

Unveil Half the Sky: Paradox of Women's Role in the 4 Decades of China's Family Planning
Policy

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Abstract

The famous one-child family planning policy, had been implemented for over four decades; this “tradition”, however, was put to an end by the announcement of selective two-child policy in 2013 and then universal two-child policy in 2015. Adopting a gender perspective, this review integrates both empirical and conceptual research on changes of China’s family planning policies from the 1970s up to now. Contrary to most previous studies that depict Chinese women as powerless and fragile receivers of family planning policies, this research presents the duality and paradox of roles of women during the enforcement of policy. After a thorough review, we have identified changing gender ideology during different periods and dynamics of women’s labor force participation as key mechanisms to understand women’s reactions to the one-child policy, which shapes the enforcement, modifications, effects and the end of the policy. We further discuss new gender and family dynamics under universal two-child policy. This study is the first review to comprehensively discuss China’s family planning policy in a gender perspective. It has significant implications to understand and evaluate the current universal two-child policy.

Keywords: family planning policy; China; gender

Introduction

Two years after the official initiation of China's comprehensive two-child family policy, the lukewarm reactions among ordinary Chinese couples contradict the blowout fertility growth worries regarding the consequence of the relaxation of the strict one-child family policy for about 40 years. In both years of 2016 and 2017, there are more babies born than the average births of previous 5 years. While there are 1.62 million more babies in 2017 than in 2016, and for second births, 2017 has about 4 million more than 2016; but for first births, the year of 2017 has 2.49 million fewer babies than 2016. This implies a relative gloom picture of future fertility trajectory. Some demographers begin to concern that this may be the sign of tenacity and the possibility of further drop of the below-replacement fertility lasting for three decades in China. The urgent questions are, why the relaxation of the strict family planning policy did not result in a surge of fertility as some demographers and policy makers predicted? How should we appropriately assess the role the one-child family planning policy had played in fertility decline in the past decades? What key parameters do we miss when assessing the family planning policy? What important factors did we miss in the long debate of policy vs. economic development drive underlying fertility decline in China?

During the long course of the birth and modification of China's strict family planning policy, demographers as well as policy makers are engaged in the debate of the birth control effect of the family planning policy and the driving forces underlying the policy vs. economic development debate. The increasing consensus is that, China's rapid fertility decline began in early 1970s before the initiation of the strict one-child family policy in late 1970s and early 1980s; and the policy may have effects in the early reform period of China, but it is exaggerated to a degree, and economic development is the primary forces driving fertility decline in recent years. Tracing the logics of the above mainstream debates, unfortunately, the

role of Chinese women who are the agents of both contraceptive and fertility decision-making and behavior is largely vanishing, if not totally disappearing.

We contribute to the above debate by systematically sorting out Chinese women's role in fertility decline and the effective implementation of the one-child family policy in limited, sporadic literature. Further, we demonstrate why women's role are missing in the mainstream literature. We also lay out theoretical analyses regarding women's role in fertility decline and economic development to open new discussions rather closing the debate regarding family planning policy and fertility decline in China. We deem that if Chinese' women's roles are not appropriately recognized, this likely leads to the misunderstanding and incorrect assessment of the policy change, which may further affect our prediction and corresponding policy measures for the further fertility trend in China.

This paper is thus organized into four parts. 1) We introduce the changing gender dynamics in China in relation to family planning policy and fertility decline. 2) We describe the birth and development of family planning policies in China, and introduce the debates regarding policy vs. economic development as the forces driving fertility drop. 3) We describe how Chinese working women embrace fertility control measures and policies for decades, and how state's support for women's reproductive responsibilities has changed. 4) In discussion and conclusion, we discuss how to applying a gender and development approach to understand Chinese women's role in the state's family planning policy and in fertility decline.

Changing Gender Dynamics before and after the Implementation of the Strict One-Child

Family Planning Policy

The initiation of the one-child family policy concurred with China's grant opening and reformation the end of 1970s and the beginning of 1980s, after which the public and private spheres are increasingly separating. This historical synchronization greatly enriches our

imagination, understanding and evaluation concerning the one-child family policy. In the pre-reform socialist era, the Chinese government effectively promoted women's labor force participation as the means for women's liberation and gender equality. Under the policy of "equal work, equal pay", China bragged one of the highest women's employment rates and gender earnings ratios, above 80% respectively during the socialist time. Women's participation in the labor market has reduced their child bearing time and women's economic independence enhance their autonomy on contraception and fertility decision. This result in the trade of children's quantity for quality. Research also shows that in high fertility, women's education, labor force participation and income are associated with fertility drop. Therefore, Chinese women, particularly urban women's labor force participation and economic status in the socialist era had already laid out the pre-family-planning-policy context.

The late 1970s and early 1980s become the critical trinity time node of the historical link—the transition from socialist-planning economy to marketization, from the relatively integrated public and private spheres to separated two spheres, from the pre-family-planning-policy era to post-policy period. During this transition, the danwei system which provided comprehensive reproductive and health care services, such as dining hall, nursery center, kindergarten, health clinics, etc., collapsed. Yet, the welfare system is rather weak. Reproductive responsibilities shifted back individual family and women shouldered the bulk of work. At the same time, Chinese women have overpassed men's achievements in higher education. Yet, overt gender discrimination are no isolated episodes in social life. Proposals of "women returning home" are heard from time to time. Women's employment rates have steadily declined in post-reform China and gender earnings disparity is increasing at the same time. The separation of the two spheres has shaped women's escalated work-family conflict and their dual disadvantages in both labor market and private family. This might also affect women's fertility decisions, particularly in the era of the family planning policy relaxation.

A related issue is whether women's returning home or women's declined employment would facilitate a boost of China's long term below-replacement fertility. The answer is a no, both empirically and theoretically. China seems to have experienced a dual normality of economy and fertility: women's steady declining employment rate did not result in a significant fertility increase, but contributed to the slow down of economic growth at least in recent years.

In the low-fertility-and-rapid-aging era of China when the public and private spheres are increasingly separated and women's work-family conflicts are escalating, we have to understand women's dual role in social reproduction and economic production. Because women have to carry the bulk of unpaid labor of child rearing and housework in the private family in the current gender context, their participation and treatment in the labor market are negatively influenced, which in turn shapes their disadvantaged status in the family. Facing the declining demographic dividend and rapid aging, the implementation of the comprehensive two-child family policy thus has imposed great pressure on many Chinese women to have a second child, with some having to withdraw from the labor market. This can further add to women's burden in the private family. On the one hand, mature women as active, skilled workers have to leave labor market, and on the other hand, to-be-born babies would take close to 20 some years to become skilled workers, which does not seem to be an efficient way to manage the demographic crisis. Yet, protecting women's rights in the labor market and promoting gender equality would both benefit women's autonomy in the private family and help women to make informed decision concerning having a second child. Further, providing more affordable and quality child care and encourage men's engagement in unpaid labor of social reproduction can help to penetrate the barriers between the public and private spheres, likely resulting in rising fertility in the long term.

China's family planning policy have persisted for more than 4 decades and hence fundamentally shaped people's imaginations and ideas about family size and forms in contemporary China, nonetheless, studies which elucidated the changing contents of policy during different historical periods remain sparse. Moreover, its impact on curbing fertility, which was boasted of by some officials as "averting at least 400 million births", seems dubious as the plummeting fertility also paralleled with the economic booming of China. To better understand the dynamics and tenet of family planning policy, we discuss the birth and development of the policy in this section. And we believe some debates on relation between policy and drastic fertility decline are also worthy of exploring as to fathom the policy.

Encouraged by Mao's saying "the more people, the stronger we are" (*renduo liliang da*), China experienced a rapid population growth during the 1950s and 1960s (except the period of Great Leap Forward Famine). However, long before the official birth of family planning policy in 1979, the central leadership of CPC and government had conspired to control fertility, for a strong belief that birth control was crucial to China's economic development and modernization (Wong, 1997). Hence, three family planning campaigns unfolded before the enforcement of family planning policy during the period of 1956-1958, 1962-1966 and 1971-1978 respectively (Chen, 1982; Greenhalgh, 1994). Influenced by natalism in the early 1950s, the first and second family planning campaign failed to achieve the goals of curbing fertility (Chen, 1982). Then a much stricter family planning campaign was launched nationwide in 1971. The kernel of the third campaign was "later, longer, fewer" (*wan, xi, shao*) policy (the name suggested the advocacy of later marriage, longer birth spacing, and fewer children), and quite shockingly, fertility dropped from six to just under three in the late 1970s (Coale, 1984).

Though fertility had already declined sharply during the 1970s, it could not alleviate the government and party's concerns about severe social and economical problems due to large

population, and it seemed still inadequate to meet its long-term goal of reducing the population growth rate to 1 percent by 2000 (Yang, Liang & Zhang, 2001). Moreover, after cultural revolution and Mao's death, new central leadership with Deng Xiaoping at the core needed to establish legitimacy urgently, which was believed to be based on rapid economic growth. In the meantime, Song Jian, an elite scientist in missile design, saw the political opportunity behind birth control and boldly entered the field of population projection, which was a brand new arena for him. Though the idea of family planning policy or one-child policy was initially conceived by party leaders rather than Song Jian, his problematic and pseudo-scientific projection model did serve as a justification for the birth of family planning policy. Hence, the enforcement of family planning policy nationwide in 1979 was beyond doubt.

Family planning policy was sometimes referred to as "one-child policy", but it was quite inaccurate for no legislation could be traced in national government during the 1980s which stipulated clearly that "every couple are only allowed to have one child" (Attane, 2002; Bongaarts & Greenhalgh, 2014). In fact, regulations and implementations to a large extent became responsibilities of local governments, hence the specific content and enforcement strength of policy varied a lot among different regions and ethnic groups. Basically, more permissive policy versions were adopted in rural and underdeveloped areas whereas the implementation was much stricter in urban and developed regions. For instance, Attane (2002) suggested that in the 1980s provinces could fall into three categories according to the enforcement force of policy, ranging from only 20 percent of women were authorized to have a second child to at least 70 percent. The distinction of policy implementations between urban and rural China were even recognized by national government since 1984, and couples in rural areas who had a only daughter were allowed to conceive another baby thereafter. Besides, birth control was looser among ethnic minority groups than Han Chinese (Bongaarts & Greenhalgh,

2014), and two or sometimes three children were permitted for couples of certain ethnic minorities.

Moreover, the enforcement force of family planning policy also differed during various periods. Some research suggested that the implementation was strictest in the early 1980s, and birth control operations reached peak in 1983 when more than 21 million sterilizations and 14 million abortions were recorded in the single year (Greenhalgh, 2005; Whyte et al., 2015). Nevertheless, resistance to birth control burst out nationwide and the government had to back away to some extent in the late 1980s (Attane, 2002; Greenhalgh, 2005). Consequently, fertility rate even bounced back a little in the late 1980s before it soon dropped below replacement level in the early 1990s.

After 40 years of enforcement of family planning policy, China's fertility maintained very low, around 1.5 in general today. In the meantime, debates around whether policy or economic development resulted in China's fertility decline never reached a consensus. Some demographers and officials believed low fertility acted as an accelerator of rapid economic growth and it should be credited to family planning policy (or so called one-child policy), and some even claimed that family planning policy averted at least 400 million births (Zhou & Wang, 2015). Nonetheless, since the enforcement of family planning policy and drastic fertility decline after the 1990s also paralleled with reform and opening up policy and its consequent economic booming, the role of family planning policy on curbing fertility was doubted in various research (Potts, 2002; Wang, 2011; Whyte et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2016). For instance, Wang et al. argued that China's fertility transition was achieved before the official enforcement of family planning policy for fertility had already dropped from 5.8 in 1970 to 2.8 in 1979. Furthermore, they applied Bayesian models to examine China's fertility trend without family planning policy, and it turned out that fertility would have fallen to its observed level of around 1.5 in 2010 with or without the policy.

While scholars who believed the fertility decrease were mainly ascribed to socio-economic transformations in China tried to prove the insignificant role of policy after the 1970s, nevertheless, the socio-economic view was not impeccable as well (Zhao, 1997). Researchers found that people of Chinese origin in some Asian countries such as Malaysia and Indonesia which did not experience a rapid socio-economic transformation also had the lowest fertility in those societies (Noor Laily et al., 1985; Tan and Soeradji, 1986). Moreover, the fertility decline in rural China was not corroborated by economic booming for that people in rural areas were barely affected by China's huge socio-economic developments and their economic status and education levels remained very low (Zhao, 1997). Since neither policy nor socio-economic transformations seems adequate to explain the dramatic fertility decline in China, it is necessary to reflect on what might be missing in the perpetual debate on what actually resulted in the decline.

In Coale (1979)'s research about fertility transformations, he emphasized human's calculus and consciousness when making fertility decisions. This view may still be illuminating today when we seek to reappraise and elucidate China's family planning policy and steer a path to placate the tricky policy-driven vs. socio-economic driven debate. As both the vital fertility decision-makers and center of family planning policy, women's willingness and agency, however, have been neglected or underestimated for long. Chinese women were deemed as silent and compliant receivers of family planning policy as few research took their role into consideration when assessing the policy, or they were simply depicted as victims. Hence, women should be brought back to the center as to understand China's family planning policy.

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