

Unpacking the 2025 National People's Congress:

Innovation, Rural Trends, Women's Roles, and Market Trust

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Introduction

-Sreemati Chakrabarti

The National People's Congress (NPC) of the People's Republic of China represents the 'State' in the term Party-State. Borrowed from the Soviet Constitution of 1936 the main objective behind the establishment of the NPC was to separate the ideological, social and political responsibilities of the Communist Party of China (CPC), and frame policies accordingly while all legislative work was assigned to the NPC. As per China's first Constitution, promulgated in 1954, the NPCs were to be held every five years. Soon after China's Liberation in 1949 and before the formation of the first NPC, an advisory body known as the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) was set up to make and implement laws urgently required to run the new government, which included the Common Programme, the Marriage Law and the Land Reform Law.

Since its inception, 14 NPCs have been held in China. In the pre-Deng period, the NPCs were convened irregularly due to the political turbulence of the Mao era. From 1978 onwards, with Deng Xiaoping at the helm, the NPCs have been held every five years, with a plenary session convened annually — thereby contributing to the institutionalisation of China's political system, which had not been a feature of the pre-Deng era. From being a 'rubberstamp' of the Party's policies, as termed by scholars outside of China, the gradual transformation of China's legislature has assumed a greater significance and has gained traction worldwide. Regular convening of all of China's major political organisations has greatly contributed to the continuity, stability and predictability of the political system.

The First Session of 14th NPC was held in March 2023. Three yearly sessions of this NPC give a clear understanding of how China sees the challenges it is facing, its current priorities and future directions. On 5 April 2025 the Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi organised a panel discussion on the Third Session of the 14th NPC which was held between 4 March and 11 March 2025. Six papers were presented by ICS Fellows of which summaries of four presentations have been included in this publication. All four of the authors are established China scholars holding faculty positions in Jawaharlal Nehru University, Shiv Nadar Institution of Eminence, Delhi-NCR, and the University of Delhi. These are short write-ups based on their presentations reflecting some of the key aspects of China's plans and policies

which are to be pursued in the subsequent years. Two of the papers concentrate primarily on social issues and the other two focus on economy and technology (artificial intelligence).

Anand P. Krishnan focuses on the state support to private businesses and how it contrasts with that of India. For instance, for science and technology research China has allocated an amount twenty five times that of India's in this year. Government support to private companies is not only enhancing development in the domestic economy but also leading to achieving more of China's economic foot prints internationally.

Ritu Agarwal's piece is an analysis of the Rural Rejuvenation programme of the Chinese regime. Rapid urbanisation has led to the shrinking of the rural sector. China's developmental policies and projects have mainly focused on industrialisation and urban development although concern was often expressed on rural backwardness. The Rural Revitalisation policy encourages university students, migrant labourers and young people to return to their villages and start their own businesses and also be part of agricultural modernisation, in addition to regaining traditional knowledge and rediscovering local history.

Rityusha Mani Tiwary explains and elaborates upon how the AI industry is being supported and promoted in China with state support. This year's NPC Session has emphasised the need for further developing the increasingly "popular AI technology". It has set the goal to become a global AI leader by 2030. China is on its way to become a "global supermarket" as she terms it.

Usha Chandran, whose expertise is on gender issues, writes on how the state is reinforcing patriarchy and pursuing policies on women's secondary role in society by proposing the so-called "Mom Jobs" to enable women to take up part-time and flexible jobs to concentrate on family responsibilities. These jobs are low-paid and prevent women from reaching senior positions in their work place.

We hope these write-ups will be useful to gain insights into present day China's aims for the future.

I

China's Indigenous Innovation: Is Chinese AI the Curveball?

- Rityusha Mani Tiwary

China's AI excellence and catching up with the West has generated a massive discussion and debate in the last few years. This article aims to analyse some of the current political reactions within China, as was visible in the National People's Congress 2025 and AI policy trends within China and what it means for the rest of the world. The main question is whether China's indigenous innovation can ride on AI as the unexpected, winning variable — a curveball in the global manoeuvring of next phase of technological progress.

NPC 2025: Key Takeaways

The National People's Congress (NPC) convened its third session of the 14th National People's Congress from 5-11 March 2025, to review reports on the economy, budget, and the work of various government bodies. China has been able to make rapid strides in the domain of science, technology, and innovation (STI). Due to the challenges faced by the emerging STI governance structure, NPCs in recent times have flagged many issues. In fact, the creation, inclusion, absorption, and regulation of innovation has gained increasing traction in the policy circles. For instance, in 2024 several members of the CPPCC National Committee had suggested that in the AI (artificial intelligence) arena, China should adhere to independent innovation, as the country can take a development path of large language models (LLMs) with Chinese characteristics. There is a growing recognition of the need to incorporate AI management in STI policy frameworks. In 2024, the Government Work Report of the NPC mentioned AI three times and “security” for 26 times, this year it mentions AI 4 times and security 36 times, and innovation 36 times. “Embodied AI”, or AI with a physical form such as a robot, and “large-scale AI models”, represented by DeepSeek, made it into the annual report for the first time in NPC 2025. A new high-tech “state venture capital guidance fund” launch has been announced. The People's Bank of China (PBC), the central bank, held a meeting to reinforce its technological work in 2025, vowing to promote the applications of artificial intelligence (AI) large language models and related technologies in the financial sector to accelerate the process of financial digitalisation. The financial sector generates massive data volumes, and AI-led technological tools can process data

efficiently to enhance the operational efficiency and security of financial activities, the application of various technological tools in areas such as risk control can optimise processes for risk identification, measurement, and management.

AI in Industry and Everyday Contexts in China

From initial slow growth of AI development in 1980s, China has gained substantial momentum in the AI industry, given the policy push since 2006 when it released a national agenda for AI development. In the 13th Five Year Plan, China announced its goal to be a global AI leader by 2030. At the policy level, there are key initiatives focusing on inclusion of AI in STI policy framework of the country. From nurturing and regulating the “national AI teams” from private sector, public universities, and laboratories for specific specialisations in AI, there have been a host of AI development-specific policy instruments in the last two decades. One latest example is the “AI Plus Initiative”, which was launched in 2024, and seeks:

- *Extensive application of large-scale AI models*

Examples of this include the new-generation intelligent terminals where AI models analyse data streams from over 2,000 devices, AI application enabling production lines to optimise technological parameters autonomously nearly 30 times an hour, among others.

- *Manufacturing smart equipment*

These include AI-enabled phones and computers, intelligent robots, algorithmic script generation for short films, precision agricultural weeding and robotic manufacturing.

- *Making AI Transformative*

A key component here is multi-sector industrial upgrading. For instance, China’s automotive industry with new-energy vehicles — new wave of development in large language models, intelligent connected electric vehicles, and smart robotics.

- *New Economic Growth Points*

This would entail attracting investment, talent, industrial development, economic expansion. For examples, led by this policy, in 2024, China’s new energy vehicle

production and sales volumes both surpassed 12 million units, maintaining the world's leading position for the 10th consecutive year.

Is China the new AI Supermarket?

China holds the largest robotics market in the world, accounting for over 50% of global robot installations in 2024. China is leading the development of international standards for elderly care robots. Data indicates that by 2024, nearly 200 generative AI models had been registered and launched for service in China, with over 600 million registered users. There are predictions that in the next one to two years, small and medium-sized enterprises will actively adopt AI applications, and large enterprises will develop industry-specific models using open-source frameworks. In the next three to five years, China's AI-supported drug research will enter a phase of rapid development, with AI technologies taking on comprehensive research tasks such as molecular optimisation, synthetic route design, as well as automatic generation, analysis and screening. AI could generate up to \$1.2 trillion in value for the pharmaceutical industry. According to a new report released by global consultancy Accenture, the top three reasons for higher investment in generative AI that Chinese company executives cited are capitalising on advances in the technology, maintaining business competitiveness and increasing confidence in managing associated business risks, according to the report.¹ The top three areas in which the surveyed companies plan to implement generative AI in 2025 are information technology, engineering and manufacturing, and research and development, the report added.² The Chinese government's primary focus for investment in generative AI is creating new AI-powered products or services. Data from market research company CCID Consulting projects that China's AI industry will make big strides in the next 10 to 15 years, with its market scale reaching 1.73 trillion yuan (\$237.4 billion) by 2035, accounting for 30.6 percent of the world's total.³ The report also found that in China, 77 percent of employees believe their roles will be affected by generative AI. About 85 percent of the interviewed Chinese employees are currently using generative AI-based tools in their work, with 63 percent leveraging these tools for more than a year, and their main purpose is for data analysis.⁴ Nearly 60 percent of surveyed business leaders in China said they expect their generative AI solutions to be adopted on a large scale within their organisations this year, a 32-percentage-point increase over 2024. The research surveyed 790 company executives and 687 employees in 22 industries across the Asia-Pacific region. 87

percent of surveyed Chinese companies plan to ramp up AI investment in 2025 — a year of rapid change — while 58 percent of the interviewed business executives in China feel that their enterprises' AI development is proceeding faster than expected. **The big question is how business leaders can deploy capital and steer their organisations closer to AI maturity: Which means that on deployment spectrum, whether AI is fully integrated into workflows and drives substantial business outcomes.**

The Rise of Deepseek Model and Political Reactions in NPC 2025

Chinese media outlets have maintained that the performance of DeepSeek's latest model is on par with leading models from tech heavyweights such as OpenAI in tasks like mathematics, coding, and natural language reasoning, but at only a fraction of the cost and computing power of its rivals amid tightened export controls on AI chips from the US. Such news has fuelled the assumption that DeepSeek low-cost AI model rendering massive spending (like the \$500 billion Stargate project) on infrastructure unnecessary. In February 2025, the Postal Savings Bank of China announced that, leveraging its own large language model, the bank has deployed and integrated the DeepSeek-V3 model and the lightweight DeepSeek-R1 inference model.⁵ Among joint-stock banks, the Shanghai Pudong Development Bank has deployed the DeepSeek-R1 671B large language model, which is embedded in digital assistant applications, enhancing scenarios like intelligent questions and answers, financial analyses and report writing.⁶

This year in the NPC, in response to the growing attention to DeepSeek, lawmakers and political advisors stressed upon the urgent need to harness the increasingly popular AI technology as well address some of the political-ethical questions related to its usage. For instance, political advisors like Zhu Songchun feel that DeepSeek and its open-source AI model are essentially about democratising access to advanced technology.⁷ Lou Qinjian, spokesperson for the third session of the 14th NPC, while referring to the China-proposed Global AI Governance Initiative, said that it will help bridge the technological divide and prevent sci-tech innovation from becoming “a game of the rich countries and the wealthy”.⁸ In 2024, there had been a huge uproar over ethical usage of AI when AI-generated images of actor Jin Dong were used by hackers for swindling money from his fans. In 2025 NPC, Jin, also a national political advisor, called for the establishment of **industry regulations for AI**

applications. Lei Jun, an NPC deputy and founder of tech giant Xiaomi, presented a suggestion on curbing the abuse of AI-powered face swapping and voice cloning technology.⁹ Lei, whose company's products range from smartphones to electric cars featuring extensive AI use, called for a single-subject law, enhanced industry self-discipline and efforts to raise public awareness of AI. Li Jinghong, a national political advisor, and a professor at Tsinghua University, plans to suggest the introduction of a law on AI promotion that covers a wide range of AI-related issues such as talent cultivation, employment protection, international cooperation, and copyright and intellectual property protection. According to a 2024 China Internet Network Information Center report, the user base of generative AI products in China totalled 230 million by June 2024, and the country has built a relatively comprehensive AI industry ecosystem with over 4,500 related companies.¹⁰ Some deputies and political advisors approached by Xinhua said they had already used AI assistants to help them perform their duties. **To what extent shall we leverage AI without losing our edge?** He Guanghua, a national lawmaker and a skilled technician at the State Grid Wuxi Power Supply Company, underscored the vital role of real-world research in fulfilling lawmaker's duties in the AI era.¹¹ They echoed the sentiments that despite the prevalence of AI, people-to-people contact should not diminish, to retain real time dissemination, absorption, and creation of technology.

Is there an AI Race, 'AI's Sputnik Moment' for China?

In January 2025, DeepSeek's powerful new artificial intelligence system triggered a near \$600 billion drop in Nvidia's stock value — the largest single-day drop for a US stock. According to popular analyses, the US and the world has big lessons to learn from China's AI's Sputnik moment.¹² There are major power re-alignments happening around this moment. According to some news outlets, Russia's largest bank, Sberbank, is partnering with Chinese researchers to develop AI technologies.¹³ Yet, there are many hurdles for Chinese companies in monetising AI models due to security and privacy concerns.¹⁴ Access to AI chips is still limited as there is a computing power lag for China due to US chip export restrictions. DeepSeek has been banned on federal devices in the US; Texas, Virginia and New York are banning the app on state-owned equipment.¹⁵ There is an indication of breakthrough in algorithms, yet, China's data and computing power is limited compared with US technology companies.¹⁶ It is too early to quantify when China will catch up with the US in AI. Nonetheless, the debate on AI has stood out at meetings and press conferences during

China's annual "two sessions", painting a broader picture: China aims to rapidly evolve into an AI "supermarket" with AI applications woven into the fabric of a wide range of sectors in its economy. Xi Jinping seems committed to outwit and 'overtake' the US in AI¹⁷, and there are reports that there are substantial AI gains by China in Q1 of 2025 — 'reshaping the global AI'.¹⁸ For India and rest of the Global South, this is an urgent call to invest in AI and generate a massive momentum of technology creation and absorption so that AI doesn't remain a tool for hegemonic takeovers by major powers.

II

What Lies Behind the Chinese Party-State's Increasing Vote of Confidence in the Private Sector

- Anand P. Krishnan

This write-up combines two commentary/opinion pieces of the author originally published in [*Deccan Herald*](#) (dated 1 April 2025)¹ and [*The Indian Express*](#) (dated 17 April 2025).²

Private companies in China have in recent times, voiced their concerns about local protectionism and inter-provincial law enforcement overreach by cash-strapped local administrations to increase their revenue.³ These apprehensions come at a time, when the private sector's role has increased in the economy, and private companies are becoming key drivers in the country's advanced development. Interestingly, local protectionism is also visible in India, in the form of domicile-based quotas,⁴ introduced by different states disincentivising labour mobility.⁵ These along with increased regulatory overdrive on businesses — especially foreign investments — serves to shrill the ease of doing business narrative of the Indian government (Kalra and Shah 2025).⁶

According to China's State Administration of Market Regulation, as of 2024, there are over 180 million private business entities in the country, and out of this, over 55 million are private companies.⁷ The private sector accounts for over 50 per cent of tax revenue, over 60 per cent of GDP, over 70 per cent of technological innovation, over 80 per cent of urban

employment, and over 90 per cent of the total number of enterprises.⁸ By comparison, in India, their share is 36 percent in tax revenue, 91 per cent of GDP, 36 per cent in technological innovation, 11 per cent in employment, and over 95 per cent of the total number of registered enterprises.⁹

Increased Government Support

The Work Report presented by Premier Li Qiang at the annual session of National People's Congress in March promised solid steps to spur the growth of the private sector and protect their lawful rights and interests.¹⁰ Further, private enterprises were encouraged to refine their corporate systems, to assert distinctive Chinese identity. Li also assured a crackdown on arbitrary fees, fines, and inspections, dismantling barriers to market entry, expanding financing (especially for innovation), and improving public confidence by addressing concerns related to stigmatizing the private sector.

In mid-February this year, Chinese President Xi Jinping met the country's private business leaders at a symposium in Beijing in mid-February.¹¹ Many of the participants were from technology companies which according to the formulation of the Chinese Party-state constituted the new quality productive forces¹², the new development philosophy for the country's advanced transformation. The new development philosophy (*xin fazhan linian* 新发展理念) entails economic development to be innovative, coordinated, green, open and shared.¹³ Scientific and technological innovation is the key component that would achieve high-quality development in China, pushing it up the value chain.¹⁴ The emphasis is laid upon 'holistic innovation', whereby under a strategic vision set by the Chinese state, research institutions, firms, and government agencies engaging in innovation are required to build synergies (Chen et. al 2018).¹⁵ Every department of their organisation is aligned with the overall strategic goal of innovation and they collaborate with all relevant institutions in the ecosystem.

It is worth noting that the symposium happened on the close heels of the unveiling of two open-source models by Chinese Artificial Intelligence company, DeepSeek, challenging the dominance of American companies such as OpenAI, Meta and Google (DeepSeek's CEO

Liang Wenfeng was also a participant at the symposium). Pointing out the substantial weight of private companies in China's economy, with increased prospects and potential for them to further promote high-quality development, Xi called upon the companies to enhance innovation, improve competitiveness to contribute to regional economic coordination, and social well-being.¹⁶ He also encouraged the private sector to embrace entrepreneurship and patriotism and operate legally as well as ethically.

From Regulatory Crackdowns to Legal Protection

The show of support by the Party-state marks a shift from the series of heightened regulatory crackdown on private capital in 2020-21¹⁷, which was subsumed under the Common Prosperity campaign.¹⁸ The Party-state's efforts to get behind the private sector also stems from the latter's role in pushing the boundaries of technological innovation. While the CPC still emphasizes its leadership in steering China's modernisation and therefore, maintains a tight grip over the economy, through the latest measures of support, it also seeks to corral the private sector to align themselves with the national objectives of increasing consumption and indigenous innovation.

In October 2024, China drafted the Private Economy Protection Law — first comprehensive law of its kind and submitted to the NPC for its approval after incorporating feedback — with provisions for strengthening rights of private companies, ensuring fair market competition, improving investment and financing environment, and supporting technological innovation, while providing correct political direction.¹⁹

The Global Push by Private Companies

This vote of confidence from the Chinese leadership is an acknowledgement of the rising importance of the country's private capital in not only driving domestic development but also providing wind to China's global sails. Chinese outbound investment is now increasingly driven by the expansion of private companies with global ambitions, whose focus has shifted towards emerging markets than high-income economies.²⁰ They are also involved in diverse internationalisation efforts across value chain segments, such as establishing local manufacturing, sales, and service operations. According to China's General Administration

of Customs, Chinese private enterprises contributed to the country's foreign trade with transactions totalling 24.33 trillion yuan (about US\$3.4 trillion) in 2024.²¹

Chinese private companies, with their sleek and sophisticated products, have been able to connect with global consumers and are pivotal entities in building an 'industrial diplomacy' – to borrow the phrase by sociologist Kyle Chan — to re-shape global production networks and make them centered around Beijing.²² This is visible in a range of modern sectors and industries, that are qualitatively superior and critical in a technologically interconnected world, such as Electric Vehicles, consumer electronics and digital gadgets, lithium batteries, and solar panels.²³ Chinese private companies form vital nodes in global supply chains in these industries, and their inextricability is used by Beijing for competitive advantage.²⁴ Through these companies, China has remained attentive to building backward and forward industrial linkages — making components and specialised machinery, along with developing skilled personnel with the technical know-how — and holistically dominate the wider ecosystem while also guarding against sharing of technology. The ability of Chinese smartphone companies to endure and build a loyal consumer base in an adverse country like India is testament to their adaptive capabilities.²⁵

Takeaways for India

These recent happenings in the close relationship between the state and business in China, also some takeaways for India. Backing its narrative on innovation, China has allocated to 398 billion yuan (US\$55.72 billion) for Science and Technology research in the central government's budget this year.²⁶ Compared to that, India's union budget has allocated for the Department of Science and Technology is Rs. 20,097 crore (US\$2.35 billion) (Ministry of Finance, Government of India 2025a).²⁷ This glaring gap in spending by both countries is just the partial story. Equally important, is the private sector's low level of participation in Research and Development (R&D) – in terms of gross expenditure on R&D, Indian private sector's contribution is 36.4 per cent, compared to 77 per cent by China's private sector (Ministry of Finance, Government of India 2025b).²⁸ On the whole, industrial R&D in India is concentrated in a few sectors like pharmaceuticals, biotechnology and information technology.

As scientific and technological advancement gains currency for modern geopolitics, there is need for more involvement of India's private sector, and better synergies among all stakeholders in fostering innovation and cutting-edge technology. The role of India's private sector is thus, critical in the country gaining a position of strength in global manufacturing.

III

Back to the Countryside? New Trends in the Rural Revitalization

- Ritu Agarwal

One of the key developmental tasks outlined by the Two Annual Sessions held in February 2025 was to promote rural revitalisation. The key strategies to be adopted by the government include rural-urban integration, which involves boosting farmers' incomes and improving their livelihood conditions. It also emphasised improving the land management system and promoting the development of the new rural collective economy to create conditions for financial investment in rural areas.

The development of the rural areas and the increase in farmers' income have been a consistent concern for policymakers in China. The targeted poverty alleviation campaign initiated by the Xi Jinping administration aimed to mobilise party cadres at the local level. The primary objective was to enhance infrastructure development by connecting rural areas to urban centres, create employment opportunities in towns and villages, and ensure access to healthcare and primary education for the rural poor. The Rural Revitalization Programme is a further step in transforming China into a strong agricultural economy, and it has mobilised village leaders through CPC training sessions to develop the village economy and strengthen Party governance.¹

Since the reform and opening up, the urbanization rate of China's rural areas has increased

from 18% to 67%.² The rural population, mainly those residing in rural areas, has been decreasing. As a result, there has been a sharp decline in rural villages in China, from 4.8 million in 1978 to approximately 2.3 million.³ Between 2000 and 2019, employment in the primary sector of the economy, which includes agriculture, decreased by almost half from its earlier level. Earlier, it was 360.43 million, or 50% of the workforce was employed in the agricultural sector, which has reduced to almost half, i.e., to 194.45 million, or 25.1% .⁴ In 2013, 26% of all farmland, which was 17.1% in 2008, had been transferred from rural households to other households or farming entities.⁵ The decrease in the number of villages indicates the shrinking of rural space both in terms of population and the mode of agricultural production. The agricultural production has been shifted from the peasant households to big agri-business firms and the peasants are no longer tied to the land. The village households' land is often left idle by the farmers as they have moved to the cities. In this situation, it has become the government's responsibility to revive the cultural heritage of villages, promote rural tourism, and thus create new forms of livelihood opportunities for the 'left-behind women', the ageing population, and children who remain in rural areas. Rural revitalisation aimed to transform the rural landscape by introducing changes in land use patterns, livelihood strategies, and governance structures. It generates new momentum for 'Rural Returns'. It encompasses the process of migrant workers, University students, young people returning from the city to the countryside to set up their business, engage in agricultural modernisation, rural industrialisation, and village construction projects. The main focus has been on rediscovering local history, traditional knowledge and heritage.

The Rural Revitalization, first promulgated in 2017 and later adopted as an official policy in 2021, primarily focused on restructuring agricultural production, ensuring food security, improving rural livelihoods, and mechanizing agriculture through land consolidation. Rural revitalisation primarily focused on the 'five Revitalization initiatives, which include developing rural industries, promoting culture, preserving ecology, attracting talents back to the countryside, and establishing new organizations to restore party control in rural areas.'⁶

China unveiled its "No. 1 Central Document" for 2025 in February, which, like earlier years since 2004, has consistently addressed the issues of rural development and agricultural modernization. This document sets out the priorities for further deepening rural reforms through agricultural modernisation and securing grain supply for its population. It emphasises

firstly that agriculture remains important, as a large number of the rural population is directly dependent on agriculture for their livelihood.

The second point emphasised in this document was the revival of county-level economies as the primary stage of growth. The main idea was to bring economic growth at the county level by promoting local industrial development, which in turn can reduce employment pressure on cities.⁷

The document also called for the study and use of the examples set by the “Thousand Villages Demonstration and Ten Thousand Villages Renovation” project, launched in 2003 in East China's Zhejiang Province. Thus, it revived the idea of revitalising the countryside by establishing model villages that can serve as a lesson for other provinces to follow, especially those that have experienced high levels of urbanization.⁸

Given the above background, this paper is going to discuss two issues that require some attention:

Rural-Urban Integration

As economist Lu Qian pointed out in China, “farmers have land but are poor, while urban residents have no land but are rich”. To address these issues and revitalize rural areas, China must reform its land-use and management systems. A significant income disparity persists between rural and urban areas. According to the National Bureau of Statistics, in 2022, the per capita disposable income of the rural regions was approximately 40 percent of that in urban areas.⁹ At the Central Rural Work Conference held in 2021, President Xi Jinping announced that the government would undertake a “historic shift” to improve the rural economy comprehensively. With China’s increasing urbanisation rate, many rural residents have migrated to cities; however, they still retain user rights over their residential plots in the villages. The separation of land rights into user, ownership, and management has been proposed as an alternative framework to facilitate the transfer of homestead property into private hands while retaining collective ownership rights over the land. Homestead land accounts for more than 70% of the land, which remains unused as it cannot be circulated for

profit-making activities in the outside market. The first document, jointly issued by China's State Council and the Communist Party Central Committee in 2018, focused on rural rejuvenation. The main idea was that land left idle should be brought into circulation by creating a land market.¹⁰ It primarily highlighted the flaws in China's rural land registration system, which is responsible for the limited circulation of rural land in the market. China's rural population decreased by 133 million from 1996 to 2012, while the area covered by rural homestead land expanded, as most of this land remained unused and unoccupied by rural residents.¹¹

The separation of three rights — ownership, contract or user rights, and management rights — is primarily aimed at providing the institutional foundation for land transfer and large-scale operations. Central Document No. 1 of 2025 emphasised the importance of managing and utilising rural resources and assets effectively. Where the state prohibited urban residents from purchasing these houses in the villages, it has devised ways to utilise legally owned rural housing through methods such as rental, shareholding, and cooperation.

However, the main question remains as to how far local authorities will be able to maintain a quota system for renting out land for commercial and industrial purposes.

Party Governance as a New Mode of State Entrepreneurialism

Agricultural modernisation, in contradiction to collective land ownership patterns, requires that land ownership can be transferred or leased out for commercial purposes. The entry of Dragon-Head Enterprises has reinforced the intervention of party cadres at the county and township levels. However, the infrequent land adjustment practices and the abolition of land taxes had previously curtailed the power of the village cadres. With the linkage of agricultural production to market strategies, farmers have been differentiated into those who can enter the market with their competitive products and others who exit the market space because they lack access to inputs, fertilisers, and other agricultural resources. Here, the role of local party cadres becomes crucial in revitalising village finances by promoting the One Village One Product (OVOP) scheme, which helps link agricultural production with the external market, thereby increasing farmers' income.

Document No. 1, 2023, also emphasised the critical role of the Party in rural governance, as well as policies aimed at empowering village Party branches. Chinese President Xi Jinping has revived and expanded the role of the First Secretary, whose mission is to enhance the leadership and management capabilities of the village party branch. The party cadres must combine the twin roles of rejuvenating Party branches through regular training sessions and legitimizing their rule by promoting economic growth in the localities. The primary responsibility of the village party secretary is mainly to bring social and material resources to the countryside. The party cadres have been granted a certain amount of regulatory flexibility, which can facilitate the transfer of land to other legally viable profit-making entities in many areas. The field study reveals that the Qianfen County Government of Sichuan Province collaborated with university authorities to convert unused homestead land into an agricultural teaching and training base for postgraduate students.¹² While entrepreneurial motives drive the party cadres to adapt to new urban conditions, the focus on the party building model leads to the revitalisation of rural areas through the mobilisation of financial resources.

Thus, the revitalisation of rural areas introduces a new type of land-peasant relationship, where land is no longer a moral asset; instead, local cadres utilise the collective ownership of land as a transaction asset to be exchanged between peasant households and large-scale commercial firms for agricultural modernisation. While the protection of farmland has been ensured under the institutional framework of peasant households, the state has played a more interventionist role in bringing urban facilities back to the village. However, the transition from agricultural to industrial development has not been smooth, and rural revitalisation with a new orientation of reconnecting people to their hometowns has been a significant focus in national policy narratives, especially in recent years.

IV

Two Sessions and the Role of Women

- Usha Chandran

The Two Sessions emphasised on the role of women in national rejuvenation, pointing out the greater presence of women in the NPC and CPPCC, (1.5 and 2.6 percentage respectively), and the increasing vital role women are playing in every aspect of Chinese society.¹ It discussed women's important role in solving demographic imbalance. The three main areas of discussion and proposals were centered on women's role in reproducing and taking care of the family, namely; create a separate category of employment for mothers, reduce the marriage age and provide perks and incentives for marrying early and reproducing more.

I. Separate Category of Employment for Mothers: “Mom Jobs” 妈妈岗

“Mom Jobs” (妈妈岗) is a term used for jobs with flexible hours and low income, especially available for mothers with children under the age of twelve, so that they can focus on bringing up their children along with a steady income.²

In 2025, at The Two Sessions, the proposal for “Mom Jobs” once again became a hot topic of discussion.³ CPPCC member Wu Haiying proposed, “the employers should set up flexible positions, so as to help full-time mothers to be able to take care of their children along with jobs”.⁴ Expressing that this not only respects women's employment and their family rights, but also reflects a deep-seated proposition for creating a fertility-friendly society.⁵ Several women representatives and deputies at the NPC supported the new employment model of “Mom Jobs”.⁶ The concept of “Mom Jobs” is not new, it came under public debate a decade ago, with some local authorities urging firms to include odd jobs in this category. Thus it was inherently biased to begin with.⁷ Nonetheless, it was formally promoted in 2022 in the ‘Guidelines on Implementing Measures to Support Active Childbearing’, a national directive issued by the National Health Commission which encouraged employers to adapt to operational needs by negotiating with employees to implement flexible work models

accommodating mothers who need to pick up or drop off children from school, care for a sick child, or manage other parenting responsibilities.⁸

A 2023 study by the All-China Women's Federation found that 82.7% of stay-at-home mothers have a desire to re-enter the workforce, and only 48.3% were interested in part-time or flexible employment opportunities.⁹ However, while authorities and companies are trying to provide opportunities, those currently on offer are mostly low-skilled positions in domestic services, security, catering, property management, teaching, part-time caregivers etc., with scant opportunities in technical or managerial fields; many offer only contract-based employment and hourly pay, which can mean lower job security. These are less attractive to women who previously held white-collar jobs or even senior management positions.¹⁰

II. Reduction of Marriage Age

Reducing the age of marriage for both men and women at the policy level was part of the broader debates on demographic challenges, including declining birth rates and an ageing population, during the Two Sessions. Reducing the marriage age was proposed for the first time in 2019 NPC. This year Chen Songxi, a Chinese national political adviser, suggested to reduce marriage age from 22 and 20 respectively for men and women to 18 for both genders, arguing that it aligns with the age of adulthood and could help address declining birth rates.¹¹ Last year NPC Deputy Ding Jianning, proposed strengthening of youth's education and understanding on marriage.¹² However, there was growing concern that it may lead to higher divorce rates and social issues. Some even proposed abolishing the age limit entirely leaving marriage decisions to individuals and families. There were proposals on regional flexibility pilot programmes that certain provinces (for example, those with severe population decline) should be allowed to experiment with lower marriage ages. There are reports of local governments already unofficially tolerating underage marriages.¹³

The All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) has emphasised protecting women's rights and ensuring marital stability over rushed policy changes. While Urban youth prioritise education/careers, rural families might pressure teens into early marriages. ACWF delegates proposed that instead of lowering age there is a need to improve support systems and

widened knowledge on law.¹⁴ Some of the suggestions include, providing free mandatory premarital counselling, student loan forgiveness for couples who marry before and have children they are 25 years old as well as tax breaks for married couples.

However, no immediate legal change to the national marriage age was announced. Some pilot programmes were approved, in Northeast China (2026–2028): local governments can offer marriage/childbearing subsidies, not age adjustments.

III. Perks and Incentives for Marrying Early and Reproducing More

Some NPC representatives proposed incentives for early marriage and childbearing. They linked marriage age policies with tax breaks, housing subsidies, or childcare support to encourage earlier marriages, cash bonuses for first births within two years of marriage and subsidised weddings for rural couples.¹⁵

There was a "Patriotic Marriage" Proposal, though proposed by a minor political advisory group, on granting priority housing and/or *hukou* benefits to couples where the wife is less than 25 and the husband is less than 28 and they pledge to have more than two children. This became controversial, and was widely criticised as coercive and “patronising women’s bodies”. However, no official endorsement was made, but it surely sparked online debates.

Outcomes:

State Council Premier Li Qiang in his work report delivered at the Third Session of the 14th National People’s Congress of the People’s Republic of China on 5 March 2025, in the policies on social security and services mentioned that, “we will formulate policies on boosting birth rates, provide childcare subsidies, vigorously develop integrated nursery and childcare services, and increase public-interest childcare services.”¹⁶

The 2025 Two Sessions adopted some new programmes to the existing incentives for families with more than one child. Some of them include: at the national level maternity leave extended to eight months (up from 5–6), paternity leave to 30 days (up from 15). Some regions (for example, Guangdong and Zhejiang): 12 months maternity leave for the third

child. Second child: ¥1,000/month until age three (piloted in 10 provinces, including Sichuan and Hunan). Third child: one-time ¥20,000 bonus + 50% income tax reduction for parents (approved in five cities). Mortgage discounts, 0.5–1% lower interest rates for families with more than two children (some state banks mandated to comply). Exemptions from local property purchase limits for families with more than one child (for example, Chengdu and Nanjing). Free kindergarten for third children in all rural areas and 20 pilot cities. *Gaokao* bonus points: +5 points for second/third children in Liaoning and Heilongjiang. Subsidised IVF treatments for infertile couples in Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou (state covers 50% of costs). Post-partum mental health services added to basic insurance. Guizhou Province adopted simplified wedding registrations for rural couples. “Family-friendly cities” initiative: 20 cities will expand childcare centres and offer mortgage discounts for parents. Child-Rearing Salaries (Gansu and Guizhou).

Parents of more than three children receive ¥500–¥800/month. “Company Baby Bonuses” (Shenzhen and Hangzhou). Firms get tax cuts if they pay employees ¥1,000/month per child. “Grandparent Subsidies” (Shandong) where grandparents who care for grandchildren receive ¥300/month.¹⁷

Societal Reactions to the Proposals and Decisions

While many netizens voiced their support for “mom jobs”, some raised concerns about potential increases in enterprise labour costs and the risk of deepening discrimination against women in the workplace.¹⁸ There are concerns that it may encourage further discrimination and consolidate the traditional mindset on division of labour.¹⁹ Urban Chinese women, in particular, are increasingly choosing to avoid marriage owing to the traditional expectations from marriage with childbearing as an essential element. Whereas urban Chinese men are delaying marriage owing to economic reasons, like rising living costs, bride price and even unemployment.

With a steady decline in the rate of marriage from 2013, there are reports that the Chinese youth are delaying their marriage owing to higher education and their changing views on marriage and family values. At such a juncture the proposal to reduce the marriageable age has come out as a mockery.²⁰ Social media is full of discussions on the fact that youngsters do

not want to get married or are delaying marriage and are increasingly not keen on having even a single child, let alone three children. Some netizens criticised the proposal for overlooking the fact that many 18 year olds are still in high school. Marriage will block their higher studies as well as employment, besides they fear more women without higher education would be forced into marriage. They emphasised that “society should progress in civilisation, not regress to the barbaric era”.²¹

Netizens are also of the opinion that the way the society has progressed it is obvious that young people now resent the idea of marriage and parenthood and this cannot be easily changed with a few words or even incentives. Though there are reports that some cities have witnessed growth in birth rates after certain perks were introduced, there is no research that suggests that these were second or third children. Many youngsters feel that these incentives are not enough to change their minds, since the policies are not made keeping in mind the requirements of the young people.²²

Conclusion

In propagating the idea of women’s important role in rejuvenating the nation through birthing the new generation of the Chinese people, there are attempts to reiterate a traditional mindset of seeing women as just “mothers”. This reflects the continuing androcentric approach of the government in viewing women’s “bodies” as “wombs” used for nation building. Parallely, there seems to be a systematic attempt to legalise and formalise the already existing practice of gender discrimination at work and recruitment so as to urge women to focus on marrying, birthing and bringing up children. As part of this, incentives in the form of “mom jobs”, other perks mentioned above is provided as a distraction, or a toy to silence them. Instead of providing maternity and child-care leave and other flexible conditions for mothers in jobs already held by them, the idea of creating a separate category of “mom jobs” will lead to limiting women with children less than the age of twelve, in these “Mom Jobs”, further diminishing their opportunities to get back to full-time and high-end employment in the job market. Indirectly these policies push women to “go back home”, opposite to Mao’s attempt of pulling them “outside the four walls of the house”.

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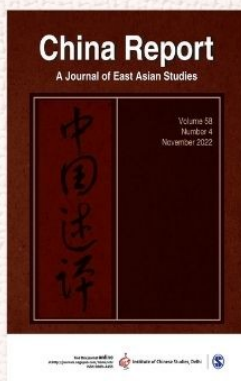


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