations agencies and several book chapters on Chinese family planning, we conducted a Scopus search, using search words "China", "reproductive health"/ "family planning" and "polic\*". Sifting through results, we identified 52 highly salient articles, including 1) academic articles from medical, public health, population and sociology journals, and 2) articles from *China Population Today*, a newsletter published by a Chinese state-affiliated research centre.

In analysing the data, we first established a timeline of Ford's key activities. We focused on 1991-2005, when major grants in family planning were made (but we

also noted key changes in the field in the following years for lingering effects). Next, we re-read the data to uncover mechanisms of policy transfer. In doing so, we identified the *Fourth World Conference on Women* (FWCW, held in Beijing in 1995) as a watershed event. We then conducted another Scopus search to find articles that provided a broad-based understanding of the FWCW's influence on China.

Reading archives against the grain also entails questioning the social position and political power of archives' owners (Basu and De Jong, 2016). In our case, archives were made available by a large foundation which arguably represented American hegemonic power (Parmar, 2002; Roelofs, 2015). Such reading enabled us to widen our analytical distance from the archive, noticing the ambiguity and paradox of Ford's grant actions.

## Findings

In the early-1990s, the Chinese family planning field was vertically controlled by the State Family Planning Commission, a state agency that enforced population targets through a massive hierarchical system of line agencies across 50,000 townships (Kaufman *et al.*, 2006). The National Family Planning Association (FPA), a Government-Organized NGO (GONGO), organised propaganda campaigns for educating and mobilizing grassroots. The one-child policy clashed with strong son-preference in rural areas; rural women, a low-status social group, were especially disadvantaged by the policy. The All-China Women's Federation, the GONGO representing women, toed government lines on family planning. To advocate for reproductive health, Ford needed to go through the state agency and GONGOs. In Table 2, we list key grant actions taken by Ford, alongside milestones of institutional change.

In the following, we explicate the two mechanisms of policy transfer identified from the historical account of Ford's grantmaking in the Chinese family planning field.

### Mechanism 1: Incentivising Elite Researchers to Conduct Scientific Research on Rural Women

In the early-1990s, rural women's predicament was not a research priority for the majority of Chinese academics. Researchers were all affiliated with state-funded institutions and lacked autonomy in topic selection. As the Ford RH officer at the time noted:

“Zealous concern for contraception, which makes women responsible for reaching desired demographic goals, has had negative effects on women's health and well-being. Yet, there has been [...] little attempt to understand the non-medical as well as medical factors involved in reproductive health.”  
(Grant 9200320, RGA 1992)

In the view of political sociologists, political dynamics decide which research is prioritised. The term “undone science” refers to an absence of research resulting

**Table 2.** A timeline of The Foundation's RH Program in China and milestones of institutional change (italicised) in the Chinese family planning field

1991-1995	
1.	Opened the "Women's Reproductive Health and Development" (WRHD) project in Yunnan province
2.	Funded Chinese population researchers from a leading university to conduct comprehensive field research on the dual effects of the family planning policy on women (report issued in 1996)
3.	Sponsored a National RH research competition by All-China Women's Federation (GONGO)
4.	Supported the Family Planning Association (GONGO) to adopt the "RH counselling" model in Yunnan and other provinces
5.	Supported Dr Zhang Kaining to form the Yunnan RH Research Association (independent NGO/think tank), which became a national centre for RH research, conference, networking and training programs
1995	Ford headquarters sponsored the NGO Forum of the UN World Conference on Women (Beijing)
1996-1999	Supported the family planning agency's RH pilot project "Quality-of-Care"
2000	<i>The family planning agency formally endorsed RH reform &amp; concepts</i>
2002	<i>National Population and Family Planning Law was adopted which legally codified RH reforms</i>
2001-2004	Supported a group of top population experts to collect extensive research evidence to support the abolition of the one-child policy
2003	Provided expanded technical assistance to the family planning agency for implementing/scaling up the "Quality-of-Care" model
2006	<i>"Quality-of-Care" and "RH Counselling" initiatives both won national awards</i>
2007	<i>"RH Counsellor" was approved by the Labour and Social Protection Department as a certifiable professional position</i>
2013	<i>The family planning agency was merged with the Ministry of Health to create a new government agency - The National Health and Family Planning Commission, signaling the official recognition that family planning is an integral part of the national public health program instead of a stand-alone policy domain</i>
2015	<i>Official abolition of the one-child policy</i>

from intentional decisions to defund a problem area – a structural condition that shapes researchers' agendas (Hess, 2009). In China, at this time, the state discouraged studies that may problematise its policy. However, Ford managed to incentivise scientists to study rural women's predicaments. We identify four major projects aligned with this mechanism.

### **Importing Western Research Methods to Uncover Women's Voices**

The Foundation's first RH project was launched in 1991 in Southwest Yunnan Province. Under the "Women's Reproductive Health and Development (WRHD)" project, grants were awarded to the Beijing Medical University



(BMU) and a Western consortium of schools of public health. Dr Wang Shaoxian from BMU, a native of Yunnan who knew the province well, was conducting public health research in Yunnan when she crossed paths with the Ford program officer. Their shared concern over women's health issues in Yunnan catalysed the idea for the WRHD project. Ford subsequently invited Dr Virginia Li (expert on public health in China, University of California at Los Angeles) and other Western researchers to make joint grant applications. The project adopted the Western "participatory research" protocol to understand family planning from rural women's perspectives. Across two sites, researchers conducted 38 focus groups. In a "photo novella" project, rural women were given cameras and asked to share their experiences:

"Eleven hundred rolls of film were taken by the village women [...] Two researchers . . . interviewed these women and recorded the meaning of the pictures as they perceived them." (Grant 9200320, grantee report, 1993, p.9)

Photos taken by rural women captured their mundane realities, including the back-breaking work in fields, burdens of childcare, and discriminations (Wang and Burris, 1994). WRHD researchers presented their findings and a photo slideshow to local officials, with the intention of presenting "women's voices that ordinarily would not be heard" by decision-makers (Wang and Burris, 1994, p.182).

### *Supporting Yunnan Researchers to Form an RH Research Cluster*

In 1992, Ford began supporting Dr Zhang Kaining, a public health scholar from the state-funded Kunming (Yunnan's capital city) Medical College, to form a research group, the "Yunnan RH Research Association". Ford funded the group to conduct research on RH, work which would have been unlikely to be supported by their state employers. By 1997, the Association had attracted researchers from over 30 institutions, comprising "some of Yunnan's most respected and promising anthropologists, gender sociologists, economists, demographers, minority studies scholars, linguists, lawyers, educators and public health specialists" (Grant 9401013, RGA 1997, p.3). Weekly meetings, Ford-sponsored training, and overseas study trips galvanised researchers: they gained international exposure, prestige, and research ideas. Researchers disseminated their studies through newsletters, publications, and books. By the mid-1990s, Dr Zhang was a well-known convener on RH issues and the Association, a thought leader of rising RH research clusters.

### *Sponsoring University Academics to Study Negative Effects of the State Policy on Women*

In 1994, Ford engaged population researchers from the prestigious Xi'an Jiaotong University to conduct field research on women's situations, "seeking the truth from the facts and finding out the problems that Chinese women have faced" (Grant 9650613, research report, p.135). In 1996, a 270-page report with policy recommendations titled "The Dual Effects of the Family Planning Program on Chinese Women" unpacked multi-faceted negative effects on women. For example, it



showed that women paid health costs for the state contraceptive policies (87% of contraceptive users were women, among whom 38% underwent a sterilization operation); rural women endured psychological pressure in the crossfire of family demands (son-preference) and state repression (one-child only). The report also highlighted how the one-child policy correlated with higher male/female sex ratios at birth, excess female infant mortality and excess numbers of female infants being placed in Welfare Houses.

### **Encouraging GONGO Researchers to Explore Topics on Rural Women**

The All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) monopolised the discussion on women's issues through a vast state-funded national network of Women's Federations. In 1992, Ford sponsored ACWF to organise a RH research competition, inviting researchers across Federation systems to submit proposals on women's issues related to family planning (Grant 9200321). International RH experts were invited to sit on the judging panel and familiarise ACWF researchers with RH research. Ford later sent winning researchers to be trained in women's research at Griffith University (Australia).

### **Mechanism 2: Graduated Enrolment of State and Semi-State Actors for Policy Innovation**

Our examination of 15 years' archival data revealed that Ford differentiated peripheral and central actors in the state system and enrolled them for policy innovation in a graduated approach. First, Ford got the Yunnan provincial agencies ("peripheral state actors") on board to experiment with RH-based development models; it then engaged two GONGOs ("semi-state actors") with national reach. Following the UN's Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW, held in Beijing in 1995), Ford was able to access the State Family Planning Commission ("central state actor") to assist it with experimenting a core RH instrument.

### **Enrolling Peripheral State Actors**

As mentioned, Ford's first RH project was conducted in Yunnan, a province geographically distant from China's political centre. The WRHD project invited the provincial family planning bureau, public health bureau, poverty-alleviation bureau, and Women's Federation to form a "Provincial Advisory Group". This group attended research briefings that "promoted multidisciplinary discussions of women's reproductive health [...] and the possibilities for intersectoral coordination" (Grant 9200320, grantee report, 1993, p.6). According to the Ford officer, this arrangement was intended to "sow what [were] hoped [to] be the seeds of a working group committed to improving women's reproductive health in Yunnan" (Grant 9151246, RGA 1991, p.7). Post-WRHD, Ford funded the public health bureau for a cross-agency RH/development project, including initiatives improving women's literacy, health, hygiene, and childcare.

### *Enrolling semi-state actors*

An important component of RH was “informed choice through the provision of counselling” (see Table 1). In 1992, Ford persuaded the GONGO National Family Planning Association (FPA) to experiment with a “RH Counselling” model, educating rural women on making “informed choice”. It was a period when state funding for GONGOs was reduced due to government restructuring. Ford’s funding thus appealed to the FPA. As a “mass mobilization organisation”, the FPA was uniquely sanctioned by the state to conduct public information campaigns. Ford brought in Western NGOs to train FPA officers, who offered free medical check-ups, distributed leaflets, conducted radio talks, and used village blackboards to disseminate educational information at pilot sites in Yunnan (Grant 9200745, Grantee report, 1995). The project gained traction and gave the FPA a refreshed mandate, in turn raising its domestic profile and garnering it praises from the transnational RH community. With further Ford support, the FPA scaled up the counselling model across provinces throughout the 1990s.

### *Enrolling the central state actor*

In 1995, Beijing hosted the FWCW, the largest international gathering on women’s issues (50,000 attendees). The Chinese government applied for host status of the FWCW in 1991 but its initial application provoked protests from human rights NGOs outside China. Beijing, however, lobbied hard for international support; in 1992, the UN accepted its application over Austria’s (Liu, 2006). The Ford Foundation (headquarters) sponsored the NGO Forum, a parallel gathering (Wimpee, 2020); this organising role arguably helped to raise Ford’s profile in China.

The Chinese government intended to use this conference to boost its international status (which plummeted after the 1989 Tiananmen Square Crackdown). The slogan of the FWCW was “Action for equality, development and peace”, without explicitly mentioning women’s rights. Yet, the FWCW was not only one conference, but also a massive political consensus-building process. From 1993-95, governments negotiated the draft plan for a Platform for Actions (PFA) at regional meetings and global preparatory meetings. The PFA, incorporating radical pro-women agendas, was finalised at the FWCW and endorsed by 189 governments, creating momentum for women’s rights and placing responsibilities firmly on governments who endorsed the PFA, including China. As the host, China came under international scrutiny for implementing the PFA agendas that included women’s health and reproductive rights (Deng and Ji, 2011; UN Chronicle, 1995).

To meet international expectations, the State Family Planning Commission began cautiously relaxing the family planning policy. In 1995, it launched a pilot project in eastern China “providing full and quality service to people of childbearing age” while relaxing the population quota (Xie and Tang, 2011, p.12). Reformers inside the agency led the project, seeking support from the World Bank, UN agencies, and Ford (which was known by the agency for having supported the FPA on the “RH Counselling” model).

Ford’s on-the-ground advantage and local experiences positioned its staff to work closely with government reformers. The pilot – “Quality-of-Care”

(QoC) – is a core RH clinical framework for providing “high-quality health care as a basic human right” (Creel *et al.*, 2002, p.1). Comprising both counselling and clinical services, this instrument was much more comprehensive than the “RH Counselling” instrument; QoC could only be implemented by the state agency since it controlled the provision of clinical services.

The pilot project was rolled out in a context in which the existing population policy, deemed as necessary for avoiding China’s population crisis, had long-established political legitimacy. It was argued that due to the socio-economic characteristics of Chinese rural areas (e.g. long-standing son-preference, low cost and high return for rural families to raise many children), severe state control had to be exercised to lower fertility rates (Lin, 1998; Yan, 1991). Despite mounting international pressure, top policymakers regarded stringent population control as a fundamental policy. On 10 March 1996, President Jiang Zemin, while addressing the National Forum on Family Planning Work, linked population control to China’s economic goals:

“The goal of quadrupling the per capita gross national product (GNP) of 1980 by the end of the century depended on developing the economy and controlling population growth. Top government and party leaders at all levels should personally take charge of family planning program implementation, and the population awareness of leaders at all levels should be increased.” (China Population Today, 1996, p.2)

Operating in such a political environment, the small group of reformers inside the family planning agency needed to build political legitimacy for their mandate. The archive data show that Ford took several measures to assist reformers.

First, Ford sponsored study trips that sent family planning officials to India to gain insight about the country’s experience in lifting demographic targets while containing population growth. These trips were intended to demonstrate the credibility of the experiments carried out by the Chinese reformers. Second, Ford helped establish a guiding council, in which high-status international experts worked alongside the reformers to lend symbolic and technical support for navigating internal debates. Third, Ford brought in international experts to train a large number of qualified government RH counsellors, essential human capital for QoC’s implementation; the intense training program was later credited as vital for QoC’s long-term success (Kaining Zhang, 2011). Finally, Ford funded and organised the evaluation of pilot sites, providing conclusive evidence that fertility rates remained low while women reported greater satisfaction and village officials reported reduced community tensions. The evaluation report helped generate propaganda favouring reformers; it also helped reformers gain internal support to scale up the pilot to many other counties (1997 onwards). The continued success of the reform project set the final stage for institutional change.

### The Institutionalisation of RH Discourses and Instruments

As highlighted in Table 2, institutional change in the family planning field began in 2000, when the central government formally endorsed the “Quality-of-Care” reform

instituted by the family planning agency. In 2002, a new Population and Family Planning Law was enacted which emphasised “informed choice” (core to the “RH Counselling” model); the Law had a provision for criminal prosecution of state officials who used coercive measures (Kaufman et al., 2006). In 2007, the new professional position of “RH Counsellor” was approved by the state Labour and Social Protection Department, further institutionalising the “RH Counselling” and “Quality-of-Care” models (both models won national awards in 2006).

### Further Change: The Abolition of the One-Child Policy

Despite relaxations in family planning, the one-child policy withheld a fundamental reproductive right (as in Table 1: deciding the number of births). The policy persisted despite policymakers’ gradual awareness of its demographic impacts after 20 years’ implementation:

“Other than the widely publicized problem of child survival and infant abandonment, these include a severely skewed sex ratio resulting in an increase in the kidnapping and trafficking in girls and brides for marriage; the problematic ratio of elderly to young workers in the coming decades and the economic viability of current arrangements for old age support and pensions.” (Kaufman, 2000, p.12)

Nonetheless, policymakers with encompassing power often can afford to be less responsive to negative policy effects. The policy was supported by an enormous bureaucratic infrastructure built up over two decades (for instance, the family planning agency had 509,000 employees as of 2005) (Hvistendahl, 2010). More importantly, vested interests strongly maintained that the policy was crucial in avoiding a population crisis, an assertion that still had the ears of top leaders: the policy was “so sacrosanct that officials who have dared in the past to hint at its dissolution have been quickly silenced” (*ibid*, p.1458).

In order to prepare the condition for the abolition of this centrepiece policy, the myth about it being necessary for population security needed to be dispelled. During 2001 and 2004, therefore, Ford supported a group of 20 eminent Chinese researchers to take up this task (Grant 10150770, RGA 2001). Researchers “looked at what would happen if birth targets were lifted, and they have put forth schemes for dismantling the policy step by step . . . debunking some of the government birth-control lobby’s most cherished claims (Hvistendahl, 2010, p.1458). For example, in one study researchers interviewed nearly 5000 women who were eligible to have two children (due to local policy relaxations); they found that 55% of them still prefer one child, with the group reported an average ideal family size of 1.46 children (Hvistendahl, 2010, p.1461). The researchers also utilised the most recent demographic data and specially designed computing software to estimate demographic consequences of different policy scenarios, testing various change options. Their three collective appeals to Chinese policymakers “to relax and to end the one-child policy, in April 2004, January 2009, and . . . in January 2015, served as the basis for

policy debates in China . . . informed the public of China's new demographics and corrected the many misconceptions" (Feng *et al.*, 2016, p.84).

In October 2015, the state allowed all couples to have two children from 2016, ending the one-child policy (Hesketh *et al.*, 2015). The final abolition was driven by a host of social, economic and political factors, and it was hard to precisely gauge to what extent the research group's work fed into the policy change. Yet, it is reasonable to suggest that extensive empirical results and scenario planning outcomes, persistently provided by this group of highly credible researchers (from top Chinese universities and institutes), had problematised the one-child policy and legitimated alternative arrangements, partially setting the stage for the final change.

### Ford's Role in Institutional Change

Although the archive did not allow us to exactly tease out Ford's role amongst a host of complex drivers of institutional change, the data provided strongly indicative evidence that Ford's grant-making was nontrivial. Ford's impact can be assessed along dimensions suggested by policy advocacy scholars, who endorsed criteria, including: 1) if the advocacy gives voice to previously excluded stakeholders (*access*); 2) if it raises the awareness of an issue to an extent worthy of policy consideration (*agenda setting*); and 3) if the desired change is translated into new legislation, the implementation of which could then be monitored by advocacy organisations (*policy enactment and implementation*) (Andrews and Edwards, 2004; Casey, 2004). In line with this framework, our case suggests that the Ford RH program facilitated rural women's voices being represented across the social sciences (*access*). When Ford sponsored state-affiliated researchers to disseminate the RH concept through research networks, RH as a policy idea was brought to the attention of policymakers for potential considerations (*agenda setting*). At the same time, through its "graduated enrolment" strategy, Ford encouraged policy innovation and facilitated the incorporation of RH instruments in state policies (*policy enactment*). Lastly, Ford's continued involvement in the Quality-of-Care project enabled it to participate in devising metrics, training counselling professionals, and evaluating project outcomes (*policy implementation*).

### Discussion

Big philanthropic foundations' outsized policy influence has attracted considerable scholarly debate (Bartley, 2014; Hammack and Anheier, 2013; Mosley and Galaskiewicz, 2014). Their participation in the international arena is viewed with some trepidation, with criticisms of supporting American hegemonic power and reinforcing capitalism (Parmar, 2012; Roelofs, 2015). Recent scholarship raises additional concerns about how a new generation of big philanthropic organisations (such as the Gates Foundation) bypass weak states in development contexts to impose their own policy agenda, which may not be appropriate for tackling complex local problems (Lambin and Surrender, 2021). Our study adds to this debate by critically unpacking a policy transfer process in which the foundation, instead of exercising hyper-agency (Jung and Harrow, 2019), had to operate under constraints

of rigid authoritarianism. Our findings suggest that foundations, in such contexts, may leverage local elite actors to drive policy transfer from inside the authoritarian state system. The study expands our understanding of transnational policy actors and their processes (Stone and Ladi, 2015). Specifically, we present two insights.

The first concerns the transfer of the “soft” policy. We find that the Ford Foundation transferred new policy ideas by veiling their ideological nature in “science”. The threat to the state was further alleviated since Ford worked through state-affiliated researchers. Extant research suggests that “undone science” – research intentionally left out by the state to occlude the perspectives of disfavoured groups (Hess, 2009) – can be completed by civil society organisations as a form of open contestation with the state (Best, 2012; Hess, 2009). This begs the question: in the absence of strong civil society actors, who could be recruited for conducting undone science? We show that, by providing financial backing, international exposure, and training and networking opportunities, foundations can incentivise state-affiliated researchers to select topics disfavoured by their state employers. When “objective” evidence of social grievances was accumulated by elite researchers, the cause-and-effect relationship was gradually revealed, eroding the legitimacy of the state discourse and putting the RH discourse on the agenda. This insight connects to the concept of “epistemic community”: it corroborates the importance of experts’ groups in disseminating new policy ideas through seemingly “objective” scientific language and research vehicles (Dunlop, 2009; Stone, 2000; Zito, 2017). Moreover, we suggest that strategically adopting a science-based “objective” position can be particularly salient in rigid authoritarian contexts, as this position reduces the perceived ideological threat to the powerful state.

Our second insight concerns the transfer of the “hard” policy. We document a graduated approach of *enrolling within the state system* for policy innovations which ultimately led to the implementation of RH instruments. This insight is aligned with the perspective that the authoritarian state is not monolithic – observed from a close range, there are different centres of power and motivations for action (Aasland *et al.*, 2020; Long, 2018). We enrich the understanding of a non-unitary state by explaining how a foundation strategically exploits such a situation for policy transfer. We show that the Ford Foundation started at the periphery of the state system, supporting low-stakes RH experiments. Cautious escalations of RH innovation provided the state the opportunity of observation, through which it evaluated risks and benefits before embarking on its own policy innovation.

Two areas of ambiguity arise when we scrutinise Ford’s role in stimulating policy changes. The first is the challenge of ascertaining the specific effect of its intervention on policy outcomes, a concern well acknowledged by foundation researchers, who noted that foundations address complex social problems with intertwined causal paths (Anheier and Leat, 2018; Fleishman, 2007; Grønbjerg *et al.*, 2000). Ford’s policy work was situated in the broad policy environment in the 1990s when China, at its early stage of economic development, strived to increase its international status and legitimacy. This environment facilitated Ford’s work despite the state’s strong authoritarian tendency. Moreover, a legitimacy crisis – international criticism following the Tiananmen Square Crackdown – propelled the state to seek the host status of the FWCW, which in turn brought to the spotlight the human rights problems in the Chinese family planning field.

The conference also imparted the responsibility for the state, as a signatory of the PFA<sup>1</sup>, to promote reproductive rights. The state's adoption of the RH policy, therefore, was framed by the confluence of Ford's decade-long grantmaking and various environmental forces.

The second ambiguity concerns the paradox of Ford's success. Anheier and Leat (2018) suggest that foundations rarely achieve clear-cut successes. For instance, foundations have general goals and specific goals which are located on different timelines and are weakly connected; they may succeed on the specific but fail on the general goal. Ford achieved results in the RH policy transfer. Yet, its general goal, which was to promote human rights and democracy in China and "facilitate its integration into the comity of nations" (FF memo, Bresnan, 1978), ostensibly failed: today's China is increasingly authoritarian and antagonistic to the west (Mitter, 2020). It may be said that Ford's role in persuading the Chinese state to adopt western policies (such as RH) helped the state to enhance its legitimacy and ultimately become more capable of resisting Western influence.

While Ford's China programs in the 1990s were aligned with the American interest in bringing China into the sphere of Western values, Sino-US relations have deteriorated since that time, with the US increasingly interested in containing the Chinese state. Ford's programs in China, reflecting the home sentiment, now comprise supporting China's civil society and managing "the impact of Chinese development finance in the Global South".<sup>2</sup> When viewed from this perspective, Ford's success in its earlier policy transfer projects can be said to have had paradoxical effects on achieving its long-term goal for China.

## Conclusion

We used a historical case to explore how a large philanthropic foundation transfers an alternative policy to a rigid authoritarian context. Contributing to foundation research and the policy transfer literature, we uncovered a route for policy transfer through which the transfer agent works with state-affiliated elite researchers to accumulate scientific evidence and supports peripheral and central state actors for policy innovations; both approaches subtly challenge the legitimacy of the incumbent policy and gradually build the legitimacy of the alternative policy. This route avoids confrontation with policy elites; yet, it has drawbacks. It requires the transfer agent to have a great deal of patience since policy influence gained through this route accumulates over a long period. It also requires the tolerance of uncertain outcomes: although we structured our findings from the perspective of the Ford Foundation as a strategic actor, we acknowledge that Ford could not have predicted the outcomes, which were contingent on many contextual factors as policy transfer often is. As such, this route may only be feasible for large foundations with resource and time on their side<sup>3</sup>. We acknowledge that our study is based on a single case which may limit its generalisability, but the core insights broaden our understanding of how philanthropic foundations exert policy influence when having to work through state actors (rather than the civil society). Our goal is to facilitate further analysis of policy transfer processes in highly authoritarian contexts.



Finally, we reflect how to re-read archives in the light of the present. Distinctly changing international relations today, in which China is a rival rather than a promising recipient of Western policies, bring to fore the ambiguity of foundation practice: policy transfer intending to bring China in line with Western practices may have helped enhance the state's legitimacy, ultimately enabling it to resist Western influences more strongly. When re-reading archives this way, "[I]ntent within the archive... is the archive's own dissolution – but also its rebirth" (Basu and De Jong, 2016, p.11).

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**Competing interests.** The authors declare none.

## Notes

- 1 It is worth noting that China also endorsed the Platform for Action for the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) held in Cairo in 1994, which contained RH goals.
- 2 <https://www.fordfoundation.org/our-work-around-the-world/china/> [Accessed 13.02.2021]
- 3 We thank a reviewer for this insightful comment.

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