

# Attention Distribution to Hierarchical Policy Diffusion A Case Study of China's Fertility Policy

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## Abstract

Attention is a scarce resource for governmental decision-making, and the allocation of governmental attention affects its judgment of and attention to the priorities of various affairs in public utilities. The traditional gradual model and the non-gradual model with policy outbursts as the typical pattern together outline the overall picture of China's policy diffusion practice, but what is the generative mechanism of the two? Starting from the matching relationship between the focus of the government's attention allocation and the diffusion characteristics of public policies, and following the logical progression of "situation-process-result" of the attention-based view, the analytical framework of China's policy diffusion under the attention perspective includes The three core chains of "high-level promotion-attention allocation-policy diffusion". The "absorption-radiation" process dominated by high-level promotion is the decisive force that induces the large-scale policy diffusion under the pressure-based system; driven by the attention allocation mechanism, the competitive performance construction of local source innovation realizes the effective attraction of higher-level attention, and the vertical transmission of high-level attention catalyzes the redistribution and aggregation of the attention of the potential adopters at the lower level, constructing the "attention allocation-attention diffusion" chain, which is the core chain. The vertical transmission of top-level attention catalyzes the redistribution and aggregation of the attention of potential adopters at lower levels, and builds up the general diffusion path of "local first innovation - superior absorption and promotion - local follow-up adoption".

## Keywords

Policy level diffusion, Government attention

## Introduction

The internal logic of policy operation is an important proposition that the discipline of public policy is committed to studying. The identification and study of factors such as the focus of events, the degree of development, the preferences of policymakers, political consensus and national sentiment, public opinion and the media, and the degree of completeness of technical solutions have led to the formation of a variety of policy explanation models. Among these factors, the "attention" of policy subjects has attracted the attention of researchers in recent years, which is used to answer the question of what kind of factors can attract the attention of policy subjects to the problem and the extent of such attention, and then explain the reasons for the formation of different forms of policies at different stages, such as how the agenda is opened up, the output of the policy content, and the degree of response to the implementation of the policy and the behavior of the policy. behavior, etc.

In the field of policy diffusion research, there exists a logical paradox, whether it is the exploration of the phenomenon of interstate policy adoption in the U.S. under the federal system, or the analysis of the process of policy innovation diffusion in China under the unitary system, the mainstream viewpoints regard policy diffusion as the gradual learning behavior of the decision

makers to reduce uncertainty, and characterize its process through the S-shaped curve of "slow growth in the early stage - rapid increase in the middle stage - slow saturation in the late stage". The mainstream viewpoints regard policy diffusion as a gradual learning behavior of policymakers to reduce uncertainty, and characterize the process through the S-shaped diffusion curve of "slow growth in the early stage - rapid increase in the middle stage - slow saturation in the late stage". However, looking at the practice of local governance in China, the phenomenon of policy diffusion is showing some new faces. From the time dimension, some policy innovations have significantly shortened the process cycle from small-scale local exploration to large-scale national practice; from the process dimension, the "diffusion rhythm" of many policy innovations is no longer as gentle as the three-stage process of the gradual mode, but rather manifests itself as "sharp outburst at the beginning - slow saturation at the end or slow saturation at the beginning". Instead, it is a two-stage process of "initial sharp outburst - late slow saturation or initial slow growth - late sharp outburst". (杨志 & 魏姝, 2020)

## **Literature Review**

This paper attempts to embed the analysis of China's policy diffusion phenomenon in the core narrative line of "attention-driven agenda-setting and decision-making process of policy adoption" by introducing the perspective of "attention" theory.

### **Information overload, attention bottlenecks and their unbalanced allocation**

Since information is consumed by people's attention, understanding information in the age of information explosion might as well be transferred to understanding attention. Whether or not information can be useful ultimately depends on whether or not it is noticed. Thus, the information analysis path actually emphasizes nothing more than the relationship between attention and choice. This effectively means that the study of decision-making takes into account the limitations in human cognitive abilities. This is the theory of Simon's limited rationality hypothesis. Whereas the world faced by decision makers is often highly complex, human processing capacity is limited. People can only process problems continuously, that is, examining one aspect at a time. The characteristic of processing information continuously determines that decision makers can only pay attention to a limited part of the environment when making decisions, and cannot pay attention to all areas of behavior at the same time. This means that the allocation of attention affects decision making and that the decision making process begins when the decision maker decides what to pay attention to. The fact that decision-making begins with attention also means that the decision itself is designed. The decision maker first determines the "evaluative dimensions for structuring the decision" and then determines the specific aspects of the problem to focus on, ignoring those aspects that are not important in the evaluative dimensions. This is the structure of attention, which is equivalent to a "filter" that filters out some of the attributes of the problem situation. When attention shifts, the evaluative dimension of decision-making changes, so that previously neglected attributes of the problem situation become salient and choices change. So, Brian Jones, in *Rethinking Decision Making in Democratic Politics - Attention, Choice, and Public Policy*, finds two important meanings in the notion of attention: first, attention implies

selectivity, whereby the decision maker chooses a particular aspect of the environment to deal with; and, second, attention implies a decision-making mechanism, by which the a salient feature of the attentional environment is brought into the decision-making structure and becomes the object of the decision-maker's preference.(琼斯 & 李丹阳, 2010)

Therefore, a key question in political analysis is "what makes decision makers pay attention to those parts of the environment that are selected and ignore the rest", whether it is the finite rational decision model, the multiple streams framework, or the discontinuous equilibrium theory, all of them try to find the answer through the "attention" perspective. Whether it is a limited rational decision-making model, a multi-source flow analysis framework, or a discontinuous equilibrium theory, they all try to find an answer through the "attention" perspective. The basis of this consensus conclusion is that the nature of decision-making is the process of synthesizing information by the decision-maker. However, due to the unavoidable limitations of individual cognitive abilities, information overload and attention scarcity have become persistent themes that disturb the policy process.

At present, the complexity and uncertainty of governance situations are increasing day by day, and information is characterized by explosive growth, which further aggravates the reality of the tension of the above-mentioned structural contradictions. Accurate prioritization of information and issues has become increasingly important for decision makers. In other words, the unbalanced allocation of attention has become a kind of objective universal behavior in the decision-making process, and the scarcity of attention gives its existence inevitability.

### Logic of translation of differential allocation of attention to policy diffusion

The study of organizational attention has its roots in finite decision theory. Subsequently, the foundational view of attention has greatly expanded the understanding of the correlation between attention allocation and organizational behavior, but both focus on the interpretation of corporate behavior. The theory of interrupted equilibrium has paid early attention to the allocation of attention in political systems, clarifying the relevance of situational shifts in individual attention

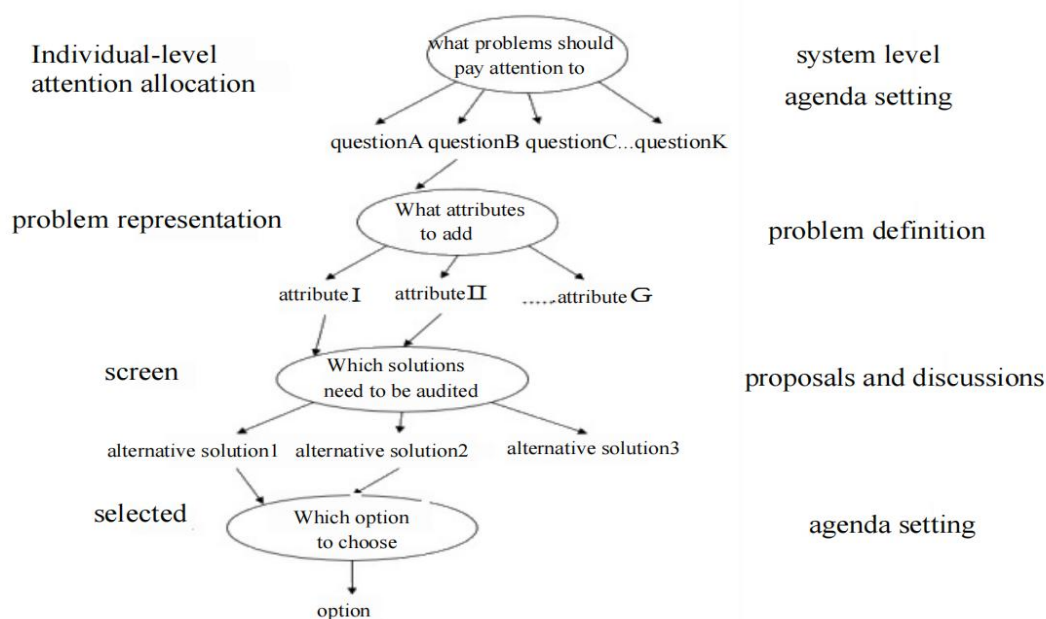


Figure 1 Attention - driven agenda-setting model

caused by cognitive limitations in information processing to changes in governmental agendas. In short, agenda-setting is "the government's policy ordering of social challenges in the context of limited resources", and what policymakers prioritize or pay more attention to depends on where they focus their attention. Attention allocation can therefore be seen as a prerequisite for policy agenda-setting, with limited attention and shifts in attention being the main cause of policy stabilization or abrupt change. Frank Baumgartner and Brian Jones in *The Politics of Attention: How Do Governments Prioritize Issues?* a book that parses how information is processed and policies are selected, specified, and modified in political systems, propose a model of attention-driven policy choice (Figure 1).(王英伟, 2019)

### **Pressure-based institutions and high-level promotion**

The "pressure-based system" is a distinctive feature of China's national governance system, which "in actual operation is embedded in the bureaucracy, and thus shapes the logic of bureaucratic operation". (欧阳静, 2011) In other words, "the implementation of public policy in China takes place in a unique structure and political ecology in which the party leads the government and the party and the state are embedded in each other, and is characterized by a high level of promotion." (贺东航 & 孔繁斌, 2011) Localization studies have found that "high leadership priority" is "a hierarchically operated way of allocating attention within the rational bureaucratic governance framework of China's unitary state" (庞明礼, 2019), and that "the phenomenon of intensified attention in local governments is, to a large extent, not a problem for the local government". attention intensification phenomenon is largely not the subjective behavior of local governments themselves, but the result of the shaping of the sectional organization" (孙雨, 2019). Therefore, the attention of local officials is characterized by "upward accountability" due to the structural constraints of the pressure-based system. As a matter of fact, upward mobilization is widely found in the process of localized policy diffusion, and the superior-led policy absorption and radiation diffusion constructs a two-way interactive mechanism of point-to-point policy diffusion in China. Empirical studies have shown that higher-level interventions have an incentive or constraint effect on local policy adoption. The coercive mechanism of vertical pressure or administrative directives is the intrinsic motivation of superior intervention to drive the local policy diffusion process. It can be seen that, in the context of China's pressure-based system, both the process of inter-governmental allocation of attention and the process of policy diffusion, which is characterized by the process of "absorption-radiation", are significantly affected by the higher-level push, and there is a de facto logical correlation between the three.

Existing studies have provided useful knowledge accumulation for understanding the process mechanism of policy diffusion in China, but there is still theoretical space for further exploration. In terms of research objects, traditional research focuses on the exploration of the progressive diffusion model, relatively neglecting the identification of the non-gradual diffusion model and the comparative interpretation of the two models; in terms of analytical perspectives, most of the existing research is based on the perspective of communication studies, which treats policy diffusion as a process in which policy innovations are disseminated within the system by means of

specific channels, but pays far less attention to organizational decision-making processes in which the diffusion of innovations takes place. However, the focus on the organizational decision-making aspect of innovation diffusion is far from adequate. Meanwhile, research on government attention focuses on the stage-specific characteristics of government attention allocation by sorting out the historical changes of policy issues, and there are few studies on the mechanism of cross-level diffusion of government attention based on the dimension of inter-governmental relations. To summarize, it is the core research goal of this paper to explore the missing links in the logical chain of existing policy diffusion studies based on the core theoretical perspective of attention allocation.

## A Framework for Analyzing China's Policy Proliferation from an Attention Perspective

Policy process research reveals the critical role of attention allocation in agenda setting, and the attention base view clarifies the impact of organizational context and structured allocation of attention on organizational decision-making behavior. In the localized institutional context, policy diffusion as a process of agenda setting and decision making for policy adoption can better connect these two logical chains. The Attention Basis Concept views the organization as an attention allocation system, and following its logical progression of Situation-Process-Outcome, the attention-driven analytical framework of policy diffusion in China includes Following its logical progression of "context-process-result", the attention-driven analytical framework of China's policy diffusion contains the three core logical chains of "high-level promotion - inter-governmental attention allocation - policy diffusion". (Figure 2)

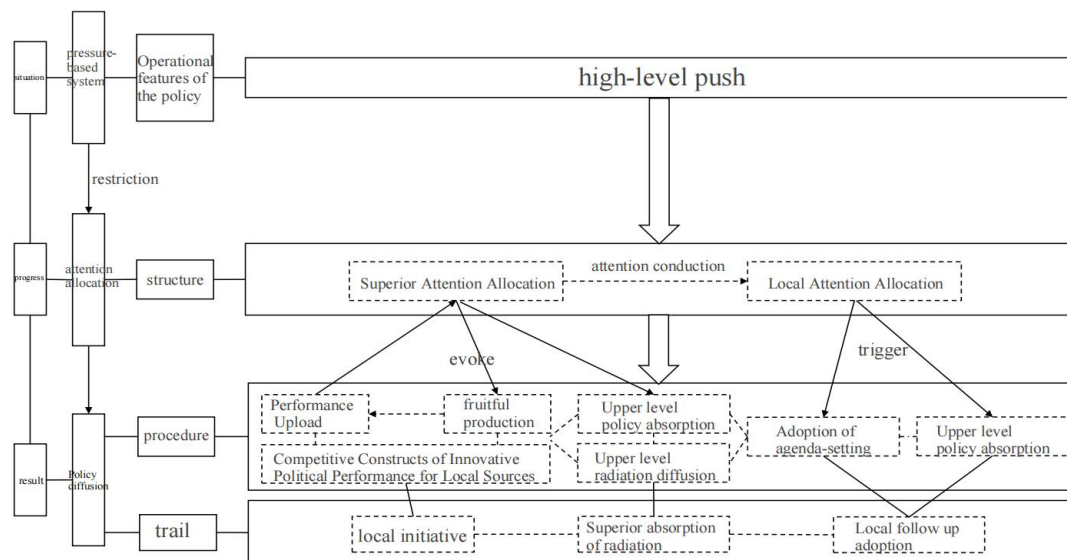


Figure 2 An attention-driven analytical framework for policy diffusion in China

### Micro-process pathways of attention allocation-driven policy diffusion

From a cognitive perspective, Bryan argues that "getting people to pay attention to a stimulus (attentional arousal) and getting them to consistently focus on that stimulus (attentional fixation) can be viewed as separate processes". We can think of the mechanism of attention allocation in

policy diffusion as a continuum of "local attraction production", "superior attention arousal and fixation", and "local attention arousal and fixation". "It is also a continuous process that includes three major links. Superior "absorption - radiation" is not the whole of a complete policy diffusion process, its diffusion chain also includes the front and back of the extension of the chain. Policy absorption reflects the fixed state of superior attention on specific policy issues, and its front link is the attraction generated by local innovative behaviors as a stimulus to the process of arousing superior attention. Radiation extension reflects the process of downward transmission of higher-level attention, followed by the evocation of local attention. The final realization of policy adoption also depends on the subsequent fixation of local attention, which is embodied in the formulation and implementation process of local adoption decisions. (杨志 & 曹现强, 2024)

1. Superior attention attraction and the competitive construction of local innovation performance. "Comparing, learning, and catching up" is a common discourse in China's local governance practices, and "the combination of pressure-based institutions and strong incentive structures directly contributes to the competition among local governments in China" (李妮, 2018). On the one hand, the competition for the scarce attention of superiors induces the competitive production behavior of local attractiveness; on the other hand, local attractiveness produced by the performance of policy innovations becomes an effective stimulus to evoke the attention of superiors.

2. The "absorption-radiation" process of attention transmission and policy diffusion. "Local government policy experimentation is the most important source of alternative options for central policy making" (吕芳, 2019), in order to fully learn from local experience and enhance the spillover effects of source innovation performance, higher level governments will intervene in the diffusion process of specific policy innovations through a series of formal interventions, which also implies that the high level push in the process of local policy diffusion. This also implies a formal "entry" of the high level promotion in the process of local policy diffusion. In essence, behind the higher-level interventions is a top-down attention allocation mechanism based on formal authority, which, through vertical transmission of attention, can "allocate the limited attention of local officials to the areas desired by high-level leaders" (李振, 2018). Continuing the previous stage of local attraction production, the vertical inter-governmental transmission of attention consists of two successive stages: the fixation process after the superior's attention is aroused by local source innovations, and the process of the superior's attention as a stimulus to arouse the attention of local potential adopters. "Absorption-radiation" is the result of the embedding of higher-level promotion in the process of local policy diffusion. Policy absorption reflects the fixation of higher-level attention on specific issue areas and alternatives, which implies a double fit between local source innovations and their superiors in terms of issue areas and choice preferences. The elevation of local source innovations to higher-level policy options gives them political legitimacy and affirms their performance legitimacy.

### **Potential mechanisms of high-level push to shape the diffusion process of local policies**

In this paper, the term "high-level promotion" refers to the strategy of positive intervention by high-level (especially central) actors to promote the diffusion of local innovations, which is a

direct manifestation of the embeddedness of political power in the policy process. The high-level push strategy in China's pressure-based system allows government departments at all levels to maintain a high degree of political mobilization and sustained attention allocation in specific domains (周雪光, 2012) and play a shaping role in the policy operating system.

First, the high level of promotion implies a strengthening of incentives and constraints. On the one hand, China's "bottom-up, broad-to-narrow distribution of institutions and personnel is designed to give rise to a natural ecology of hierarchical competition" (崔慧姝, 周望, 2021), and a hierarchical governance system centered on the allocation of power and resources is able to combine administrative orders with incentives for advancement. High-level promotion signals the "entry" of political authority in the upper echelons of power, and under the institutional arrangement of "the party manages cadres, and the lower echelons manage one level", the superior's choice of preference has an incentive effect on local officials with the impulse to be promoted. On the other hand, by firmly grasping the right to design indicators and directly linking policy promotion to performance evaluation and monitoring mechanisms, superiors have imposed constraints on the logic of action of subordinates, which makes local governments, even if they have a high degree of discretionary power, forced to follow the policy orientation of the central government.

Second, the high level of promotion implies the formation of deliberative and coordinating bodies and resource integration mechanisms. "Chinese public policy is characterized by hierarchy and multi-attributes" (贺东航 & 孔繁斌, 2011). In practice, for some major and complex decisions and deployments, it usually takes the form of "document mobilization" in the form of joint party-government or multi-departmental issuance, and "leading group" or "joint meeting system" and other working methods to promote its efficient and effective implementation. "The work of the leading group" or "joint meeting system" and other ways to promote its efficient implementation. "With the help of a higher level of authority will originally be in a parallel position of the various members of the department bonded closely so as to complete the net work, in fact, is the leadership authority and the member units of the power and responsibility of the process of integrating the utilization of resources." (刘军强 & 谢延会, 2015) In short, high-level promotion can help solve the dilemma of collaborative governance caused by compartmentalization and create synergy for subsequent policy implementation.

### **The embedded analytical framework of the central-local dichotomy of subject governments**

From the point of view of the whole process of policy operation, policy attention will continue throughout, and will be affected by different elements at different stages. The agenda-setting stage focuses on the limited nature of policy attention and the plurality of social problems, i.e., what kind of social problems should be paid attention to. Specifically, within the strategic framework of the central government, the local government designs and explores the feasibility of specific programs, debugs them, summarizes the experience, and then develops a more mature program and spreads it. From pilot experience to policy diffusion can be called the post-practice stage of agenda-setting, in which local institutional innovation plays an important role in the revision and adjustment of top-level policy options, and policy attention needs to face

the problem of the diversity of implementation paths, i.e., why to choose option 1 rather than option 2 as the basic institutional framework for the diffusion of the policy.

Based on the above discussion, this paper constructs the embedded analysis framework of the central and local dual-subject governments (Fig. 3), which is used to explain the impact of the content and characteristics of the policy flow created by the local governments on the central decision-making, from the perspective of the actors' participation, puts the central and local subjects into the stage cycle of the policy, and analyzes the policy behaviors of the local governments in order to further attract the attention of the central decision-making, as well as the structural characteristics they possess. The structural characteristics of local governments are

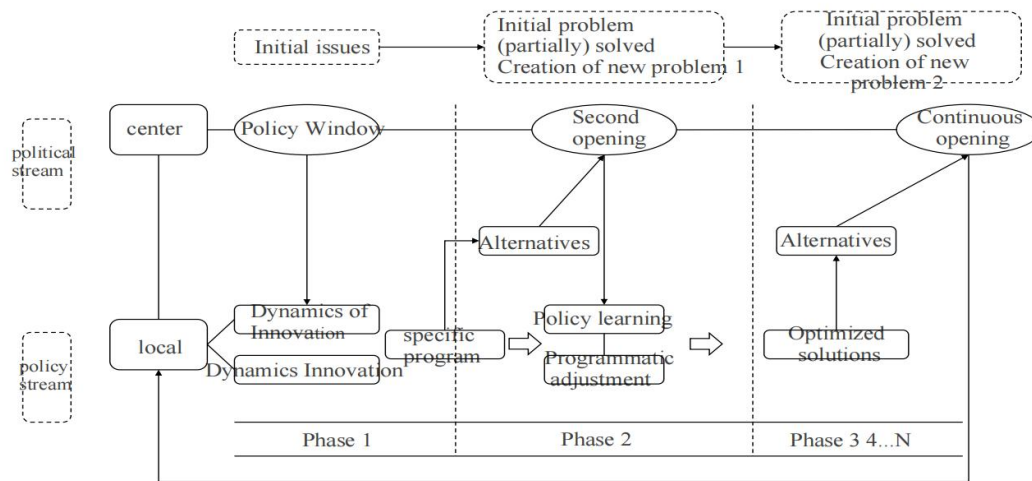


Figure 3 Analytical framework for local institutional innovation and central attention analyzed.

This analytical framework explains how attention allocation drives policy diffusion from the perspective of building a central-local dichotomy, and in the logical progression of "context-process-results", it further explains how high-level promotion and inter-governmental attention allocation form a two-way interactive mechanism. In the logical progression of "situation-process-results", it further explains how high-level promotion and inter-governmental attention allocation form a two-way interaction mechanism.

## Patterns of Fertility Policy Diffusion in China: A Case Interpretation

The government's ability to regulate fertility policy is one of the most important measures of national strength and government governance. The issue of fertility in China is a major policy issue that affects the country's economy and people's livelihood. Its evolution is quite complex and tortuous. Influenced by the cognitive level of policymakers and the differentiated level of attention allocation, China's fertility policy has gone through several large-scale shocks and policy fine-tuning in the course of nearly 70 years, which is very typical in the field of policy process analysis. In this discussion of the diffusion process of China's "three-child" policy, I analyze the diffusion mechanism based on key official policy documents, leaders' speeches, reports of important conferences, and relevant statistical data, in order to present the relationship between the differentiated levels of governmental attention allocation and the diffusion of the policy in the actual policy arena.



The adjustment and diffusion of fertility policies has been characterized by vertical diffusion from the national to the local level, and horizontal diffusion among provinces (autonomous regions and municipalities) at the local level. In terms of vertical diffusion, the diffusion of the "three-child" birth policy is a compulsory mechanism that spreads from the national to the local level, with the central government directly promulgating the policy, releasing national strategic signals, and the local governments actively implementing it and relying on strong government authority to push for its implementation, so the "three-child" birth policy has a typical top-down vertical mechanism. The "three-child" birth policy has a typical top-down vertical generation characteristic. Since the introduction of the "three-child" policy by the central government in 2021, local governments have also actively adjusted their local fertility policies to promote the implementation of the "three-child" policy through the power of the rule of law. After the introduction of the three-child policy at the national level, provinces (autonomous regions and municipalities) have accelerated the pace of formulating the three-child policy in their respective regions. 25 provinces (autonomous regions and municipalities) have centrally introduced the three-child policy within half a year, of which 25 provinces (autonomous regions and municipalities) have introduced the three-child policy, with some of these provinces (autonomous regions and municipalities) having introduced the three-child policy. Twenty-five provinces (autonomous regions and municipalities) focused on introducing the "three-child" birth policy within six months, and six of these provinces (autonomous regions and municipalities) completed revisions to their regional Population and Family Planning Regulations within two months, and introduced the "three-child" policy and related supportive measures, indicating that provinces (autonomous regions and municipalities) have responded quickly to the new birth policy. From the perspective of horizontal diffusion, the diffusion of the "three-child" policy is a learning mechanism in which later governments pay attention to and learn from the policies of earlier governments. Throughout the text of the Regulations on Population and Family Planning of the 30 provinces (autonomous regions and municipalities), the framework is basically the same as that of the National Population and Family Planning Law, with the differences reflected in the addition, deletion, and consolidation of some chapters, as well as the establishment of a "proactive fertility support policy". The establishment of an "active fertility support policy system" is the core value orientation of the text of the Regulations. In addition to the similar framework structure of the provincial (autonomous regions and municipalities) "three-child" maternity policy texts, the content of the texts is expressed in a way that better reflects the learning mechanism of policy diffusion, for example, Hubei explicitly proposes in its local Regulations to "encourage the establishment of a cost-sharing mechanism for the costs of enterprise vacation employment that is shared among the government, enterprises, and individuals. "Subsequently, Guangxi also proposed to "establish and improve the cost-sharing mechanism for vacation employment", and then, Anhui, Liaoning and Hebei have proposed to "strengthen the construction of inclusive kindergartens" in the newly revised Regulations, encouraging kindergartens, in addition, eight provincial-level administrative regions, including Heilongjiang, Ningxia, Guangdong and Hunan, have successively proposed that "when people's governments at or above the county level are allocating public rental housing, appropriate care may be taken in the selection of household types

according to the number of minor children for families with minor children who meet the conditions for local housing security". Other provinces (autonomous regions and municipalities) have not made explicit provisions on this. (张洪玉, 2024) From the two mechanisms of the proliferation of the "three-child" policy, it is clear that the "three-child" policy of local governments reflects compliance with the central government's documents and its will to regulate fertility. A total of 31 population and family planning laws and regulations from the central government to the local governments show that the whole country attaches great importance to the "three-child" policy and that there is coordination between the top and the bottom of the country.

## Summary and discussion

Research on causal mechanism emphasizes the interpretation of the influence of macro-institutional background on micro-behavioral outcomes through the mechanism of meso-processes, and accurately identifies the mediating process between the "high driving characteristics of policy operation" and the "differentiated policy diffusion pattern", which has become the key to explaining the generation mechanism of China's policy diffusion pattern effectively. It becomes the key to effectively explain the generation mechanism of China's policy diffusion pattern. Following the logical progression of "situation-process-result" of the attention-based view, this paper constructs an analytical framework for the attention-driven policy diffusion in China, and realizes the analysis of the high-push situation characteristic of policy operation under the pressure-based system, the attention-driven policy agenda-setting and decision-making process, and the differentiation of policy diffusion patterns. This paper constructs a framework for analyzing policy diffusion in China under an attention-driven approach, and realizes the integration of the three logical links: the high-push context of policy operation under a pressure-based system, the agenda-setting and decision-making process of policy adoption driven by the allocation of attention, and the results of policy diffusion. On this basis, the two-way influence mechanism of attention allocation under the dualistic relationship between the central and local governments is analyzed.

"Policy diffusion has its applicability boundary, not all effective policy innovations are suitable for diffusion"(郁建兴 & 黄飏, 2015), not all local governments have the same policy adoption basis and adoption capacity, in fully recognizing the strong incentive effect of the high level promotion at the same time, but also should be sober to see its potential risks. When the intensity of the high level of promotion is too large, may induce "for the adoption and adoption" of irrational behavior. In the face of the central policy to promote the deployment of time pressure and task indicators, even if there are such as "local conditions", "smooth and orderly" and other guiding words, the local government will still be fast and furious to catch up, in order to avoid falling behind. In addition, the competition for attention among multiple governance tasks has further strained local attention resources, making it difficult to achieve the expected results in the promotion of some policies and their subsequent implementation.

This paper's emphasis on the role of the "high push" has somewhat weakened the exploration of the dynamic role of local governments, while in fact "local governments under the pressure system ..... will be in the 'perfect administration' and 'representatives of local interests' in the

camera correction" ..... . perfect administration' and 'representatives of local interests'" (贺东航 & 孔繁斌, 2011). The fundamental purpose of policy diffusion is to empower adopters through the knowledge spillover of policy source innovation. In the process of promoting the modernization of the national governance system and governance capacity, it is necessary to scientifically grasp the "intensity" of high-level promotion to avoid the "one-size-fits-all" phenomenon of policy diffusion, and also to make efforts to enhance the capacity of the local government to promote the development of the local government. Phenomenon, but also focus on enhancing the local follow-up innovation "effectiveness", to curb the "a rush" type of suspended policy adoption tendency. (杨志 & 曹现强, 2024) Subsequent studies need to further strengthen the focus on the role of local dynamics in the process of policy diffusion in China, and to compare the sustained impact of different modes of policy adoption on the performance of policy implementation.

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