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## **Looking forward in the Chinese real estate market**

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## **Abstract**

The objective of this project is to provide suggestions for whether real estate firms in China should consider exiting the market or decrease the amount of investment and stay in the business. The rationale for this project is to explore how the sudden plummeting of Chinese real estate will do in the upcoming time. The method analyzed different kinds of factors that influence the Chinese real estate market and determined the relationship between the factors and the real estate market. It forecasts four scenarios to simulate the different kinds of possibilities of the trend of the real estate market. The result showed that most government officials and industry experts forecast the decline in the real estate market may continue. Demographic data shows that the real estate market in urban areas is better off compared to rural areas because of the shift in the population. In conclusion, it is recommended that general Chinese real estate firms consider exiting the market due to the projected continuous decline and the fierce competition. Investment in real estate projects in rural areas and the countryside should be reconsidered, while investment in urban areas needs to be carefully analyzed.

## **Introduction**

The Chinese real estate market plays a big role in the Chinese economy. During the past few decades, this industry has seen some major growth. The urban landscape in Chinese cities has been filled with tall skyscrapers, densely packed residential apartments, and fancy shopping centers. The country's stock market and many other markets have been influenced by the real estate market. Just in the year 2013, over 10 million new commodity units of houses were sold (including apartments and various types of housing). This made the Chinese real estate market to be the largest real estate market in the world at the time (Cao, 2015). Even with the downturn in the economy, the global residential real estate market is still projected to be dominated by China in 2024, with a value of 117.40 trillion dollars (Statista, 2024). The impact of this industry not only influences the domestic economy, but it also has some impact on the global real estate market and some other industries (Cao, 2015). To support such a size of operation, there is an enormous demand from the construction side. Other countries can benefit from the Chinese real estate market by supplying raw materials, machinery, and investment (Cao, 2015).

## **Background of the Chinese real estate market**

During the best time of the Chinese real estate market, the contribution of the real estate market can be estimated to be up to 25 to 30 percent of the entire country's GDP (Phillips, 2023). Any changes in the real estate market can easily influence the GDP, even the global economy. There have been numerous cases of foreign investors deciding to withdraw their investment from China during the economic downturn. According to the Financial Times, Foreign investors have withdrawn about \$29 billion out of Chinese stocks this year, which is the equivalent of an 87 percent drop in net foreign investments (Soni, 2023). Any news or updates from the Chinese market or economy will affect the decisions of foreign investors; the real estate market happens to be a major factor influencing the Chinese economy.

The reason for the rapidly increasing demand for urban housing in China is interconnected with the growing economy. As the economy started to grow, more population could afford housing. So, the demand for housing started increasing in urban areas, and so as the prices of the real estate (Statista, 2023). Demands such as education and healthcare facilities have also impacted the prices of real estate. Due to these demands, the prices of housing and the real estate market have been growing steadily for the past few decades.

Another reason for the importance of the real estate market to the Chinese economy is that there has been an increasing amount of people buying real estate property as a means of investment. Many people think it is a safe financial investment that will make them profit in the long run. The reason for such motivation is not clearly defined, but the culture of owning a property as a symbol of wealth and status may be one (Statista, 2023).

Because the Chinese real estate market is so interconnected with the economy, various factors could influence the value of the real estate market. Government intervention, taxes and

other regulatory changes, economic changes, change in market practices, social changes, and government policies changes could all impact the value and the potential of the real estate market (Cao, 2015).

The real estate market in China has taken a massive impact during the past few years. According to the New York Times, China's housing sales have fallen 6.5 percent in 2023. Sales have fallen 17.1 percent from a year earlier prior to December 2023. Investment in new projects are slowed down because of this. There was a 9.6 percent fell in the Real estate development (New York Times, 2024). There are many real estate companies fallen into financial crises due to various reasons. Some of them were not able to complete some ongoing projects meanwhile carrying debt, this also means that some buyers did not receive their houses even though they deposited their money.

This background section will cover some essential knowledge of the Chinese real estate market. It will explore the history of Chinese real estate and how it grew and expanded to its current state. Then it will explain some of the current market dynamics. Finally, it will explain the difference in the situation between private real estate firms and state-owned real estate firms and explore the current challenges and issues in this industry.

## **Historical context of the Chinese real estate market**

The real estate businesses in China did not rise all of a sudden. It is important to know how and why the real estate market got to the point nowadays. At any time, the Chinese real estate market is under the control or influence of the rules and regulations. The Chinese government adjusts the regulations at times depending on what they want to achieve. This is because real estate is not only an important part of the Chinese economy but also an important living standard for people in society; real estate is also an important asset that people could use for other purposes such as borrowing money from the bank and other social benefits (Cao, 2015).

Rules and regulations for the real estate market are set by the Chinese government depending on the real estate provision, which is also impacted by the changing politico-social condition. Regulations can vary vastly because of different political figures or leaders. Every leader has different provisions, hence there may be changes every time a new leader takes over the office. There are three periods of time to be focused on, also known as the three different systems of real estate provision by the Chinese government. These periods have different political, economic, and social conditions (Cao, 2015).

The first period was the feudal and semi-colonial Qing Dynasty until 1911 and the turbulent republic of China from 1911 to 1949 (Cao, 2015). This first period is not a good period for China. There was weak governance, domestic unrest, and constant foreign invasions. This means the real estate was constantly undersupply and there were shortages in the major cities (Cao, 2015). There was also uncontrolled migration, uncoordinated construction, war destruction, and slow rebuilding after the Japanese invasion and the civil war (Cao, 2015). For example, there was a reduction of 10,177 residential buildings in Wuhan city in 1936 and 1952 while the urban population increased from 0.9 to 1.3 million (Cao, 2015). The buildings were in



poor condition by 1950 because of lack of or delayed in maintenance. Permanent housing was built in large numbers to replace many poorly built temporary housing in Shanghai from 1901 to 1931, this redevelopment resulted in riots by those residents in 1925 (Cao, 2015). Because of the riot, the construction of the poorly built houses continued. By 1949, the living space in Shanghai averaged out to 3.9 square meters per person, which is the equivalent of around 42 square feet (Cao, 2015). There were 13.68 percent of the poorly built houses and sheds (Cao, 2015). Figure 1 shows an old housing estate built in 1917.



Figure 1

Source: photo by Albert Cao (2013).

(Cao, 2015)

The second period was the Communist People's Republic of China from 1949 to 1978. In 1949, the People's Republic of China was established (Cao, 2015). This establishment had a big impact on the country itself and the real estate provision. Although there was a change in the political aspect, this period still had major problems in the real estate provision (Cao, 2015). Most of everything in the real estate realm was still controlled by the government. Housing poverty and bad construction were still prevalent (Cao, 2015). There was also an increasing population, limited resources available, and a lack of public provision. China nationalized real estate in urban areas similar to the Soviet-style command economy (Cao, 2015). The real estate industry was gone after 1956 in Shanghai because the government had to focus more on industrial projects. The government was responsible for urban housing accommodation. During this period, there was no market allocation for real estate (Cao, 2015). Market trading was made illegal and only the public sector of administrative could provide real estate. The urban housing providers also could not make any sustainable profit because housings were demanded to be charged at a low rent (Cao, 2015). From 1966 to 1976, a cultural revolution reduced housing construction and affected economic growth. Up until 1978, the urban housing conditions were unpleasant, and the living conditions were poor (Cao, 2015). Resources were drawn to other sectors and the growing population puts a heavy toll on the improvement of urban real estate. Lots of land was allocated to industrial projects, which occupied the central urban area; it was a wasteful use of land for this purpose (Cao, 2015). In 1978, the average space per person for housing averaged out to be 3.6 square meters, which is the equivalent of around 39 square feet. This is even less space than in the first period (Cao, 2015).

The third period was the reformist People's Republic of China from 1979. This is the most recent and most important period because it had a big influence on the Chinese real estate

market. Starting in 1978, reforms were made by the Communist Party to improve China's dissatisfied economy by increasing productivity (Cao, 2015). The reforms were a milestone for China, they opened up a lot more opportunities. In 1972, a few years before the reform, trade blockades were removed by the US so it opened up international trading and other exchanges (Cao, 2015). Soon government realized the benefits and importance of real estate markets. It was deemed a valuable company asset and factor of production. In the early 1980s, real estate was made legal, and transactions were made possible between state-owned firms, foreign firms, and private individuals in Shanghai and a place near Hong Kong (Cao, 2015). In 1987, Shenzhen, a coastline city beside Hong Kong, was set to be a special economic zone by the government to experiment with economic reforms to explore how far they could manipulate rules and regulations to maximize the regional economy (Cao, 2015). Market transactions of state-owned urban land were made legal in 1988 in an amendment to the constitution because of the experiment in Shenzhen (Cao, 2015). The goal of this change in the constitution was to maximize the efficiency of land use while trying to maximize the benefit of companies and citizens. In 1980, private property rights were created, which turned housing from a state of welfare to a commodity (Cao, 2015). It also relieves some stress for the states and the government because the reform has made the real estate business market-driven instead of state-initiated. In 1990, a new system was established and brought in the idea of land use rights, which means the right to use property for up to 70 years (Cao, 2015). From then on, it was a campaign to privatize state-owned real estate. Since the 1990s, the Chinese government has recognized the impact real estate had on the economy. The housing market was successful, and it has bloomed since (Cao, 2015). The government further focused on the real estate industry in 2003 by giving local support and favorable policies for the industry (Cao, 2015). The real estate industry

gradually became a major contributor to China's growing economy in the coming years. In 2013, the investment in Chinese real estate in development was 573.42 times greater than in 1987, and the nominal GDP was 46.17 times greater (Cao, 2015). The real estate industry has turned from a non-existent to a relatively wealthy market.

## **Growth and expansion**

Since 1979, real estate has been a main contributor to the growth of the Chinese economy. The real estate industry not only increased the local tax income but also provided many job opportunities and created markets for different services. The tax income allows the local government to construct public infrastructure such as subways and parks. This may attract more investors to invest in such areas. Real estate also provides many opportunities for industries such as construction companies, sales agencies, appliance companies, furniture companies, and investment companies. As real estate buildings are getting bigger and taller, it rises some Chinese cities to become economic centers (Cao, 2015).

## Current Market dynamics and issues

The Chinese real estate market has had consecutively increasing sales by value in Apartment and commercial properties since 2014. In 2014, China's property sales were 7.6 trillion yuan. In the following years, it was 8.7, 11.8, 13.4, 15.0, 16.0, and 17.4 trillion yuan in 2020. The Chinese real estate sales peaked at 18.2 trillion yuan in 2021 (Bloomberg, 2023).

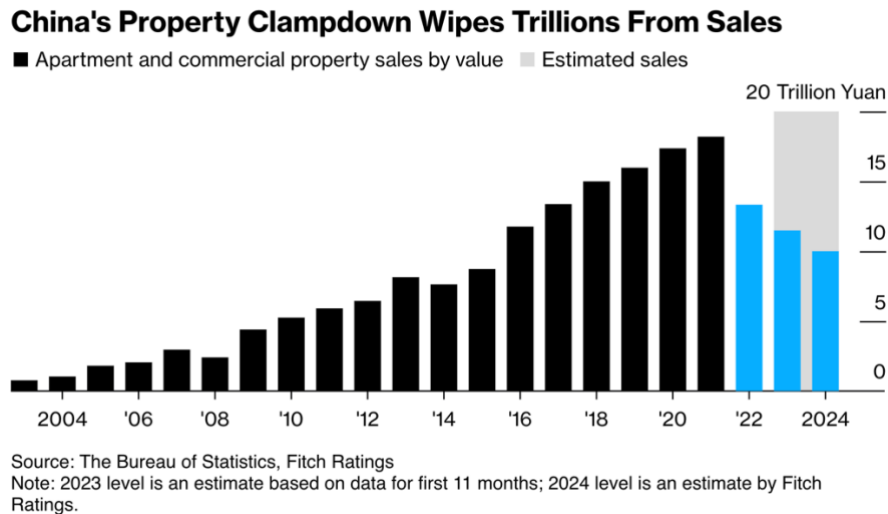


Figure 2

(Bloomberg, 2023)

Everything in the real estate market seems great until the massive drop in sales in 2022. From 2021 to 2022, sales in real estate declined 27 percent or 4.9 trillion yuan (Bloomberg, 2023). In 2023, sales continued to plummet and dropped another 6.5 percent (New York Times, 2024). Expert predicts that the market will further decrease due to several reasons.

The sudden clasp in the Chinese real estate market was caused by several interconnected issues. First, for a long time, Chinese real estate customers and investors have had a strong belief that real estate property is an investment you can never lose money on (New York Times, 2024). Because of this belief, people were willing to spend a high percentage of their

savings or income on buying real estate property. According to Fortune, China stores 70 percent of its wealth in real estate (Fortune, 2021). This belief drives people's willingness to buy real estate properties as soon as they are economically available (New York Times, 2024). Some even purchase multiple properties and re-sell them to earn profit, the government had to counteract this move by posting restrictions on the number of real estate properties people can purchase depending on the location. Nonetheless, this belief drove the prices of housing up quickly, which caused real estate to be harder to afford (Cao, 2015). The inflation in the prices of housing has surpassed the ability of an average person to save up for a property. Second, inflation drove up the prices of the land which is paid by the developers (Cao, 2015). The big developers were carrying a heavy burden because they were using bank loans to work on these real estate projects, they were allowed to pre-sell the properties before the constructions were done (New York Times, 2024). The problem was that companies were allowed to get more loans from the bank by using their existing project as leverage, even if the project was not done (New York Times, 2024). Many companies laid leverage over another leverage and constructed as many projects as they could. They were doomed to collapse when one of the projects do not make a profit. Third, there were many cases of loans for bad choices of projects, for instance, building luxury houses in rural areas where there was no demand. The money could not be recovered after these projects were constructed. The combination of inflation in the pricing and the fear of losing money on investing in real estate and various factors finally caused a decrease in sales of real estate properties (New York Times, 2024).

Although the sudden drop in sales of the real estate market was caused by various interconnected problems, the declining population plays a big role. The layout and movement of the population also have a big impact on the real estate markets. According to Wind EDB, China's population has been growing since 2000 but gradually came to a stop and a slow decrease starting in 2019, which is close to the time when the real estate market started falling apart (Wind EDB, 2024). During this period, the coronavirus also has a small degree of impact on both the population and the real estate market because of strict regulations and rules regarding isolation (National Library of Medicine, 2022). Apart from this, the increase in population also started declining since 2015, the birth rate has decreased consecutively. From 2021 to 2022, the birth rate has decreased so much that it became lower than the death rate (Wind EDB, 2024). It continues to worsen as the birth rate decreases even more and the death rate increases in 2023. This generation of parents is showing a decreasing willingness to have children and even get married. A report from the CCP development research center showed that the decline in the birth rate was due to 'delayed marriage age, decreased willingness among young people to have children, reduction in the number of women of childbearing age, and higher prevalence of infertility and subfertility' (The heritage foundation, 2024). The decrease in the population may be one of the causes that lead to the decrease in real estate market sales. Fewer people lead to less need for housing; hence demand is starting to decrease. The problem is that the real estate property was built already, and nothing can be done to reverse the action. The decline in the population was not the only factor impacting the sales of the real estate market. As mentioned earlier, the inflation and increase in the prices of real estate property have surpassed the rate at which people could afford them. Moreover, there will be less incentive for the younger generation to purchase housing when they can inherit it from their parents. The population of 65



years old and older has been increasing gradually since 2000 and is still seeing an increase in 2023 (Wind EDB, 2024). With a combination of decreasing birth rates, a drop in the real estate market sales can be anticipated in the future.

The layout of the population also impacts the real estate market. According to Wind, data clearly shows a shift in population from villages to urban areas (Wind EDB, 2024). This increases the prices of real estate in the urban area because there is a limited supply, but the demand is gradually increasing. The government has stepped in and put a price ceiling on some areas to combat the excessive increase in price and inflation (Wall Street Journal, 2023). On the other side, real estate businesses outside of those urban areas are having a harder time selling their products because demand is decreasing. Some of the projects ended up never selling and the companies had to file bankruptcy. Some of the largest private real estate developers such as Evergrande, Country Garden, and Greenland are facing severe debt issues because they could not earn the money back (Wall Street Journal, 2023).

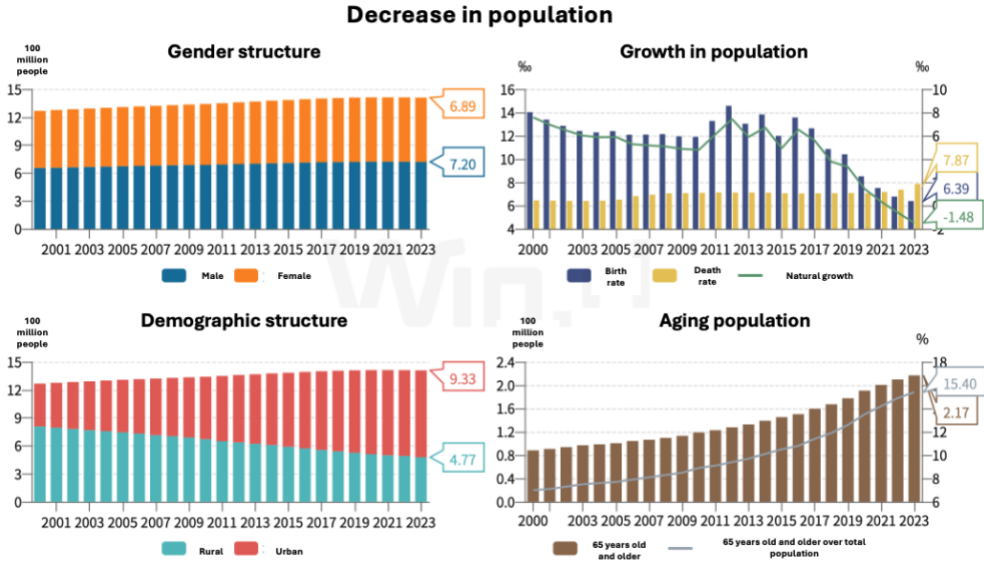


Figure 3  
(Wind EBD, 2024)

## **Financing and government incentives**

To combat the collapse in the real estate market, the Chinese government and China's central bank have lowered the interest rate to a historically low value in recent years. Although the government has no intention of further expanding the real estate market as a means to propel the economy, they want to prevent a complete meltdown since real estate contains so much of people's assets. According to CNN, 'The People's Bank of China (PBOC) announced Tuesday that it would cut its five-year loan prime rate (LPR) from 4.2% to 3.95%, while keeping the one-year LPR unchanged at 3.45% (CNN, 2024).' This change is intended to stimulate and stabilize the real estate market. However, the change did not seem effective as previous attempts also failed. The government and China's central bank have started decreasing the loan prime rate since 2020. The loan prime rate was 4.15 percent in 2020, and sales of real estate were 16.9 trillion yuan (Statista, 2024). The loan prime rate in 2021 was lowered to 3.85 percent, the sales revenue did improve by a little, at 17.69 trillion yuan (Statista, 2024). However, in 2022 and 2023, the loan prime rate was lowered to 3.7 percent and 3.65 percent, but the sales revenue took a massive drop to 12.96 trillion yuan in 2022 and 11.66 trillion in 2023. The continued decrease in the loan prime rate did not stop the real estate market sales from plummeting.

Because of the magnitude of the impact of the real estate market collapse, the government has also stepped in by changing laws and regulations regarding real estate markets. The real estate crisis impacted construction companies, workers, and home buyers (Fortune, 2024). Because some of the real estate firms were not able to sell their property and make enough profit to cover the cost, they had to file for bankruptcy. This means that construction companies may not get paid, and projects may be left unfinished (Fortune, 2024). A lot of home buyers who prepaid for these houses are not able to get their money back, nor do they receive a

finished home. These bankrupt projects and companies also left the banking system financial crisis because the loans were not getting paid. For many smaller companies and firms, there is no method of recovery at all. For larger firms such as Evergrande, Country Garden, and Greenland, the government had to provide a safety net for them to keep them operating because they have a massive impact on society (Fortune, 2024). The government also lifted restrictions on the number of properties each person can purchase in multiple areas. Under the current situation, private real estate firms are facing a harder time getting loans from the banks because of the downturn in the market. States own firms and are better off since they are backed by the government directly therefore having easier access to financial support.

## **Methods**

This research aims to identify the factors that impact the Chinese real estate market and determine the relationship between them. The method provides an analysis of historical and future trends and offers recommendations on Chinese private real estate firms' upcoming marketing strategies (whether they should consider exiting the market, staying in the market, or decreasing investment and staying in the market).

Various factors influence the real estate market. Therefore, predicting the future of the real estate market can be difficult and inaccurate. However, some key indicators can be used to help assist decision-making in marketing strategies for private real estate firms in China. A few scenarios will be hypothesized to provide recommendations for Chinese private real estate firms' marketing strategies.

## **Scenario 1: The variation in the population**

As mentioned in the background study. The population in China has started growing negatively for a few consecutive years and the trend is continuing. This means that the number of births every year will be less than the number of deaths every year. For the real estate market in China, even a small variation in population can have a great impact on the industries.

For the majority of the population, real estate property is an inelastic good. This means that the demand will not fluctuate a lot even if the price changes. However, because there is a decreasing population, the demand will decrease accordingly. Hence there will be less demand in the overall market. For example, 100 families in 2000 needed houses, so there will be an approximate maximum of 100 houses sold; but in 2001, there were only 80 families who needed houses, so the approximate maximum number of houses sold will hardly reach 100 again.

From 2016 to 2023, the birth rate has continued decreasing at a relatively fast pace (Wind EDB, 2024). This may be one of the leading causes of the decreasing sales of real estate property. A lower birth rate can also mean that customers may shift to smaller properties. For example, a couple who does not plan to have children may look for a one-bedroom and one-bathroom plan apartment instead of a two-bedroom and two-bathroom plan apartment. The aging population has also slowly increased starting from 2000 (Wind EDB, 2024). This may indicate that the population who needed the housing already purchased it and are no longer in the market looking for more.

The shift in population also has an impact on the real estate businesses in places other than urban areas. The population has gradually shifted from countryside and rural areas to urban areas since 2001. In 2001, there were about 800 million people located in the countryside and rural areas, and there were about 500 million people located in the urban areas (Wind EDB,

2024). In 2023, there were 477 million people located in the countryside and rural areas, and there were about 933 million people located in the urban areas (Wind EDB, 2024). The shift in the population to the urban areas may lead to less intention to buy real estate property in the countryside and rural areas. In addition, the real estate firms will face a more competitive environment in the urban areas because the land is a limited resource that only bidders with the highest price could obtain.

## **Scenario 2: The economy**

The Chinese economy and the Chinese real estate industry have been interconnected, in recent times. The real estate property sales were impacted by the dent in the economy caused by the coronavirus starting in 2019. There is a delay in the impact of the economy which showed up in the real estate market that started collapsing in 2022.

Although there was a downturn in the economy because of the coronavirus, the Chinese residents' average yearly disposable income has surprisingly increased gradually from 2019 to 2023. The average yearly disposable income per person in the fourth quarter of 2019 was 30,000 yuan, whereas in 2023 it was 39,200 yuan (Wind EDB, 2024). This increase should have suggested an increase in real estate property sales, but the rate of increase in the prices of the properties has surpassed that of the disposable income and savings. So real estate became less affordable though the average income has increased. Moreover, the unemployment rate during 2022 increased by a little and soon fell again, this may have some impact on the real estate sales (Wind EDB, 2024). These indicators should not be used to help formulate real estate firms' future marketing strategies because other factors have more influence.

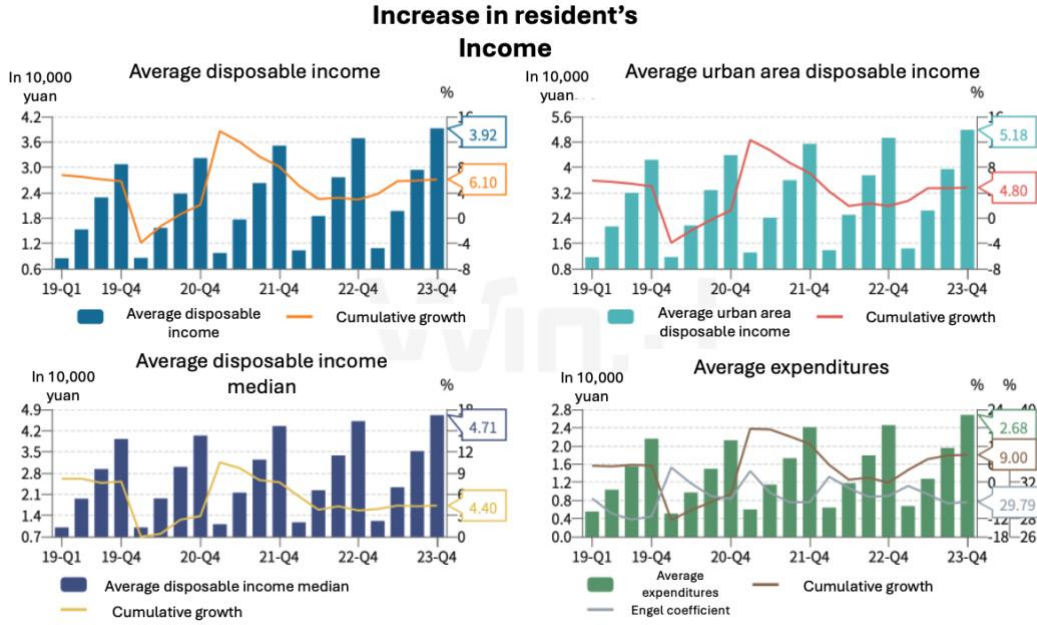


Figure 4

(Wind EBD, 2024)

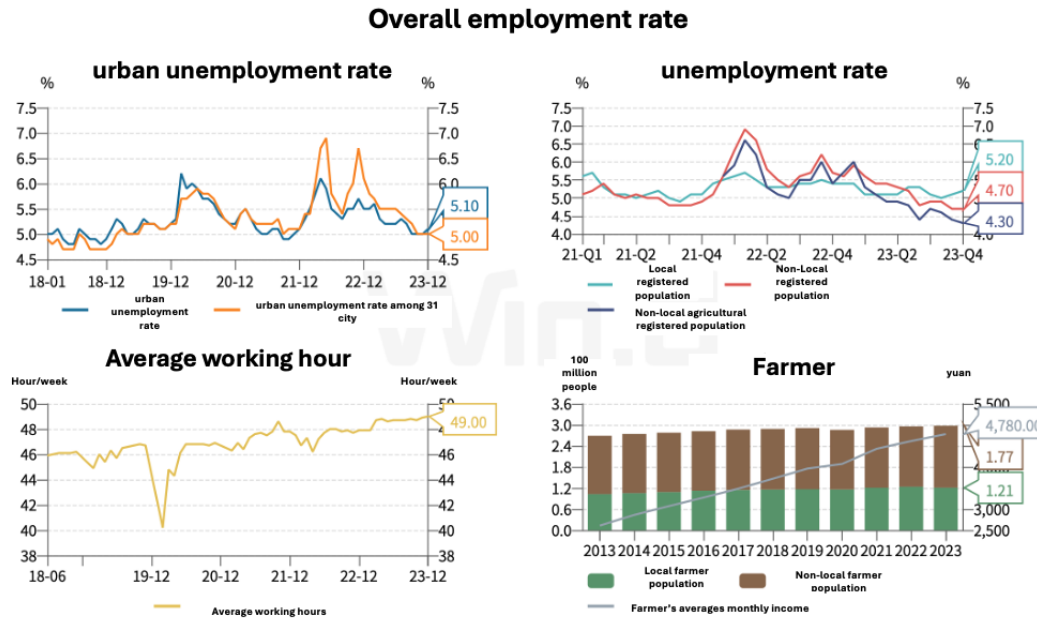


Figure 5

(Wind EBD, 2024)



### **Scenario 3: The variation in monetary policy and financial policy: mortgage interest rate and loan prime rate**

The variation in the monetary policies has some impact on the economy as well as the real estate industries which are interconnected. They are not always effective though or may take longer than expected to be effective because the economy is a massive entity that has its own momentum sometimes. Just changing one of the factors in the system does not always ensure a change to the system. For example, if a new species is introduced into an ecosystem to control the pest population, the new species may interact with other species and create other issues. Therefore, the strategy of only introducing the new species does not guarantee fixing the system.

Similarly, to combat the real estate crisis, the Chinese government and the central bank have lowered the loan prime rate to try to stimulate the economy by urging people to buy real estate properties since the monthly payment will be more affordable. However, because the prices of real estate property have increased at a rate faster than people could afford them, the change in the loan prime rate made no sense for people since they could not afford the monthly payment no matter how much the loan prime rate is. Although the monetary policy cannot be relied on fully to make decisions in future real estate marketing strategies, it is an important factor to pay attention to as its effect may come with a delay.

#### **Scenario 4: Variation in government policy**

Some government policy impacts the real estate market as well. This can be harder to predict compared to some of the other factors. Some government leaders may change policies without any reason or incentive at times. Originally, to prevent real estate companies from pushing the prices too high, the Chinese government set a price ceiling by requiring the developers to complete approval on selling prices before they list the properties (Wall Street Journal, 2023). This policy was good for the market since the price was increasing at a rate that people were starting to not be able to afford. However, when the real estate bubble burst, the government tried to set a price floor that limited the developers from decreasing the price too much. The Chinese government intended to stabilize the market and keep it at a healthy pace (Wall Street Journal, 2023). However, this policy is worsening the real estate crisis by further harming the decreasing demand. The Chinese government has also started limiting bank loans on real estate projects, it is a good policy in the long run because the real estate companies are already overbuilding, and the market does not need such an amount of supply. So, there is a higher point of entry for new real estate companies. It is worth considering moving to another industry.

**Conclusion:**

This research identified four scenarios within the Chinese real estate industry: the variation in the population and the market, the trend of the economy, the variation in the monetary and financial policy, and the impact of the government policy. The four scenarios identified some key issues in the Chinese real estate market that Chinese real estate firms should consider in their future investment or business plan.

The decrease in the population has a significant impact on the future of the real estate industry. It represents a large amount of demand in the market. The fluctuation in the economy also adds a lot of uncertainty to the future market. Government support, government policy, and financial policy are also seeing a downturn; bank loans are becoming harder to secure for new real estate projects.

**Recommendation:**

Based on the findings from this research, it is recommended that general Chinese real estate firms consider exiting the market. Further investment in real estate projects in rural areas and the countryside should be reconsidered. Investments in urban areas also need careful analysis because demand will gradually decrease so will the price.

The Chinese real estate market has started to reach market saturation. The already competitive red ocean will become worse as the demand starts to decrease. It is a good time for real estate firms to finish their existing project. Another consideration is to transform it into another kind of business if the construction has not started. If the construction has not begun, it is worth considering selling the land unless there are other plans for it.

**Limitation:**

There are many limitations when studying this topic. Most limitations are common issues such as time and access to data. There is a lot of data to be processed in this short amount of time, which could introduce chances of error or misinterpretation. Also, many unpredictable factors could impact the result of the study, such as sudden changes in government structure. Second, there are a lot of unpredictable factors in the future that could impact the result of the study. The changes in economy, population, government policy, and culture can all impact the result. The coronavirus was a great example of an unpredictable natural hazard.

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