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The Dual Demands: Gender Equity and Fertility Intentions After the One-Child Policy

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Abstract

This article investigates fertility intentions and obstacles among young Chinese men and women after the lift of the one-child policy. Over a hundred in-depth interviews reveal that while having one child is viewed as the normative step following marriage, various obstacles remain for second-birth transition. Time and financial concerns are salient among both men and women, whereas labor market disadvantage and the perceived incompatibility between work and motherhood create additional hindrances for women. The gendered childcare leave policy, coupled with discriminatory hiring practice, leads women to view multiple childbirths and successful career as fundamentally incompatible. A universal ‘two-child policy’ without additional institutional measures that address work-life incompatibility for women may not successfully boost fertility level, but would rather exacerbate the existing gender inequity in China’s labor market.

Introduction

Starting with the ‘later, longer, fewer’ campaign in the 1970s, China began its unprecedented population control program that would last into the next several decades. Despite a sharp decline in the total fertility rate (TFR) in the 1970s from almost six births per woman to around 2.7, the draconian one-child policy, possibly the most extreme and controversial population control policy ever enacted, was launched in 1980 in the hope that it would reverse population growth and eventually produce what the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) had believed to be an optimal population size for China’s economic development.¹ By the late 1990s, the Chinese government estimated that the one-child policy had prevented 400 million births—a claim that has been widely disputed by Western scholars.² China now

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

¹Susan Greenhalgh, *Just One Child: Science and Policy in Deng’s China* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2008); Martin King Whyte, ‘Modifying China’s one-child policy’, *E-International Relations*, 2 February, 2014, accessed 17 December, 2017, <http://www.e-ir.info/2014/02/02/modifying-chinas-one-child-policy/>; Martin King Whyte, Feng Wang and Yong Cai, ‘Challenging myths about China’s one-child policy’, *The China Journal* 74, (2015), pp. 144–159.

²For representative studies, see Yong Cai, ‘China’s below-replacement fertility: Government policy or socioeconomic development?’ *Population and Development Review* 36(3), (2010), pp. 419–440; Feng Wang, Yong Cai and Baochang Gu, ‘Population, policy, and politics: How will history judge China’s one-child policy?’ *Population and Development Review* 38(s1), (2013), pp.115–129; Whyte et al., ‘Challenging myths’, p. 158.

finds itself in the company of the rest of the low-fertility societies with a total fertility rate far below the replacement level (2.1 children per woman). Demographers have largely reached the consensus that China's fertility has dropped below replacement since 1991–1992.³ Scholars have estimated China's TFR to be approximately 1.5 births per woman as of 2005, with possible lower rates in more developed regions.⁴ The 2015 World Bank estimate puts fertility rate in China at around 1.6 births per women.⁵ In other words, China's fertility has stayed below replacement for nearly three decades.

Scholars critical of the one-child policy have long advocated for lifting the restriction.⁶ Iterations of relaxations have been made since the policy's inception. A '1.5-child policy' was carried out on trial basis in rural areas in 1984 and was later formalized in 1988. Under the '1.5-child policy' regime, rural families with only one daughter are allowed to progress to a second child without incurring penalties.⁷ Between 1984 and 2011, couples of whom both spouses are only children were permitted a second child. This relaxation was carried out at different paces across provinces, and was further relaxed in 2013 to include couples of whom either spouse is an only child. In October 2015, after a four-day strategy meeting of senior CCP officials, the one-child policy came to a full stop.⁸ Starting January 1st 2016, all married couples in mainland China are permitted to have two children. The most recent shift to a universal 'two-child policy' across the country is aimed by the state to alleviate the growing concerns around China's declining fertility, shrinking labor pool, and rapid population aging.

Will this profound shift in China's population control program achieve its intended goal in boosting population growth? Various surveys conducted not long before the 2016 nationwide lift of the one-child policy decree have consistently shown low fertility aspirations.⁹ According to a survey conducted by the National Health and Family Planning Commission, the average ideal number of children was 1.93.¹⁰ Regional survey in the western province of Shaanxi reported the average ideal number of children to be 1.8 in the early 2010s,¹¹ whereas the figure was 1.44 in the much more developed eastern province of Jiangsu.¹²

³Yong Cai, 'Assessing fertility levels in China using variable-r method', *Demography* 45(2), (2008), pp. 371–381.

⁴Zheng Zhenzhen, Yong Cai, Feng Wang and Baochang Gu, 'Below-replacement fertility and childbearing intention in Jiangsu Province, China', *Asian Population Studies* 5(3), (2009), pp. 329–347.

⁵'Fertility rate, total (births per women)', *The World Bank*, accessed 17 December, 2017, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.TFRT.IN?locations=CN>.

⁶Mara Hvistendahl, 'Has China outgrown the one-child policy?' *Science* 329(5998), (2010), pp. 1458–1461.

⁷Greenhalgh, *Just One Child*.

⁸Thomas Scharping, 'Abolishing the One-Child Policy: Stages, Issues, and the Political Process', *Journal of Contemporary China*, 28(117), (2019).

⁹Fertility aspiration encompasses both fertility intention and fertility ideal. Demographers have generally agreed that fertility intention shows greater foresight and planning, and much of the research has thus been devoted to examining the predicative power of fertility intention on realized fertility behavior. In surveys, varied operationalizations and measurements of fertility intention exist. 'Ideal family size' and/or 'ideal number of children' are sometimes used as proxies for individuals' fertility intention—an approach that has its drawbacks. This article therefore specifically focuses on individuals' fertility intentions (sheng yu ji hua). For more discussions, see: Yingchun Ji, Feinian Chen, Yong Cai and Zhenzhen Zheng, 'Do parents matter? Intergenerational ties and fertility preferences in a low-fertility context', *Chinese Journal of Sociology* 1(4), (2015), pp. 485–514; S. Philip Morgan and Heather Rackin, 'The correspondence between fertility intentions and behavior in the United States', *Population and Development Review* 36, (2010), pp. 91–118; Robert Schoen, Nan Marie Astone, Young J. Kim, Constance A. Nathanson and Jason M. Fields, 'Do fertility intentions affect fertility behavior?' *Journal of Marriage and Family* 61(3), (1999), pp. 790–799.

¹⁰Quanbao Jiang, Li Ying and Jesús J. Sánchez-Barricarte, 'Fertility intention, son preference, and second childbirth: Survey findings from Shaanxi Province of China', *Social Indicators Research* 125(3), (2016), pp. 935–953.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Zheng et al., 'Below-replacement fertility in Jiangsu', p. 337.

Furthermore, the same survey conducted in Jiangsu between 2006 and 2007 found that many married women with one child did not intend to proceed to a second birth even when eligible, often citing financial affordability as one of the most common constraints.¹³ Some scholars have thus inferred from these findings that ending the one-child policy across the board may not lead to increases in fertility level desired by the state, as it is socioeconomic development, rather than institutional policy features, that seems to be the driving force behind individuals' low fertility aspirations and China's continued fertility decline.¹⁴ However, such inferential findings at the time fail to consider the significant changes in structural, normative, and policy conditions that have come with the complete halt of the one-child policy.

Although relaxations have been made over the years in phases permitting certain segments of the Chinese population to progress to a second child, none of the exceptions have received similar amounts of concerted state promotion and media attention as the universal 'two-child policy'. China's National Health and Family Planning Commission stated that one of the agency's central missions in 2017 was to fully implement the 'two-child policy' and to encourage childbirth adhering to the policy mandate.¹⁵ According to a 2017 BBC report, the National Health and Family Planning Commission was considering bonuses and allowances that aimed to incentivize second births.¹⁶ *Xinhua*, the state-run news media has showcased local government's decision to promote measures that may facilitate couples to have two children. These possible measures include subsidizing prenatal care, extending the length of maternity leave, and offering up to one year of free/subsidized childcare for preschool children.¹⁷ One highly publicized and controversial incidence happened in Yichang, a city in the central province of Hubei where the local Health and Family Planning Bureau penned an official open letter in 2016 that encouraged CCP members to 'lead the way' in producing two children per couple, either by setting the example themselves, or by nudging their children to do so.¹⁸ The open letter has drawn some public backlash, yet numerous news reports and opinion pieces continue to appear in China's official media outlets promoting the shift to a universal 'two-child policy'. In this sense, with the complete halt of the one-child policy, the Chinese state is no longer simply *permitting* birthing a second child for some, but is also actively *encouraging* it for all.¹⁹

This study is set against this backdrop of the recent dramatic shift in China's population control program and examines how young Chinese men's and women's fertility intentions and decision-making respond to the lift of the one-child policy decree and to the state's shift

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Cai, 'China's below-replacement fertility', p.434.

¹⁵'2017 nian quanguo jihua shengyu gongzuo huiyi zai hainan zhaokai' ['2017 national family planning working meeting was held in Hainan'], *National Health and Family Planning Commission of the People's Republic of China*, 17 February, 2017, accessed 17 December, 2017, http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2017-02/17/content_5168800.htm.

¹⁶'Zhongguo kaolv jiangli cuoshi guli ertai' ['China is considering measures to incentivize second birth'], *BBC*, 28 February, 2017, accessed 17 December, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/simp/press-review-39114632>.

¹⁷'Huai'an shi hongze qu: si ge shuaixian guli shengyu ertai' ['Four "first"s to incentivize second birth in Hongze county, Huai'an city'], *Xinhua News*, 28 April, 2017, accessed 17 December, 2017, http://m.xinhuanet.com/2017-04/28/c_1120893185.htm.

¹⁸'Zhongguo guancha: "Gongchan dangyuan daitou sheng ertai" de beihou' ['China review: Examining "communist party members lead the way to produce a second child"'], *BBC*, 22 September, 2016, accessed 10 August, 2017, http://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/simp/indepth/2016/09/160922_nan_china_second_child_yichang.

¹⁹Björn Alpermann and Shaohua Zhan, 'Population Planning after the One-Child Policy: Shifting Modes of Political Steering in China', *Journal of Contemporary China* 28(117), (2019).

towards a universal ‘two-child policy’. Specifically, this article addresses the following set of questions: What are the current fertility intentions for young Chinese men and women? What are the perceived obstacles, if any, in men’s and women’s desires and decisions to progress to a first and a second birth? What are young men’s and women’s attitudes towards the active promotion of the ‘two-child policy’?

It is impossible to examine fertility intentions and transition without considering them in relation to gender and in the context of family. One of the central foci in research on gender, family, and inequality is the incompatibility and conflict between motherhood and women’s employment.²⁰ In recent years, demographers too have turned to gender inequity as a possible mechanism in trying to understand the phenomenon of low fertility across societies.²¹ Therefore, in answering the three questions outlined above, this article specifically highlights the gendered nature of individuals’ fertility intentions, perceived obstacles in fertility transition, and their attitudes towards the state’s population policy change. In doing so, this study holds the implication for understanding the consequence of the universal ‘two-child policy’ on gender relations, namely how such a policy shift may differentially affect men and women and further impact gender (in)equity in the Chinese society.

This study is among the first to empirically examine and evaluate both men’s and women’s responses and attitudes towards the halt of China’s one-child policy. Different from conventional demographic approaches that rely predominantly on the quantitative analysis of large-scale survey data, this project instead draws on original qualitative in-depth interviews with Chinese men and women of childbearing age. These interviews give primacy to the narratives underlying individuals’ fertility intentions and practices as well as their attitudes and ideations towards the state’s policy change. In the context of a nationwide shift towards a ‘two-child policy’, this study explores individuals’ logic and decision-making processes surrounding their family planning and fertility transition. This article focuses not only on the tempo and quantum of contemporary Chinese men’s and women’s fertility intentions, but also on their expectations of parenthood and childrearing, perceived obstacles regarding first and second-birth progressions, and values and beliefs around gender and family.

Theorizing low fertility

Without any coercive population control program, fertility rates have dropped and remained below the replacement level in a broad range of postindustrial societies from Southern Europe to East Asia over the last three decades.²² Observed trends of changes in family behavior, particularly the decline in fertility and the retreat from marriage, have been collectively described as the second demographic transition (SDT).²³ A core tenet of SDT is

²⁰Pamela Stone, *Opting Out? Why Women Really Quit Careers and Head Home* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2007).

²¹Frances Goldscheider, Eva Bernhardt and Trude Lappegård, ‘The gender revolution: A framework for understanding changing family and demographic behavior’, *Population and Development Review* 41(2), (2015), pp. 207–239.

²²Thomas Anderson and Hans-Peter Kohler, ‘Low fertility, socioeconomic development, and gender equity’, *Population and Development Review* 41(3), (2015), pp. 381–407; Mary C. Brinton and Dong-Ju Lee, ‘Gender-role ideology, labor market institutions, and post-industrial fertility’, *Population and Development Review* 42(3), (2016), pp. 405–433; Joshua R. Goldstein, Tomáš Sobotka and Aiva Jasilioniene, ‘The end of “lowest-low” fertility?’ *Population and Development Review* 35(4), (2009), pp. 663–699; Naohiro Ogawa, ‘Japan’s changing fertility mechanisms and its policy responses’, *Journal of Population Research* 20(1), (2003), pp. 89–106.

²³Ron Lesthaeghe, ‘The unfolding story of the second demographic transition’, *Population and Development Review* 36(2), (2010), pp. 211–251; Dirk J Van de Kaa, ‘Europe’s second demographic transition’, *Population Bulletin* 42(1), (1987), pp. 1–59.

the increased importance individuals place on self-realization and the pursuit of ‘higher order needs’ aside from the ‘duty’ of marriage and family.²⁴ However, as Goldscheider and colleagues have perceptively pointed out in their 2015 article, SDT is largely a collective statement of descriptive trends: little consensus has been reached regarding the *determinants* of the observed changes in family behavior.²⁵

In the past decade, a theoretical framework was developed highlighting the importance of gender (in)equity in explaining low fertility.²⁶ Here, individuals’ fertility ideals and intentions are framed in the context of the ‘unfinished gender revolution’ that has transformed societal gender relations through women’s gradual entry into the labor market as co-breadwinner.²⁷ In comparative fertility research, scholars have turned to the cross-national differences in gender inequality levels to explain the variations in total fertility across countries.²⁸ Specifically, recent theoretical formulations emphasize the relative importance of gender equity in the public (e.g. education and labor market) and the private (e.g. household) spheres. As Peter McDonald noted in his 2000 article, ‘very low fertility as observed in many advanced countries today is the result of incoherence in the levels of gender equity inherent in social and economic institutions. Institutions which deal with women as individuals are more advanced in terms of gender equity than institutions which deal with women as mothers or members of families.’²⁹ Following McDonald’s formulation, fertility rate is likely to remain low when there exists stark work-family incompatibility for women, i.e. when women’s advancement in the labor market is not mirrored by changes in men’s and women’s roles in the household. Given the increases in levels of female educational attainment and labor market participation in postindustrial societies, McDonald has theorized that more women will opt out of childbearing if the division of unpaid household labor and care work in the private sphere remains gendered and unequal, thereby leading to declines in total fertility rate on the aggregate level. Furthermore, societies where women are able to reconcile the competing demands of work and family, rather than facing great imbalance between the two, will experience higher fertility.³⁰

McDonald’s own formulation of the relationship between gender (in)equity and fertility level has largely been theoretical. Empirical tests of the framework exist on both the micro- and the macro-levels in multiple postindustrial contexts, with varied operationalizations for the concept of gender (in)equity. Micro-level studies have often operationalized gender (in)equity through patterns of household division of unpaid labor and/or individuals’ gender-role attitudes, which are then linked to individual-level fertility intentions and outcomes.

²⁴Lesthaeghe, ‘The unfolding story’, pp. 214–215, see also Goldscheider et al., ‘The gender revolution’, p. 209.

²⁵Goldscheider et al., ‘The gender revolution’, p. 209.

²⁶Peter McDonald, ‘Gender equity in theories of fertility transition’, *Population and Development Review* 26(3), (2000), pp. 427–439; Peter McDonald, ‘Gender equity, social institutions and the future of fertility’, *Journal of Population Research* 17(1), (2000), pp. 1–16;

Peter McDonald, ‘Societal foundations for explaining fertility: Gender equity’, *Demographic Research* 28, (2013), pp. 981–994.

²⁷Goldscheider et al., ‘The gender revolution’, p. 210.

²⁸Anderson and Kohler, ‘Low fertility’; Bruno Arpino, Gøsta Esping-Andersen and Léa Pessin, ‘How do changes in gender role attitudes towards female employment influence fertility? A macro-level analysis’, *European Sociological Review* 31(3), (2015), pp. 370–382; Brinton and Lee, ‘Gender-role ideology’; Gøsta Esping-Andersen and Francesco C. Billari, ‘Re-theorizing family demographics’, *Population and Development Review* 41(1), (2015), pp. 1–31.

²⁹McDonald, ‘Gender equity and the future of fertility’, p.11.

³⁰McDonald, ‘Societal foundations for explaining fertility’, p. 982.

Findings across societies have generally shown that more equal division of household labor is associated with higher likelihood of second-birth transition in postindustrial families.³¹ For the macro-level comparative analyses that treat country as the unit of analysis, gender (in)equity is sometimes conceptualized as societal gender-role norms that are aggregated from individual-level attitudes.³² Researchers have also relied on a host of gender (in)equality and human development indices to measure the extent of a society's gender equity level.³³ These studies based on postindustrial countries have largely demonstrated that fertility recovery from very low levels is coupled with a society's gradual move towards greater gender equality and away from the 'male breadwinner/female caregiver' gender-role ideology.³⁴

The gender equity framework treats a society's aggregate fertility level as inextricably linked to and produced by a host of social and institutional forces and mechanisms working through individuals. Empirically, McDonald's gender equity theory provides a fruitful explanatory framework for understanding individuals' fertility intentions and decisions by considering the gender (in)equity contexts they face in both the public and the private spheres. For China where fertility has been strictly governed in the past several decades, with the shift towards a universal 'two-child policy', individuals now have marginally more leeway in making decisions about whether to transition to higher-order births. In this sense, the gender equity framework serves as a useful starting point to understand and explain how young Chinese men and women think about their fertility intentions and make fertility decisions, and aggregately, whether the policy change will eventually achieve its intended goal of boosting fertility level.

Moreover, investigating men's and women's fertility intentions and decision-making in post one-child policy China contributes to demographic theory-building by extending the gender equity framework beyond its postindustrial birthplace and into a post-socialist context. McDonald's original theoretical framework has focused on the mismatch in gender equity levels *between* the public (e.g. labor market and education) and the private (e.g. household) spheres. The gender equity context in China is characterized by distinctive and sometimes conflicting features *within* both of the realms. After 1949, the Chinese state has adopted an ideology of gender equality with state policies that have actively promoted women's incorporation into the educational system and the labor market.³⁵ Fully integrating women into the labor force is considered to be vital for the state's socialist/communist development

³¹For some representative studies, see Lynn Prince Cooke, 'The gendered division of labor and family outcomes in Germany', *Journal of Marriage and Family* 66(5), (2004), pp. 246–1259; Lynn Prince Cooke, 'Gender equity and fertility in Italy and Spain', *Journal of Social Policy* 38(1), (2009), pp. 123–140; Melinda Mills, Letizia Mencarini, Maria Letizia Tanturri and Katia Begall, 'Gender equity and fertility intentions in Italy and the Netherlands', *Demographic Research* 18, (2008), pp. 1–26; Livia Sz Oláh, 'Gendering fertility: Second births in Sweden and Hungary', *Population Research and Policy Review* 22(2), (2003), pp.171–200; Berna Miller Torr and Susan E. Short, 'Second births and the second shift: A research note on gender equity and fertility', *Population and Development Review* 30(1), (2004), pp.109–130. For a review, see Brinton and Lee, 'Gender-role ideology'.

³²For example, Arpino et al., 'Changes in gender role attitudes and fertility'.

³³Melinda Mills, 'Gender roles, gender (in) equality and fertility: An empirical test of five gender equity indices', *Canadian Studies in Population* 37, (2010), pp. 445–474; Mikko Myrskylä, Hans-Peter Kohler and Francesco C. Billari, 'Advances in development reverse fertility declines', *Nature* 460(7256), (2009), pp. 741–743.

³⁴See Brinton and Lee, 'Gender-role ideology', p. 409.

³⁵Xueguang Zhou and Phyllis Moen, 'Job shift patterns of husbands and wives in urban China', in Hans-Peter Blossfeld and Sonja Drobnic, ed., *Careers of Couples in Contemporary Society: From Male breadwinner to Dual-Earner Families* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 333–367.

agenda and dual-earner family became the normative family form.³⁶ Contemporary China is one of the Asian countries with the highest women's participation in economic activities.³⁷ Gender gaps in educational attainment have been steadily closing in recent years³⁸ and in higher education, female students have now become the majority and are outperforming their male counterparts.³⁹ Yet at the same time, researchers have consistently found there to be persistent gender gaps in employability after higher education.⁴⁰ While women are included into the labor force to 'hold up half of the sky' after 1949, the current state policies have also strongly emphasized women's role and responsibility in family and in childrearing. China's mandated childcare leave for women is generous in time and far surpasses the length of the leave for men. According to the *Special Rules on the Protection of Female Employees* issued by the State Council in 2012, female workers are entitled to a maternity leave of 98 days.⁴¹ Some provinces have since introduced specific provincial policies that grant even longer leaves. For example, Guangdong's provincial People's Assembly passed modification on the province's family planning regulations in 2016. Under the new policy, maternity leave was further extended to 178 days for births adhering to the state's family planning mandate.⁴² By comparison, regulations regarding the length and eligibility for paternity leave are largely left to the discretion of provincial governments in their regulations on population and family planning. Currently, the length of paternity leave ranges from seven to 30 days. Scholars have long cautioned against the gender imbalance in seemingly generous family leave policies as such policies negatively impact women's labor market prospects and outcomes.⁴³ Whereas previously the communist party-state has played a central role in allocating employment opportunities and determining wage structures, decisions are now being made by autonomous employers, making women's status in the labor market more precarious to discriminatory hiring practices.⁴⁴

Some inconsistencies exist within the private sphere as well. While the division of unpaid labor remains gendered in the Chinese households, intergenerational support for care work is often readily available, thereby relieving some of the responsibilities from the couples.⁴⁵ In addition, housework outsourcing is becoming an increasingly viable option, particularly for

³⁶Hans-Peter Blossfeld and Sonja Drobic, ed., *Careers of Couples in Contemporary Society: From Male breadwinner to Dual-Earner Families* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Martin King Whyte and William Parish. *Urban Life in Contemporary China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

³⁷The 2013 estimate from International Labor Organization of China's female labor force participation rate is 63.9%, see also Sukti Dasgupta, Makiko Matsumoto, and Cuntao Xia, 'Women in the labour market in China', *ILO Asia-Pacific Working Paper Series*, (2015), accessed 10 December, 2017, http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/documents/publication/wcms_371375.pdf.

³⁸'Gender gap in China: Facts and figures,' *The World Bank*, (2006), accessed 10 February, 2018, <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTEAPREGTOPGENDER/Resources/Gender-Gaps-Figures&Facts.pdf>.

³⁹Zhou Zhong and Fei Guo, 'Women in Chinese higher education: Educational opportunities and employability challenges', in Heather Eggins, ed., *The Changing Role of Women in Higher Education: Academic and Leadership Issues* (Springer International Publishing, 2017), pp. 53–73.

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹'Nv zhigong laodong baohu tiebie guiding' ['Special rules on protection of female employees'], *State Council of the People's Republic of China*, 7 May, 2012, accessed 21 March, 2018, http://www.gov.cn/zwjk/2012-05/07/content_2131567.htm.

⁴²'Sanshi sheng chanjia yanchang' ['Maternity leave extended in 30 Provinces'], *Fenghuang News*, 2 August, 2017, accessed 10 March, 2018, http://news.ifeng.com/a/20170802/51548416_0.shtml.

⁴³Diane Sainsbury, ed., *Gender and Welfare State Regimes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁴⁴Yang Cao and Chiung-Yin Hu, 'Gender and job mobility in postsocialist China: A longitudinal study of job changes in six coastal cities', *Social Forces* 85(4), (2007), pp.1535–1560; Ching Kwan Lee, 'Engendering the worlds of labor: Women workers, labor markets, and production politics in the South China economic miracle', *American Sociological Review* 60(3), (1995), pp. 378–397.

⁴⁵Feinian Chen, Guangya Liu and Christine A. Mair, 'Intergenerational ties in context: Grandparents caring for grandchildren in China', *Social Forces* 90(2), (2011), pp. 571–594.

higher-earning couples living in urban areas.⁴⁶ In this sense, China's gender equity context is characterized by incompatibility not only *between* the public and the private spheres, but also *within* each of the two realms. Furthermore, such inconsistencies, particularly in the public sphere, are to some extent, resulting from a state socialism that has undergone market reform. Examining individuals' fertility intentions and decision-making in China's post one-child policy context therefore further contributes to the theoretical conceptualizations of the link between gender (in)equity and low fertility beyond the context of postindustrial societies.

The current study

The shift towards a universal 'two-child policy' has undoubtedly ignited fervent discussions among Chinese citizens after its announcement. In order to understand how young Chinese men and women of childbearing ages respond to the policy shift, as well as their fertility intentions and decision-making in the post one-child policy context, the author went into the field in early 2016 and conducted 102 in-depth interviews with 39 men and 63 women recruited from two metropolitan areas in China (i.e. Beijing and Nanjing⁴⁷). Respondents were recruited via snowballing in late 2015 immediately after the announcement of the lift of the one-child policy. Among the respondents, 30 women and 14 men are currently in their first marriages while the remaining 33 women and 25 men have never been married. Among the married individuals, nine women and eight men already had one child at the time of the interview. The male and the female samples were independently recruited so that the married respondents are not in unions with each other. In determining sample size, recruitment was stopped when saturation was reached. That is to say, the sample is considered adequate when no more salient new themes emerge with each additional interview conducted.⁴⁸

Considering the inherent limitations of a small-N design, strict sample selection criteria were imposed in order to avoid generating an overly fragmented sample. To qualify for the study, one has to be heterosexual and between the ages of 22 and 36. All respondents have completed some form of tertiary education and are currently working and residing in either of the two metropolitan areas. Individuals were not selected on their places of birth or household registration status (*hukou*) when growing up. While 17 respondents held rural *hukou* status at age 14, only four of them have not yet obtained urban *hukou* status at the time of the interview. This pattern is unsurprising as tertiary education is one important channel for rural-to-urban *hukou* mobility in contemporary China.⁴⁹ Furthermore, among individuals with present-day urban *hukou*, 28 respondents currently residing in Beijing do

⁴⁶Yang Hu, 'Gender and children's housework time in China: Examining behavior modeling in context', *Journal of Marriage and Family* 77(5), (2015), pp. 1126–1143.

⁴⁷73 Respondents and 29 respondents were recruited from Beijing and Nanjing respectively. While both Beijing and Nanjing are highly developed urban areas, the two cities were initially selected because they also differ on a variety of measures including size, population density, housing price, and the cost of living. However, analysis of the qualitative data does not show meaningful differences by locales in individuals' fertility intentions, perceived obstacles, and attitudes towards the 'two-child policy'. Therefore, interviews from both research sites were merged in this article without making further geographical comparisons.

⁴⁸Greg Guest, Arwen Bunce and Laura Johnson, 'How many interviews are enough? An experiment with data saturation and variability', *Field Methods* 18(1), (2006), pp. 59–82.

⁴⁹Xiaogang Wu and Donald Treiman, 'Inequality and equality under Chinese socialism: The *hukou* system and intergenerational occupational mobility', *American Journal of Sociology* 113(2), (2007), pp. 415–445.

not have their *hukou* registered in the same city.⁵⁰ Lastly, given the age range of the sample, most of the respondents are only children themselves.

The decision to restrict the sample to highly educated individuals (i.e. those with tertiary education) in developed urban areas is based on the following considerations: First, China has undergone drastic educational expansion in the past two decades. Transition rate from junior high schools to upper secondary schools has increased from 40.6% in 1990 to 69.7% in 2005 and 87.5% in 2010. During the same period, transition rate from upper secondary schools to tertiary education has also risen substantially, from 27.3% in 1990 to 76.3% in 2005 and 83.3% in 2010.⁵¹ Obtaining some form of tertiary education has become increasingly common for young Chinese individuals that have selected into upper secondary schools. Moreover, abundant studies both in and out of the Chinese context have pointed to financial instability and economic uncertainty as some of the most salient constraints preventing individuals' transitioning into parenthood or higher order births.⁵² Highly educated respondents are comparatively more likely to fare better in the labor market. All respondents in the sample hold professional and managerial jobs in both public and private sectors and across various professions. Restricting the sample to individuals with some amount of tertiary education thereby allows explorations of individuals' reasoning and ideations that may go beyond simply lacking financial resources.

In addition to asking about individuals' fertility intentions, perceived obstacles in fertility transition, and attitudes towards the new 'two-child policy', marriage transition timing and decisions as well as current and ideal divisions of household labor were asked in interviews with all married respondents. For individuals having one child, information was gathered on their current and ideal divisions of childcare. Moreover, all respondents were asked whether they (intend to) receive additional help with housework and/or childcare, either from extended family members or through the market in the form of outsourcing. To understand individuals' lived experiences, respondents were asked about their day-to-day routines at home and in the workplace. With both female and male respondents, the author probed their job-search experiences for each job they have held. Finally, using the World Value Survey instrument on gender role attitude,⁵³ a set of gender-related value questions was incorporated into the interview protocol. These questions are designed to gauge respondents' adherence to gender essentialist beliefs and the 'male breadwinner/female caregiver' model in the division of labor. Taken together, these interviews elucidate men's and women's fertility intentions, decision-making, and attitudes towards the universal 'two-child policy' in relation to their views and practices regarding gender, family, and work. To ensure consistency and minimize the effect of interviewer, all interviews were conducted by the

⁵⁰This number is much smaller for the sample recruited in Nanjing. Only four respondents residing in Nanjing do not have the urban *hukou* registered in the same city. This difference is reflective of the variations in migration patterns to both cities, and the increasing difficulty in registering one's *hukou* in Beijing.

⁵¹'Promotion rate of graduates of regular school by levels', *Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China*, accessed 3 April, 2018, http://www.moe.gov.cn/s78/A03/moe_560/jytsj_2016/2016_qg/201708/t20170822_311606.html.

⁵²Alicia Adsera, 'Where are the babies? Labor market conditions and fertility in Europe', *European Journal of Population* 27(1), (2011), pp.1–32; Alicia Adsera, 'The interplay of employment uncertainty and education in explaining second births in Europe', *Demographic Research* 25(16), (2011), pp. 513–544; Zheng et al., 'Below-replacement fertility in Jiangsu'.

⁵³Ronald Inglehart, C. Haerpfel, A. Moreno, C. Welzel, K. Kizilova, J. Diez-Medrano, M. Lagos, P. Norris, E. Ponarin and B. Puranen et al., ed., *World Values Survey: All Rounds - Country-Pooled Datafile Version* (Madrid: JD Systems Institute, 2014), accessed 20 December, 2015, <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWVL.jsp>.

author between 2016 and 2017. Interviews were recorded and on average lasted for 1.5 to two hours. Most of the interviews were phone-based. To test the effect of interview mode, in the summer of 2017 some face-to-face interviews were carried out. Over the course of data analysis, the author returned to each interview multiple times, listening to the recordings, taking detailed notes, and writing in-depth analytical memos. The listening method fully captures the “mood” and emotional cues in the conversations. Key themes on individuals’ fertility intentions, perceived obstacles, and attitudes towards the ‘two child policy’ were inductively identified. The analysis shows no meaningful differences in data quality between phone-based and in-person interviews.

Conditional and universal desire for one child

Among the married individuals who have not yet had children, when describing their fertility intentions, almost all respondents have stated that they plan to have a child. When asked about the intended timing for first birth, one answer that has repeatedly surfaced is ‘at this point anytime is OK’. For currently married and childless respondents, the majority of them either intend to have a child within the next three years or are already actively preparing for it. For an illustrative example, consider the case of Yang.⁵⁴ Yang is a 27-year old man who, at the time of the interview, just married his wife after three years of dating. Yang and his wife have cohabited briefly before marriage, and he stated that after marriage, they stopped using contraceptive methods. ‘We are not making a plan [about when to have a baby], but whenever the baby comes, it will be OK.’ Furthermore, for Yang, the decision to have his first child is closely linked to his decision to get married.

Yang: If we didn’t want to have children soon, we probably wouldn’t have been married right now.

Interviewer: What do you mean?

Yang: I mean there is really no reason to get married if not for having children, right?

Yang’s reasoning for getting married is echoed by a large number of respondents, regardless of marital or childbearing status. More than half of the married respondents have cohabited with their current spouse for some length before marriage. When asked about their perceived meaning of marriage and the decision to transition into marriage from cohabitation, one salient theme across the interviews is that marriage is viewed as the necessary precondition for having children. Being the precursor to childbearing sets marriage apart from premarital cohabitation alone. As extramarital birth is heavily regulated and controlled in China, many married respondents, both men and women, have expressed a sentiment that is similar to Yang’s. That is, one needs to get married so as to have children. More importantly, were it not for having children, marriage is not that different from being in a committed relationship or premarital cohabitation. In other words, not only is marriage viewed as the necessary precursor to childbearing, childbearing is also often framed as the end goal of marriage.

⁵⁴All names are pseudonyms.

While individual respondents may each have their own different reasons for wanting children (e.g. emotional fulfillment, desire to experience parenthood, etc.), having one child after marriage remains to be a strong norm to which most married respondents acknowledge and adhere. Married respondents often describe having a first child as ‘the *natural* next step’ or ‘the thing you *should* do next’ following marriage. For example, when Jie, a 32-year old married man, was asked about his reasoning for intending to have a child within the next three years, Jie was perplexed by the question.

Jie: What do you mean *why* I am going to have a child? It’s the thing you do. It’s what everybody does.

Another telling example is Hui. At the time of the interview, Hui was 36-year old. Her child, a 9-year old daughter, was born one year after her marriage. In explaining her timing and decision to have a child, Hui drew a comparison between childbearing and going to college.

Hui: It’s like fulfilling an obligation-you have to do it. I think of it as having a checklist. You have to go to college, so you went, check. Now you are married, the next thing on the list is to have a child.

Along this line, it is not surprising that when married and currently childless individuals describe any perceived obstacles in transition to first birth, the most prevalent concern has to do with fecundity. Married respondents have mostly described ‘getting [their] bodies ready’ when discussing the preconditions that they viewed as necessary for childbearing. In other words, if the couple is physiologically able to have children, then first birth is largely taken for granted. Pei, a 33-year old woman whose son was just under one-year old at the time of the interview, has put it like this: ‘I may not particularly want a child, but I am also not against the idea strongly enough for me to buck the expectation.’ Again, Pei’s statement illustrates the entrenched norm that regards having a child as a necessary part of married life.

The close link between marriage and parenthood is further corroborated when examining the first-birth transition among married individuals having had one child already. Among the 17 respondents in this group, 14 had their first child within three years of the marriage and seven became a parent within the first year of the marriage.⁵⁵ What is more, when discussing the transition to parenthood and the timing of childbearing, there is a conspicuous lack of ‘planning’ in individuals’ stated decision-making processes. Respondents have repeatedly used frames such as ‘surprise’ or even ‘accident’ when referring to their pregnancies. When asked about whether there were conditions that they actively fulfilled before childbearing, a number of respondents have provided answers in the line of ‘we got pregnant and we were married so we decided to keep it’. In this sense, rather than being a result of meticulous household decision-making and careful negotiations, in most cases, parenthood and first birth just happened, often as couples stopped using contraceptive methods after marriage.

⁵⁵A similar close link between marriage and first birth is observed when looking at the national pattern. The mean ages at first marriage and first child birth for women are 23.9 and 26.2 respectively in 2010, see James M. Raymo, Hyunjoon Park, Yu Xie and Wei-jun Jean Yeung, ‘Marriage and family in East Asia: Continuity and change’, *Annual Review of Sociology* 41, (2015), pp. 471–492.

On the one hand, we observe a nearly universal intention to have a child among married individuals. Different from what the second demographic transition framework has postulated, in contemporary China, having a child after marriage remains to be a salient family norm, and is largely taken for granted as the ‘natural next step’ or even ‘obligation’ following marriage. On the other hand, among the currently unmarried individuals, there does not seem to be a universal desire of equal measure for marriage. While nearly all respondents highlight a desire for long-term romantic relationship, a fair number of unmarried respondents, both men and women, stated that such a companionship does not have to morph into the form of marriage. However, here, again we see the close link between marriage and parenthood. Among unmarried individuals that intend to get married in the future, the desire for marriage is tied to the desire for having children. Among unmarried individuals, marriage is similarly viewed as the necessary precondition for childbearing.

Of course, even for respondents who have currently expressed little desire and intention for marriage, interviewing them at a single time point in their life cannot adequately predict their eventual marital status. However, the findings from these interviews with married and non-married respondents together illustrate a sequential selection process: For individuals who have or intend to self-select into marriage, the overall majority intend to and will progress to a first birth. The meaning of marriage is deeply enmeshed with the norm that views having a child as integral for making a family. Marriage is regarded as the necessary precursor to childbearing both according to the individuals and more importantly, by the institutional design of the state that sanctions against extramarital births. In this sense, understanding China’s below-replacement level fertility becomes a two-part question: First, to what extent are various segments of the Chinese population selecting out of marriage and why? Secondly, for married individuals, after having one child, what are the obstacles they face when deciding whether to have a second child?

Existing research has consistently pointed to a slight trend towards late marriage in contemporary China: The mean age at first marriage has increased from 22.1 in 1990 to 23.1 in 2000 and 23.9 in 2010 for women, whereas men’s mean age at first marriage has risen from 24 in 1990 to 25.1 in 2000 and 26 in 2010.⁵⁶ Despite the delay, studies have shown that marriage remains nearly universal, except for educationally disadvantaged men in recent birth cohorts.⁵⁷ Given the near-universality of marriage and the rarity of voluntary childlessness among married couples, the second part of the sequential selection becomes more important for understanding China’s below-replacement fertility. On this note, the next section examines individuals’ perceived constraints in transitioning to a second birth.

Gender (in)equity in the public sphere: gendered constraint in second-birth transition

Bai, a 28-year old married woman with no children, stated that she would like to switch careers. At the time of the interview, Bai was working for a successful state-owned

⁵⁶Raymo et al., ‘Marriage and family in East Asia’, p. 474–475.

⁵⁷Jia Yu and Yu Xie, ‘Changes in the determinants of marriage entry in post-reform urban China’, *Demography* 52(6), (2015), pp. 1869–1892.

publishing house and was in her second year of marriage. Bai wanted to become a mother, so before taking the plunge and actually quitting her current job, Bai had plans to have a child first so she could take full advantage of the generous childcare leave policy at her current work place. 'Just so I can get it [childbearing] out of the way', she said. Bai had been headhunted a few times before, but upon learning that she was married but had not yet had a child, those prospective employers almost all never followed up.

Bai is not alone when she made the decision to hold off making career changes until she has had a child. Hufei, a 30-year old married man with one child, stated that while his wife was not completely satisfied with her old job as an administrative assistant, she intentionally waited after the birth of their son and only left recently after taking a four-month maternity leave with her previous employer. By comparison, Hufei did not strategically time his own job changes. His two recent switches happened in quick successions, both after he got married and before he became a father.

Bai's experience exemplifies the conundrum highly educated women face in China's labor market today. When describing their job search experiences, nearly all female respondents reported that employers inevitably had inquired about their marital/relationship status at the time as well as their plans for marriage and childbearing in the near future. Such a hiring practice seldom occurs to their male counterparts. Childless female respondents, regardless of their marital status and across a variety of professions, perceive themselves to be at the most disadvantage while searching for jobs in both the public and the private sectors. Nearly all female respondents, along with some male respondents, believe that potential employers prefer hiring men in order to avoid the cost (e.g. extended childcare leave) that a childless female employee will create down the road. It is precisely this belief that has led Bai (but not Hufei) to intentionally postpone switching careers after marriage.

Such perceived gender disadvantage in hiring across sectors and professions is further substantiated in interviews with respondents who themselves are human resources officers, small business owners, or have participated in their organizations' hiring decisions. For example, Nan, a human resource officer working for a private firm described an incidence when three of her female colleagues became pregnant at the same time and had to take childcare leave simultaneously, leaving the office short-staffed. 'This incidence spooked my supervisor so much that now he is extremely hesitant about hiring women.' Similarly, Hejia, a lecturer in an adult education college, stated:

In those meetings where we make hiring decisions, my colleagues will outright just say that if there is a male candidate, we will hire the man even if the women are more qualified. Men don't take childcare leaves. They [the colleagues] know they are not supposed to say that, but they do it anyway.

Along the same line, particularly in workplaces with higher concentration of women, employers sometimes devise implicit strategy that aims to govern and regulate the timing of childbirth for female employees. Ruwen, who teaches middle school English, stated that each semester female teachers were asked to report if they intend to have a child that year, and if too many a teacher has expressed such an intention, some would be advised to wait.

Interviewer: What happens if a female teacher gets pregnant 'out of turn'?

Ruwen: If it happens, it happens, but it doesn't reflect well [on her].

Similarly, Linsu, who works for a regional TV station, has stated that there is an expectation from her supervisor that a female new hire should not get pregnant too soon after starting the job.

However, as the previous section has illustrated, for married individuals, parenthood is largely taken for granted as a normative next step following marriage and the transition to first birth often lacks purposeful planning. The incidence described by Nan earlier is exactly a case of 'queuing' that did not go according to the plan. Here, the burden then falls onto the female employees to ease the informal sanctions from the employers. Among the three female employees described by Nan, 'two of them cut short the childcare leave, and one literally worked till the day before she gave birth.' In doing so, these female employees were eventually able to avoid unfavorable evaluations. However, as Nan pointed out, the negative impact was still directed towards future prospective female job candidates.

When looking at the public sphere, these examples illustrate a gender equity context that is characterized by profound paradox and inconsistencies. On the one hand, contemporary Chinese women are expected to work. Almost all respondents in the sample have themselves grown up in dual-earner households, with mothers belonging to a generation of women that were actively incorporated into the labor force as part of the state's communist/socialist development agenda. Perhaps thus unsurprisingly, the overwhelming majority of the respondents, both male and female, have stated that they agree to the following statement adapted from the World Value Survey⁵⁸: 'both men and women should contribute to the household income'. Moreover, female respondents show little desire to be full time housewives, nor do male respondents expect their (future) partners to do so. On the other hand, while there exists a strong norm that women are expected to enter the labor force, current state policies, specifically the lengthy maternity leave, put female job seekers (particularly those without children), at a significant disadvantage when they have to compete with their male counterparts in the hiring process. In other words, as hiring decisions are now being made by autonomous employers, rather than being allocated by the state, the gender imbalanced childcare leave policy has left women to be at a greater disadvantage in the labor market. Furthermore, it is exactly such 'generosity' of long maternity leave that leads employers to implicitly sanction childbirth timing of their female employees. Thus, when having a child is the normative next step following marriage, the burden again falls on women to balance the demand of being an ideal worker and the expectation of motherhood. In this sense, these highly educated Chinese women are caught between competing forces of dual demands that are extremely difficult to reconcile.

Therefore, while having one child after marriage is largely normative and does not call for special preparations, female respondents are much more cognizant and explicit about the preconditions that need to be in place before they are willing and able to progress to a second birth. For female respondents who are ambivalent about whether they would like to have a second child, one necessary precondition that has been repeatedly mentioned is (the

⁵⁸Inglehart et al. *World Values Survey: All Rounds*.

difficulty in) ensuring career success while having more than one child. Specifically, those respondents believe that in order to have a second child, they have to first do well enough at work and 'have made some achievements' so that the negative impacts of an additional disruption (i.e. the second pregnancy and the subsequent long maternity leave) can be somewhat mitigated. However, such a balancing act is not a small and easy feat. Shali, whose daughter was three-and-a-half years old at the time of the interview, has put it like this:

I have to go to work and earn a living for the family, I have to care for my daughter—one more [child]? It's impossible to do so much.

Shali was adamant that she had no intention to have another child, precisely due to the perceived difficulty in reconciling the demands of work and motherhood, both she has viewed as a form of responsibility that she was expected to do equally well.

However, it must be noted that a small number of women in the sample do intend to have a second child. Here, a cogent theme has emerged as well. Ning, a 32-year old married woman with a newborn daughter, stated that she would likely have a second child within the next three years:

My career will stop, but it doesn't really bother me. I don't have any projects [at this work place] that I am really interested in anyway. Why not have another child?

Ning's sentiment is echoed by those women who intend to progress to a second birth. In other words, intention to have an additional child often means actively choosing a second birth over career development. Like the different side to the same coin, among this small group of women, their stated precondition for second-birth progression further highlights the difficulty in *balancing* the dual demands of work and motherhood—a gendered obstacle in second-birth transition.

Gender (in)equity in the private sphere: additional transition constraints

At the time of the interview, Yifeng was 36 years old, married, and had a two-and-a-half-year old daughter. Yifeng was an interpreter for an international firm based in Beijing, and his wife resumed her work as a lawyer in a mid-sized firm shortly after childbirth. Yifeng was born and raised in a city not far away from Beijing, where he still had his *hukou* registered, and because of the short distance, his parents were able to come and live with the couple and help out for three weeks at a time each month. After Yifeng's wife returned to work, the couple found a private childcare facility for their daughter, which ran from 8:30 in the morning to approximately five in the afternoon during weekdays. The childcare facility costed around 5200 *yuan* each month—about one-ninth of the couple's monthly income.

When describing his perceived obstacles in second-birth transition, Yifeng highlighted the additional financial and time demands a second child would bring. According to Yifeng, having a second child would likely require his parents to relocate to Beijing permanently to help with childcare. Also, since neither Yifeng nor his wife (nor by extension, their daughter) had their *hukou* registered in Beijing, Yifeng was unsure about the steps needed to gain public school access in Beijing for his daughter. At the moment Yifeng was thinking

tentatively about private schools—he reckoned he still had time since his daughter was young. Private school for two children, although not unfeasible, would be financially burdensome.⁵⁹

Yifeng's perceived obstacles in second-birth transition are reflected in interviews with other respondents as well. While the dual demands of work and motherhood, particularly the disruption having a second child would impose on one's career trajectory, was largely mentioned only by the female respondents, both men and women have put forth a host of additional obstacles that they perceive to hinder the progression to a second birth. Consistent with findings in the low fertility literature, financial affordability is one of the most prominent concerns. However, the financial constraint experienced by highly educated respondents goes beyond covering the basic needs for two children. Rather, they focus on the cost of providing things of quality—specifically quality education. Research in the United States has shown that middle-class parents adopt distinct childrearing strategies that could be characterized as a form of 'concerted cultivation'.⁶⁰ Here, we observe similar practices and aspirations. Respondents frequently use the frame 'raising the child right' to denote the perceived need of providing their children with adequate resources for enrichment and extracurricular opportunities. For those individuals whose *hukou* is not registered in the city they currently reside in, the financial constraint mentioned often centers on the accessibility and cost of education for their children. For this group of respondents, educational accessibility is not simply having school access, but rather, it is being able to go to a quality school.

In addition to financial affordability, time availability has emerged as another salient theme when respondents discuss their perceived obstacles in second-birth transition. The gender equity framework has pointed to the incompatible equity levels between the public and private spheres as a mechanism in explaining low fertility. Division of household labor between spouses has largely been viewed as an indicator for the gender equity level in the private sphere. In the Chinese context, however, this is further complicated by the role grandparents and outside help play in providing childcare work. Among married respondents that have had one child, all have relied on grandparents and/or hired help for additional childcare support. Consider again the case of Pei, which illustrates the typical arrangement among this group of respondents. After the birth of her son, Pei's in-laws moved in. During the day, while Pei and her husband were away at work, in addition to caring for Pei's son, they would also perform other household labor, such as cooking, cleaning, laundry, and grocery shopping. Ning and her husband never moved away from the city they were born in. After giving birth, Ning's parents and in-laws stopped by daily to help with childcare and housework.

When intergenerational support is unavailable from grandparents, individuals, particularly those with financial means, often turn to the market. As mentioned above, Yifeng found a private childcare facility for his daughter as his parents were unable to consistently live with

⁵⁹ *Hukou* is one important mechanism for resource redistribution in contemporary China. Regional variations exist in policies regarding educational incorporation for migrant children. In addition, these policies are often subject to changes across time.

⁶⁰ Annette Lareau, *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2011).

the couple. Neither Hufei's nor his wife's parents were able to relocate to Beijing, the couple thus hired a nanny (in their case, a distant relative) to care for their child. Similar to Pei's arrangement, the outside help not only provides childcare, but also shoulders the lion's share of the housework during the day. In this sense, among married individuals with one child, the division of household labor has largely been shifted away from the couple. On the one hand, individuals have pointed to time availability as a constraint for second-birth transition. On the other hand, they also acknowledge and expect intergenerational support and/or outside help to be available when needed. A caveat here is that such strategies in outsourcing care work are viewed largely as out of necessity, rather than being the ideal arrangement. When asked about their ideal division of childcare, nearly all respondents with one child have stated that the ideal is to 'do it by ourselves'. Respondents often highlight the generational differences in childrearing practices and beliefs between themselves and their parents, as well as the difficulty in establishing trust in childcare facilities and nannies.

The expectation of having intergenerational support is further present among married individuals who have not yet had children. Among this group, when looking at the patterns of housework division, most respondents have reported a generally egalitarian divide with little outsourcing. However, when discussing the intended division of childcare, nearly all respondents have stated that they may rely on support from their own parents and/or outside help when the time comes. The expectation of intergenerational support in childcare is normative to the point that it sometimes becomes intertwined with the rationales behind fertility timing. A theme that has surfaced repeatedly across interviews is that: 'It is always better to have a child sooner rather than later— so [the child's] grandparents are still young enough to help out.' Furthermore, nearly all respondents have stated that they do not wish to live with their parents or in-laws after marriage, often citing possible intergenerational friction as the reasoning.⁶¹ However, these respondents have also made one exception, that is, after having a child and when childcare support is needed, 'living with one's parents is OK because it's necessary'. In this sense, while intergenerational support for childcare is expected, apprehension surrounding possible intergenerational friction further reinforces individuals' ideal childcare arrangement that emphasizes self-reliance.

Taken together, consistent with existing findings across societies, young Chinese men and women have also pointed to financial affordability and time availability as major concerns in second-birth transition. However, while discussing these constraints, respondents have also pointed to individual-level strategies (i.e. intergenerational support, outside help, and financial means) that could be utilized to solve, or at least ease, some of the obstacles. Taken together, we see that in the Chinese context, the incompatibility in gender equity levels *between* the public and the private spheres matters less for understanding fertility transition obstacles after the first birth, particularly with respect to time availability. Rather, the major obstacle in second-birth transition stems much more from the paradoxical gender equity context *within* the public sphere. While more women have been incorporated into the labor

⁶¹This is consistent with existing findings on intergenerational conflict and frictions when parents and grandparents share childcare and childrearing responsibilities. See Esther Goh, *China's One-Child Policy and Multiple Caregiving: Raising Little Suns in Xiamen* (New York: Routledge, 2011); Suowe Xiao, 'Intimate power: The intergenerational cooperation and conflicts in childrearing among urban families in contemporary China', *The Journal of Chinese Sociology* 3(18), (2016), pp. 1–24.

force as part of the socialist development agenda after 1949, the current state policies, particularly the lengthy maternity leave, continue to reinforce women's roles as mothers and caregivers. Yet, at the same time, the expectation that women will work remains a strong norm to which highly educated women mostly adhere. For this group, work is viewed as a form of responsibility that they are expected not only to undertake, but also to perform well. In a way, for individuals, the non-gendered financial and time constraints in second-birth transition almost appear to be more solvable with viable strategies. The gendered constraint, i.e. the hard-to-reconcile dual demands of motherhood and work, presents greater challenge for second-birth transition.

Attitudes towards the universal two-child policy

Given the paradoxical gender equity context in the public sphere, specifically with respect to women's perceived and experienced disadvantage in the labor market and the incompatibility between career success and multiple childbirths, when discussing their attitudes towards the lifting of the one-child policy, the majority of the female respondents have expressed ambivalence or even outright anger regarding the nationwide shift towards a 'two-child policy'. Among highly educated women, the universal 'two-child policy' is viewed as potentially more damaging for women's career prospects. Even those female respondents who intend to progress to a second child themselves have acknowledged that more female job seekers may now face greater disadvantages in the labor market. As multiple respondents have put it:

It used to be that when you are married and have had one child, you are 'safe'—now because of the 'two-child policy', even when you already have one child, potential employers will still not want anything to do with you.

This sentiment rings particularly true under the current population regime where there exist concerted state efforts encouraging the transition to a second birth. Here, with the active promotion of the universal 'two-child policy', having a second child is not merely an additional option that individuals could choose to opt into, but rather it is to some extent, being pushed to be the new *norm* of marriage and family life. Given the age range of the sample, the majority of the respondents are only children, meaning that they are eligible to have two children should they want to, even under the conditional 'two-child policy' before 2016. However, as these respondents have stated, it is only with the recent shift to a universal 'two-child policy' and the subsequent state promotion and media attention that the public and private discussions on second-birth transition have become hyper visible and is being pushed to the forefront in their day-to-day life. One typical response that has surfaced repeatedly goes as following:

Before, I know I'm eligible [to have two children] but I really didn't think about it. But now everybody is talking about it [the universal 'two-child policy'], whether to have two, who is going to have two.

Unlike previous relaxations of the one-child policy, with the universal 'two-child policy' the state is shifting from permitting a second birth for some to encouraging it for all. It is therefore likely that the employers would assume that a prospective female employee would have two children, regardless of her actual fertility intentions, much in the same way that the

current assumption is that childless female job seekers will eventually have one child and thus generate additional cost for the employer with lengthy maternity leave. In this light, most of the female respondents are critical of the policy change, fearing it would further disadvantage women in the labor market.

Of course, the universal ‘two-child policy’ also has its support. Among respondents who are supportive of the policy change, two distinct rationales have emerged. First, individuals that are critical of the one-child policy acknowledge that the ‘two-child policy’ may be less restrictive in governing women’s body. Pei remembered that her older sister was asked to have an intrauterine device inserted after giving birth: ‘I don’t want it to happen to me. I think it might still happen if the policy is strictly one child per couple?’

In this light, the ‘two-child policy’ is viewed as a corrective to the draconian practices enforced under the one-child policy regime. Some respondents have gone further to suggest that there should not be restrictions on the number of births at all, arguing that ‘it is only in China that they [the government] can tell you how many children you can have.’

Rather than viewing the ‘two-child policy’ as easing the restriction on women’s reproductive rights, the second rationale adopted by individuals supporting the policy change bears striking resemblance to the state’s discourse and regards the ‘two-child policy’ as a possible remedy for China’s declining fertility. Respondents holding such views have adopted frames such as ‘the trouble of population aging’ and a point of view from the state’s perspective. Here, the shift towards the ‘two-child policy’ is regarded as a step in the right direction because it may fulfill the state’s need of boosting the national fertility level, maintaining the demographic dividend, and avoiding economic stagnation. However, among respondents supporting the shift towards the ‘two-child policy’, such attitudes have little correlation with their own stated fertility intentions. In other words, being supportive of the policy change does not mean that these individuals themselves will necessarily progress to a second birth.

Together, individuals’ attitudes towards a universal ‘two-child policy’ cover the entire spectrum from support to frustration and anger. Similar to individuals’ perceived constraints in second-birth transition, these attitudes also exhibit a gendered pattern. On the one hand, among respondents that have shown support for the lift of the one-child policy, two different rationales exist. One rationale views the policy change as easing the infringement on women’s reproductive rights, while the other adopts the point of view that is more aligned with the state’s agenda in promoting population growth and confronting issues associated with low fertility and population aging. On the other hand, opposition to the universal ‘two-child policy’ comes largely from the fear that it would further exacerbate women’s existing disadvantages in the labor market—a fear that is expressed almost solely by the female respondents.

Discussions: theoretical and policy implications

With a total fertility rate that has stayed far below the replacement level since the early 1990s, China now finds itself in the company of the rest of low fertility societies, facing similar issues such as shrinking labor pool and rapid population aging. The one-child policy

was formally replaced with a universal ‘two-child policy’ in 2016 in the hope that the new policy will boost the country’s fertility level. Drawing on more than 100 in-depth interviews with highly educated Chinese men and women, this article reveals that having one child after marriage remains a strong family norm in contemporary China. After marriage, parenthood is largely taken for granted as the next step in the life course. For individuals who have or intend to self-select into marriage, there exists a near-universal desire and intention for having one child. However, a host of obstacles remain when it comes to the transition to a second birth.

Consistent with findings from multiple societies and unsurprisingly, both Chinese men and women point to time availability and financial affordability as obstacles for having a second child. However, viable individual-level strategies exist that render these obstacles somewhat solvable, particularly for highly educated individuals with greater available resources. Specifically, young men and women often can rely on outsourcing and/or expect intergenerational support for childcare. A greater obstacle in second-birth transition, i.e. the disruption of career trajectories and the perceived incompatibility between a successful career and multiple childbirths, is experienced almost exclusively by women.

On the one hand, the expectation that women should work remains a highly salient norm in post-socialist China. On the other hand, state policies, particularly the lengthy maternity leave, continue to reinforce women’s roles as mothers and caregivers. The generous yet gendered childcare leave policy, coupled with discriminatory hiring practice, puts childless female job seekers at greater disadvantages when they compete with their male counterparts. When motherhood is largely expected after marriage, female workers thus must face the burden of navigating the hard-to-reconcile expectations of being a mother and being an ideal worker. In this sense, highly educated Chinese women view themselves as being pulled by the dual demands of being a productive as well as a reproductive force. The shift towards a universal ‘two-child policy’, with its concerted state promotion and media attention, thus has created fear of worsening gender inequality in the labor market, particularly among highly educated women.

In recent years, demographers have turned to gender equity as a mechanism in trying to understand the persistent low fertility in various postindustrial societies. Abundant research based on the gender equity framework has theorized and found that fertility is likely to remain low if there exists incompatibility in gender equity levels between the public and the private spheres. The current study contributes to theory-building by extending the gender equity framework beyond the postindustrial setting and into a post-socialist context. The obstacle to second-birth transition in the Chinese case is driven less by the incompatibility *between* the public and private spheres in gender equity levels, but rather by the paradoxical gender equity context *within* the public sphere—a paradox that is largely by design given the state policies.

In this light, the findings further hold the following policy implications. The nationwide shift towards a ‘two-child policy’ in its current form and without additional institutional measures that address the issues of labor market discrimination and work-life incompatibility for women may not be successful in achieving its intended goal of boosting fertility level,

particularly among highly educated women. One possible policy solution is to close, or at least narrow, the gap in the lengths of the maternity vis-à-vis the paternity leave, so that women no longer disproportionately shoulder the cost and the disruption extended childcare leave exerts on individuals' career trajectories. In addition, on the one hand, the current state development plan has highlighted the goal of expanding socialized childcare. On the other hand, individuals often view childcare outsourcing as out of necessity, rather than being the ideal family arrangement, frequently pointing to difficulties in establishing trust in childcare facilities and providers. This disjuncture calls for the need of rigorous program evaluations. In other words, what matters is not only the availability, but also the quality and the kind of socialized childcare.

This article has shown that individuals' choices and decisions regarding marriage, family, and childbirth are inextricably linked to the gender dynamics and gender equity contexts they face at the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels. As such, in designing and implementing population policies and measures, demographic process needs to be recognized as a fundamentally gendered process. Rather than conceptualizing women simply as a reproductive force for the state's agenda of boosting population growth, population policy has to recognize and safeguard women's multifaceted roles in the society and their rights for individual fulfillment.

Conclusion and future directions

This article has focused on the fertility intentions and perceived transition obstacles among highly educated individuals after the end of the one-child policy. Future research is needed to further explore individuals' fertility intentions and obstacles under the 'two-child policy' regime across class lines and across the rural-urban divide. The findings from this article hold broad implications as the dual demands of work and motherhood are not uniquely experienced by highly educated women in contemporary China. Yet for individuals with fewer socioeconomic advantages, they may also lack the means and resources for outsourcing care work that could ease some of the burdens. In addition, as shown in previous sections, the financial constraint experienced by highly educated individuals is closely tied to parenting strategies and aspirations that emphasize providing high quality resources and adequate opportunities beyond the basic needs. The question remains how individuals in other social strata may experience financial constraint differently when making decisions about second-birth transition. Furthermore, another question of interest is to examine the household bargaining power of women across class lines and the rural-urban divide, and how they may in turn differentially resist or comply with the normative pressure of having a second child.

Additional work is also needed to rigorously evaluate a wider range of population consequences of promoting a nationwide 'two-child policy', beyond its efficacy of boosting fertility level. Abundant research exists that examines the effects of the one-child policy on a host of gender equity outcomes, such as son preference and sex selection, sex ratio imbalance, educational investment and attainment among singleton daughters. It is worthwhile to consider whether and how a nationwide 'two-child policy' would further influence these outcomes.

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