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SMALL-FAMILY MINDSET:  
AN ANALYSIS OF THE IMPACT OF CHINA'S FAMILY PLANNING POLICIES ON  
FAMILY CULTURE

By  
Sarah Ansley Croft

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford, MS  
May 2021

Approved By

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## ABSTRACT

### SARAH ANSLEY CROFT: Small-Family Mindset: An Analysis of the Impact of China's Family Planning Policies on Family Culture

This thesis examines the impact of China's family planning policies on women's attitudes towards family culture and the implications on China today. The family planning policies began in the 1970s as an emergency measure intended to create a short-term voluntary small-family culture by decreasing fertility rates. My research, comprised primarily of primary and secondary qualitative sources, discusses the development and implementation of the policies, the economic reforms beginning in the 1980s, and their joint effects on fertility rates, sex ratio at birth, women's liberation, and changes in family culture, particularly in rural areas. This study found that the family planning policies and economic changes exacerbated the decline in fertility rates and accelerated the change in cultural beliefs about the family and the role of women in society, resulting in continued low fertility rates and the acceptance of the small-family culture in both rural and urban areas. The lasting effects of these changes are threatening China's socioeconomic future, thereby requiring action from the government. While it remains to be seen which policies the government will choose to pursue, it must consider the long-term effects and address not only the exceptionally low fertility rates, but also the problems arising from them, for instance, the 4:2:1 problem, leftover men, and the sex ratio imbalance.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction and Methodology**

I was interested in learning more about the one-child policy and earlier family planning programs in China, and particularly how they impacted women in a larger sense. I initially wanted to examine women's attitudes towards the family planning policies and how they changed over time, but I quickly realized not much information is available about how women felt towards the government's actions because the political climate in China does not allow for surveys or criticism of the government. I realized that at the same time these policies were being enforced, China's economy was being transformed into a market economy. I knew from the language and history classes that I have taken on China, and from global news, that China is now dealing with a huge gender imbalance and continued low fertility rates even though the one-child policy has been repealed. I was curious to learn how the family planning policies and economic changes worked together, how they were related to the gender imbalance and low fertility rates facing China today, and what effects they had not only on controlling population growth but on Chinese culture and women.

My research is qualitative, and I collected both primary and secondary sources to understand the reasons behind the changing attitudes of women in China towards childbearing and family planning. The majority of the secondary sources I used were journal articles analyzing the effects of family planning policies, the history and development of the policies, as well as trends among women over time regarding fertility and attitudes towards family planning policies and childrearing. The primary sources I used were journal articles conveying the findings of new research and surveys that had been conducted in China, as well as an original documentary by Carma Hinton interviewing women in Longbow, China. Due to the nature of the political atmosphere in China, it is difficult to conduct surveys because it is not often allowed.

When surveys and interviews in China are allowed, they are often accompanied by government officials which can lead to interviewees withholding information out of fear of political repercussions. Limited surveys and interviews with Chinese students on campus would have been helpful, but COVID-19 has made it impossible for me to do so, which further limited this study.

The primary focus of this paper is to evaluate what caused the changes in rural women's attitudes towards family planning, particularly the changes in how many children women want to have and their views towards sons and daughters. Rural areas were slower to change than urban areas, which by nature encourage smaller families and offer more opportunities for women. Historically, Chinese culture emphasized large families and a preference towards sons. Large families, with five or six children, were important in rural areas not only to working and maintaining the family farm and land but also to preserving the family line and guaranteeing support in the parents' old age. Sons were preferred to daughters because they played a more active role in society and bore responsibility as the primary providers for their family and parents in old age. Daughters were raised to marry a suitable partner and when they married, they would leave their family to become a part of their husbands' family and take care of his parents. Today in rural China, the culture has changed significantly, and the preference now is for smaller families with only one or two children, not particularly caring if they have sons or daughters. Alternatively, more Chinese people are choosing not to get married or not to have children at all. This is evidenced by the decline in fertility rates over the past forty years in China, and the continued low fertility rates even as the policies have been relaxed and repealed.

These attitude changes were a direct result of the family planning policies that began to be implemented in the 1970s, as well as the economic reform in which China engaged in the



1980s. Due to the stringent enforcement of the family planning policies, women began to see what their lives would look like with fewer children and access to contraceptives, something that had not been present in Chinese society before, but they did not have many opportunities outside the home when policy implementation began. However, when the economic reforms started, women, rural women, in particular, had more opportunities outside the home in education and the labor force, which soon began to create a voluntary small-family culture because women were enjoying their new freedoms and roles in society and did not want to return to the home. This small-family mindset meant women's primary focus became economic stability rather than childbearing and rearing, as they were only having one or two children and were working more. With more education and higher income, women desired fewer children and this was the trend for both rural and urban women, even though there were some disparities in type of work and level of income based on location.

The birth control policies themselves accounted for part of this shift in attitude, but the small-family mindset lingered after the policy was relaxed and eventually repealed because the policy implementation and the concurrent economic reforms fundamentally changed Chinese culture by altering the space in which women occupied in society. The coercive and strict implementation of the family planning policies of the 1970s, which often forced women to undergo abortions, sterilizations, and intrauterine device (IUD) implementation, was a major factor in initiating this cultural shift as it forced families to be smaller. With fewer children to raise, women's burden inside the home was lessened. As China engaged in opening up and reform in the 1980s, the labor market offered women unparalleled access and they began to significantly contribute to China's growing economy, as well as their families. In turn, women's status in society was elevated and daughters began to be valued as equally as sons, who were

historically favored. As families became reliant on only one or two children, each child became more important to the family and the traditional belief of sons being more important to daughters began to break down. This traditional preference was slow to change, however, leading to an abundance of sex-selective abortions, female infanticide, and female infant abandonment under the family planning policies. Because of this, there is a lack of women today which has also made them inherently more valuable to society. Interviews and surveys conducted with Chinese women revealed their changed attitudes towards family size and sex preference of their children.

As this study is qualitative and not quantitative, this correlation and association was observed primarily through existing literature that evaluated the family planning policies, family structure, and women's roles in society through surveys, interviews, and limited data analysis. In the literature, there was a clear relationship between women's opportunities outside the home and their attitudes towards family size and children. As women's participation in society at large increased, they generally desired fewer children, but this was exacerbated by the implementation of the family planning policies that did not allow for more than a couple of children per family. Given the sensitive political climate within China that prevents political criticism and outside research, the available information on this topic, both from the past and today in China, is extremely limited. While the data is limited, many of the works I used in this study documented women's attitudes by way of more recent surveys and interviews that demonstrated attitudes towards the policies, women's perspectives reflecting on the policy, and other factors impacting their opinions. This study is limited as this relationship has not been quantitatively proven and it is difficult to conduct unbiased and honest interviews in China, but the existing literature and recent research show a clear relationship between the family planning policies, the market reform policies, and the changes in women's attitudes towards children.

Chapter 2 gives a general overview of the development of family planning policies, the implementation, the various responses to the policies, and the impact on fertility rates. The family planning policies began in the 1970s primarily as political slogans encouraging families to be smaller, but the enforcement of these policies was highly coercive. The strict enforcement of these policies elicited resistance from families, leading to policy changes in the 1980s and the one-child policy, which was eventually relaxed and repealed in 2013. Chapter 3 discusses the changes in women's attitudes as a result of the family planning policies, focusing on how the policies liberated women from the patriarchal past of China and changed their attitudes regarding family size. This chapter also discusses the role policy enforcement had in forming women's attitudes towards the small-family culture, as well as the lasting cultural changes the policies created. Chapter 4 discusses other factors of women's changing attitudes, including differences in rural and urban women, as well as the changing role of women in Chinese society as a result of the market reform and the impact of the family planning policies. Chapter 5 is the analysis and evaluation which examines the fertility rates after the policies were relaxed, offering possible explanations for the continued low rates as well as possible courses of action moving forward. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the findings of the paper and presents various challenges facing China as a result of the family planning policies, changed attitudes, and continued low fertility rates in China.

## Chapter 2: Overview and Policy Background

### Overview

In the 1970s, China began to implement family planning policies as the rapid rate of population growth was threatening the country's goals of development. These policies began moderately, encouraging couples to get married later, have fewer children, and wait longer periods between having children. While these policies were aimed at creating a voluntary small-family culture, they were often enforced coercively and strictly. The policy was effective in decreasing fertility rates, as households were more likely to have two or three children, rather than the average five or six children in the past, but it was met with widespread resistance because of the style of enforcement. Women were subject to forced abortions, sterilizations, or IUD implementation, as well as general invasion of privacy as the state was now involved in women's personal health choices. There were various forms of resistance, perhaps the most striking being how families went around the policies, including hiding illicit pregnancies and engaging in female infanticide so the family could have another chance at a son.

In 1979, the policies became much stricter as the infamous one-child policy began to be implemented, giving the state power over birth planning. The consequences for violating the policy became more severe, particularly in rural areas. Over the next twenty years, family planning policies were slightly adjusted with social responses and policy effectiveness, and smaller families became the standard. Even though the policy began as voluntary in name but coercive in nature, over time, women were voluntarily choosing to have fewer children. When the family planning policies became more relaxed, China witnessed a consistent low rate of fertility, despite families being allowed to have more children. This is a clear demonstration of

the more permanent cultural shift to the small-family mindset, despite the government intending it to be a short-term shift in family size.

Over time, these family planning policies changed the culture regarding family from a filial and agrarian mindset of having large families to a modern, collective good effort to have small families. These policies showed women what opportunities they could have in life with fewer children and liberated them in this sense from the burdens of mothering many children, allowing them the time to fill a new space in society. Many women were open to having fewer kids and supported the goal of the official policies, and looking back, multiple generations of women have supported the government's actions regarding family planning and thus, have bought into the small-family mindset. However, many women did not support how the policies were enforced, as it was often coercive, treated women as a means to an end, and left women with intense physical and psychological distress.

The massive economic reforms that began in China in 1978 under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping also contributed to changing the culture surrounding family planning, specifically the attitudes of women towards having children. This opening up and reform of China created a society in which women had more options outside of the home, leading to a decrease in the desire to have large families. These market reforms opened up spaces for women in the labor market and higher education, liberating them from the patriarchal history of China that expected them to stay inside the home and raise children. As these reforms primarily took place in urban settings, the difference between urban and rural women's attitudes towards family planning is evidence of the impact these changes had in shifting the overall culture to a small-family mindset.

As a result of the creation and implementation of China's family planning policies from the 1970s forward, along with China's market reforms, the culture surrounding family planning and childbearing was changed. Chinese women are now more inclined to embrace the small-family mindset and reject the traditional model of larger families to fulfill their filial duty, even when the policies are loosened to allow for more children. China's family planning policies not only affected population size and demographics, but they fundamentally changed long-held cultural beliefs on the family make-up and the role of women in society.

## Development and Implementation

In 1979, the Chinese government introduced a plan to boost economic development by creating markets. However, China's already large population was growing too fast to sustain the proposed economic growth, so the government created the one-child policy to curtail this problem. It was always intended to be a "short term policy that aims to foster a voluntary culture of small families." (Ding & Hesketh, 2006, p. 371) Looser family planning policies had been in place in the 1970s, and while implementation was inconsistent and largely based on party slogans, such as "later, longer, fewer", they were highly effective in bringing down fertility rates. Despite this success, the one-child policy was implemented in 1979 and adjusted over time to be eventually repealed in 2015.

In Hong Zhang's article (2007), *From Resisting to Embracing? the One-Child Rule: Understanding New Fertility Trends in a Central China Village*, the development of family planning policies is divided into four phases: the moderate period from 1970-1976, the draconian period from 1977-1983, the adjusting period from 1984-1990, and the stabilizing and accepting period from 1991-2000. During the moderate period, households most commonly had two to

three children (Zhang, 2007, p. 863). It was during this period that the policy of “later, longer, and fewer” was emphasized through various campaigns. “Later” referred to the Chinese Communist Party’s requirements for later marriages, the woman having to be 23 and the man to be 25 to be given an official marriage license and recognition. “Longer” meant that there should be three years or more between having a first and second child, and “fewer” suggested that couples should have no more than two kids (Zhang, 2017, p. 143). At this early stage in family planning policies, enforcement was deemed lenient and an ideal more than a concrete law, but in reality, it was both coercive and effective.

In the 1970s, to begin to control population growth, rather than just put out idealistic slogans, the Chinese government implemented six different forms of intervention, particularly aimed at rural areas. These methods of state involvement included free access to contraceptives, abortion, and sterilization, enforcement of late marriage guidelines and incentivizing adhering to birth limits, campaigns to promote smaller family size and birth limits, the creation of a state family planning bureaucracy, and including population goals in the central planning process. (White, 2003, p. 184) “Socialist planning thus came to embrace human reproduction in much the same way that it embraced agricultural and industrial production. Local officials... now began to receive quotas for babies.” (White, 2003, p. 185) While these initial policies were technically voluntary, they had many coercive elements and there was a significant uptick in intrauterine device (IUD) insertions, abortions, and sterilizations (Zhang, 2017, p. 143). In the next period of policy development, coercion to ensure effective policy implementation became much more common.

In the draconian period, from 1977-1983, more families began to adhere to the two-child household norm, and households with only one child were on the rise (Zhang, 2007, p. 863). It

was during this time that the state officially implemented the stringent one-child policy, even though fertility rates had already declined from 5.81 children per household on average in 1970 to 2.75 in 1979 from the “later, longer, fewer” policy (Zhang, 2007, p. 860). Given the historical importance of large family sizes in rural areas, to be able to have hands to work the fields and children to support their parents in old age, there was significant pushback and outrage from rural families in the early 1980s. As government policy became more aggressive, so did the people it was affecting. The family planning policies created a fundamental value conflict with which people were forced to reconcile; the duty to the nation, which would prioritize following the family planning policies, and the patriarchal duty to family and ancestors, which emphasizes having many children and having sons to guarantee one’s future (White, 2003, p. 197). Rural families were more inclined to prioritize the protection of their family lineage before serving the socialist collective. White (2003) characterizes this resistance into three categories: confrontation, evasion, and accommodation.

While the cultural pressure to have big families in rural areas was the impetus for rebellion, families were angry with local cadres and doctors that enforced the national policy and how they did so. Women that were carrying illegal pregnancies or had reached the child limit faced intense and coercive pressure to undergo abortions, sterilizations, and the implementation of IUDs. Given the nature of the rural healthcare system in the post-Maoist, de-collectivized era, sometimes these birth control procedures were botched, resulting in various issues and disputes. Soon, these disputes all too commonly caused angry families to engage in direct and violent confrontation for those who reported violations of the policies, performed the procedures, or generally implemented the policies. In a county in Jiangsu province, from January of 1987 to May of 1988, one-third of 381 reported “incidents of revenge” were related to birth planning



(White, 2003, p. 188). However, along with a rising consciousness of an individual's legal rights, there was a slow uptick in rural people appealing to the law and going to court to challenge corrupt policy implementation.

The second most common form of resistance to the stringent birth control policies was "evasion." Families would attempt to conceal their illegal pregnancies until it was too late, either by timing it well to be able to physically cover it up, leaving the village during the pregnancy, or by bribing doctors to fake monthly examinations and procedures. Additionally, some couples would live together or marry without the legal marriage permit, as the policy was largely enforced on legally married couples (White, 2003, p. 190). While this period witnessed the strictest policies, it also gave way to increased inconsistencies in policy enforcement. Officials were inclined not to disclose high numbers of illegal pregnancies and births as it reflected poorly on them, which had a direct effect on their income and standing. Local cadres were also sometimes sympathetic to their townspeople, particularly those with only one girl, and were more willing to turn a blind eye to their policy violations until they had a son. This also encouraged the practice of levying fines for illegal births rather than engaging in preventative measures to stop the pregnancies from happening or being carried to term (White, 2003, p. 191).

This inconsistent application of the one-child policy and frequency of loopholes led to various unforeseen consequences and a change in the law. Since the policy was met with widespread resistance in the early 1980s in the countryside, it was changed in 1984 to allow for more households to have two children under certain circumstances. "For rural China, then, the one-child limit has been more of a goal than a reality." (White, 2003, p. 187) If a rural household had a daughter, they were allowed to have a second child in hopes of it being a son, though they had to wait four or five years to do so. In some places, even families with one son were allowed

to have a second child. “Given the practical difficulties, the central government relaxed the policy to make it more feasible in rural areas.” (Zhang, 2017, p. 144) While now officially permitting for more children, this adjusted policy resulted in stricter implementation of the birth planning targets and harsher crackdowns on those who violated them, “strengthened by closing up loopholes for local implementation and supervision.” (Zhang, 2007, p. 862)

Finally, the third avenue of resistance during the draconian period was “accommodation”, which included female infanticide, female infant abandonment, and sex-selective abortions (White, 2003, p. 193). This unintentionally, but slowly, altered attitudes towards gender roles and family structure. Because families could only have one or two children, each child became more important to securing the patrilineal line and providing for their parents in old age, regardless of gender, and this was soon reflected in parent’s treatment of their daughters. Throughout the rest of the adjusting period and into the 1990s and early 2000s, the family planning policies continued to evolve but became more common-place and socially acceptable. One-child households became as common as two-child households, and later, the standard, while families became more neutral in their gender preferences for children (Zhang, 2007, p. 864).

Another reason the family planning policies were revisited and adjusted in the 1990s and early 2000s was in part due to the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, Egypt, and the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, China. The setup of the Chinese government and the size of the country requires that sanctioned policies from the central government are enforced by officials at the township and village level. Due to the resistance the policies faced, particularly in rural areas in China in the 1980s, it became clear that this heavy-handed top-down approach was not working and signified a need for change in the public’s perception of the policies. While the family planning policies brought

an improvement to reproductive health in China, women did not have many choices regarding their care. At these conferences, feminist activists helped transform “the agenda from the achievement of demographic targets to the enhancement of women’s sexual and reproductive health, choice, and rights.” (Greenhalgh, 2001, p. 852) It was a more patient-centered approach, that “provides better quality care and a choice among contraceptive methods, in addition to an expanded range of reproductive health services.” (Hardee et al., 2004, p. 75) While it gave women a bit more freedom and a higher quality of care, the policies were still controlling fertility rates quite strictly.

In 2012, steps towards officially repealing the one-child policy and allowing more children to be born were taken. A think tank that works closely with the Chinese national government proposed a three-step policy transition that would allow a national two-child policy by 2015, and all birth limits removed by 2020 (Basten & Jiang, 2015, p. S98). In 2013, the government announced a relaxation of the one-child policy and began its dissolution (Whyte et al., 2015 p. 144) in favor of a two-child policy. However, since the one-child policy has been officially repealed, the fertility rate as of 2018 is only 1.7 (World Bank, 2018), and China is now facing another slew of problems as a consequence of the intense family planning policies.

## Policy Results

While the one-child policy and other family planning policies created some new problems in China, it was extremely effective at bringing down fertility rates and slowing the rate of population growth to substantially grow the economy. The fertility rate is defined as the average number of children born to women during their reproductive years. This decreased from 2.9 in 1979 to 1.7 in 2004, though the majority of that change actually took place before the one-

child policy was implemented. Between 1970 and 1979, the fertility rate decreased from 5.9 to 2.9. As the implementation of the policies was different in urban and rural areas, it follows that in 2004, the urban fertility rate was 1.3, and the rural fertility rate was just under 2.0. (Hesketh et al., 2005, p.1172)

Since the one-child policy has been revealed, one study evaluating fertility trends discovered that according to official sources, “among the estimated more than 11 million couples who were eligible to have a second child under the new rule, only 1.69 million had applied as of August 2015, accounting for 15.4% of such couples,” (Guo et al., 2019, p. 247). This study examined the total fertility rate (TFR) for China based on a 2015 mini-census, as well as the TFR for specific cohorts within China. It found that the TFR in 2015 was 1.047, an exceptionally low fertility rate and a decrease from 2010 when the one-child policy was still in place, which sat at 1.188 (Guo et al., 2019, p. 247). Interestingly, the rural and urban TFRs are different. In 2015, the urban TFR was 0.914 and the rural TFR was 1.265. Both values are decreases from 2010, in which the urban TFR was 0.979 and the rural TFR was 1.444 (Guo et al., 2019, p. 248). As enforcement of the family planning policies was stricter in urban areas, it follows that the fertility rates would be slightly different between rural and urban communities.

Along with declined fertility rates, another figure that has changed with the family planning policies is the sex ratio at birth, defined as the proportion of male to female births. In industrialized countries, this ratio is typically somewhere between 1.03 and 1.07, however, since 1979 in China, this rate has slowly continued to increase. It was 1.06 in 1979, 1.11 in 1988, and 1.17 in 2001 (Hesketh et al., 2005, p.1172). Again, this ratio is different in rural and urban areas and changes with birth order, as the policies in rural areas generally allowed more exceptions to

the one-child policy. Overall, however, the sex ratio increases with each successive birth, indicating a sustained preference for having sons in Chinese culture.

Even though each child had become more important to the family, most women still feel pressure from their older family members and society-at-large to have sons. A 45-year-old woman explained this by saying, “Our generation treats girls and boys equal. But there is a common sentence in the village: boys are treasure, girls are trouble.” (Hardee et al., 2004, p. 72) The numbers reflect this sentiment.

### **Chapter 3: Family Planning and Women's Changing Attitudes**

From the start, the Chinese government intended the one-child policy and other family planning policies to be temporary to create a small-family culture. This goal was certainly achieved. Within a few decades, the culture had fundamentally shifted away from feudalistic and agrarian obligations of having large families to a culture in which most women voluntarily prefer small families. This can be attributed to a few different influences, but in large part is due to the impact of the policy itself on changing women's attitudes and status, as well as how the policy was implemented and enforced.

These attitude changes include women's perspective of the effects of the family planning policies on their lives, in terms of whether they felt it had an overall positive or negative effect. At first, women did not believe the policies had an overall positive effect, as the implementation was forced and coercive. However, over time as the policies changed and the more long-term positive effects became visible, women's attitudes began to change. Additionally, women's attitudes towards having children changed. In the early 1970s, women were accustomed to having an average of six children and resistant to having a small family. Over the thirty years of policy development and implementation, this changed, and women voluntarily preferred having a small family over a large one. These changes also involved women's attitudes surrounding the use of different types of contraceptives. Abortions became more normalized over time, and IUD implementation is the favored choice of contraception for many women in China today. Finally, women's attitudes regarding the sex preference of their children also changed with the family planning policies (Hardee et al., 2004, p. 72), as daughters became more valuable to society-at-large and their families. This challenged the traditional Chinese belief of men being more valuable than women.

In terms of women's liberation from an inferior status to men, the one-child policy showed women the opportunities they could have without the burden of multiple children by having access to contraceptives, something that had not been accessible in China before. While women supported the policy officially and enjoyed the benefits it allowed them both inside and outside of the home, the enforcement and implementation of the policies gave women hesitation, but this also contributed to altering their attitudes and societal status. Their status was certainly elevated in comparison to China before the 1970s, however, the policy's focus was not first and foremost in the interest of women's health and choices. As enforcement began in a coercive and aggressive manner, women were often uncomfortable with the forms of birth control and the invasion of privacy in their health by local officials. But as the policies changed and women began to see the positive effects of contraceptives and other manners of birth control on their lives, these hesitations started to fade. Within thirty years of the family planning policies being implemented, Chinese culture and society have fundamentally changed, in that it now prefers the small-family model and has removed itself from the patriarchal past as women now have roles outside of the home and are more valued members of society.

## Women's Liberation

In the 1970s, when the "later, longer, fewer" policies were put in place, the government justified these policies as helping to improve women's health and to liberate them. Getting married later, by waiting longer between having children, and having fewer children would allow women more opportunities outside the home, in work, and education. It would also be better for not only the women's health but their children's health as well. In turn, this liberation of women thanks to the state, would increase women's status in society and give them a larger role in

contributing to national development. The party was deemed the savior and hero of women who had been oppressed by the traditional family in China. In this way, “Women's liberation was inextricably linked to national liberation: in emancipating women, the party was also liberating the nation from a semicolonial, semifeudal past, transforming it into a modern, powerful nation able to reclaim its rightful place in the world.” (Greenhalgh, 2001, p. 853)

However, in 1979, with the nation's impending economic crisis and the decision to reform the Chinese market, the state birth planning policies took on a different function. They no longer prioritized liberating and serving women, but instead began to use women as a means to achieve an end goal that would benefit the entire nation and future generations. “During the 1980s and early 1990s the women's health and liberation narrative remained the official line, but, in fact, women's interests were radically subordinated to those of the nation.” (Greenhalgh, 2001, p. 854) Despite this change, the effect of the policy was the same – it brought about the small-family culture and gave women the possibility of playing a different role in the family. This led to many women supporting the policies, even though the focus was not necessarily intended to liberate women.

In 1996 and 1998, some researchers surveyed women, ages 20-55, in Jiangsu, Anhui, and Yunnan about what effects the family planning policies had on their health, education, job opportunities, income, leisure time, and their household work. Overwhelmingly, the majority of women felt that these family planning policies had overall positive effects on these aspects of their lives. However, there were slight variations between rural and urban provinces. The most positively rated benefits were better health, less household work, more income, and more job opportunities. In Jiangsu, over 96% of women said these were benefits of family planning, for



Anhui and Yunnan, nearly 80% or more of women perceived these things as benefits. (Hardee et al., 2004, p. 73)

This survey also highlighted the generational differences among women towards state birth planning policies. The older generation of women did not have access to contraceptives or family planning during their child-bearing years and often had many kids. One 60-year-old woman who had five children said, “Now young people are so happy—they have family planning. At that time, we didn’t want to make more children but we had no family planning methods.” (Hardee et al., 2004, p. 71) This sentiment was reflected by other women of the older generation, who wished they would have had access to family planning resources and more options outside of the home. Another woman interviewed, a 70-year-old mother to five, said that after having three children, her capability to work and to socialize was severely limited because she had to take care of her children. She said, “If family planning had been available earlier, my life would have been different. That is my lifelong regret. Because I had too many children, I had to quit.” (Hardee et al., 2004, p. 73) One woman interviewed in Carma Hinton’s documentary (1984), “Small Happiness: Women of a Chinese Village”, said she supported birth control and having fewer children. This woman said that when her children do not listen to her and do not help with the farm or house, she tells them “Too bad birth control came too late for you!” (19:18-20:00)

The middle generation of women, on whom the one-child policy was enforced, had a unique perspective to offer. In general, these women tended to support the policies as they saw the positive effects it could and did have on their job opportunities, household burden, and income. However, many women were also hesitant at first to be told how many children they were allowed to have, even though they were open to having fewer children. The one-child

policy allowed these women a chance to play a new role in the Chinese economy and have more autonomy over what they did with their time. Multiple women indicated that due to the family planning policies, more women began working outside of the home, and in turn, their social status was elevated. This began to change the culture: “Rather than wanting more children, women said people now place a priority on how they can make money to provide better housing and education for their children.” (Hardee et al., 2004, p. 73) While many women saw the positive benefits of the family planning policies, they also had concerns about how the policy was implemented and enforced, particularly those with irreversible consequences, such as mandatory sterilization.

The youngest generation, the women who had been born under the one-child policy and were around the child-bearing age at the time of the interviews, showed the result of the changing culture around family size over time. These women noted that their mothers and mothers-in-law would share information about reproductive health with them, largely emphasizing that having more children means a larger burden on the family, and that, “If you have more children, you will become a baby-making machine and will get old very quickly.” (Hardee et al., 2004, p. 71)

Women understood the health risk that having many children could pose, and after a few decades of access to contraceptives and policies limiting the number of children women could have, they had begun to teach their daughters about the small-family mindset that was imprinted upon them. This young generation of women indicated they were content with only having one or two children, and that they did not want more than that. Some survey research has shown a direct correlation between age and support for China’s family planning policies; in a survey conducted in 2005, 85.42% of women ages 20-29 supported the policies, 80.11% of women 30-

39 support them, 79.71% of women ages 40-49 supported them, 74.31% of women ages 50-59 supported them, and only 67.86% of women above the age of 60 supported the policies (Cao et al., 2009, p. 368). The impact of these policies over time on women's attitudes towards having children is evident.

## Impact of Policy Enforcement on Changing Attitudes

The enforcement of the family planning policies beginning in the 1970s was inconsistent, often coercive, and did not prioritize women's health and choices, but instead prioritized preventing a national crisis from occurring. Because of how the policy was being enforced, some women were slow to accept the small-family mindset and support the policies. While the family planning campaign of "later, longer, fewer" in the 1970s was technically voluntary, it was enforced at the local level by grassroots birth planning workers. Those in charge of enforcement took their job very seriously, which led to large-scale coercion. "These birth planning enforcers kept detailed records on each woman of child-bearing age under their responsibility, including past births, contraceptive usage and even menstrual cycles, in many reported instances becoming "menstrual monitors" who tried to detect out-of-quota pregnancies at an early stage." (Whyte et al., 2015, p. 150) They became involved in every aspect of women's fertility and family planning.

If a woman became pregnant when she was not supposed to, local officials would harass her and her family to have an abortion, and after a woman had a third child, particularly women in rural areas, she would be pressured to have an intrauterine device (IUD) inserted or to undergo sterilization. Other ways in which families were pressured into following the guidelines were threats that if they had a child out of turn, that child would be denied household registration,

which excludes them from a myriad of other societal benefits, such as education and ration coupons (Whyte et al., 2015, p. 150). The numbers reflect this trend. In 1971, there were 6.17 million IUD insertions, 1.74 million female sterilization operations, and 3.91 million induced abortions. In 1979, there were 30.58 million birth control operations, 5.29 million female sterilization, and 7.86 million induced abortions (Whyte et al, 2015, p. 151). Given such a large increase in these numbers, combined with the various forms of resistance to the policies discussed earlier, it stands to reason that this was not voluntary family planning, but rather quite coercive, particularly before the implementation of the one-child policy.

While enforcement could be coercive, as mentioned before, having access to contraceptives was a new phenomenon in China for most women, and many of them were open to the idea of having fewer children. But, the methods of contraception, primarily IUDs and sterilization, gave many women pause. Even with IUDs, there was a possibility of contraceptive failure, in which a woman would end up having to undergo an abortion, hide their pregnancy, or have an illegal birth. In Jiangsu, 29% of 1,500 women interviewed had a pregnancy as a result of contraceptive failure, 12% of 1,496 women in Anhui did, and 9% of 1,505 women in Yunnan experienced this as well (Hardee, 2004, p. 71). Though the chances of contraceptive failure were relatively low, it was still a concern for some women. Sterilization, a much more drastic procedure as it is irreversible, was more controversial. One woman cited concerns about having a child that might later show developmental disabilities in which he could not walk or talk, and if the woman had been sterilized already after two births, she would not be able to have another child. Another woman expressed concerns about the marriage ending in divorce, and if the woman wants to remarry later, she will not be able to have children after being sterilized (Hardee, 2004, p. 71).

Women's attitudes towards contraceptive use were cautious at first, especially given the coercive and forced utilization that often required a surgical procedure and potentially irreversible results in the case of sterilization. Many of these women underwent physical and psychological distress, including the women that were in charge of enforcing the policies at the grassroots level in the 1970s. Their personal reproductive health was no longer personal, but privy to the government. Local women in charge of enforcing the policies were sometimes attacked and ridiculed by families on which they were enforcing the policies. They also had to follow the policies themselves, while simultaneously being in charge of mandating the birth programs on local women and their families. It was not an easy adjustment and was met with resistance and hesitation, at first, but as women began to see the results of contraceptive use and how the small family changed their lives, attitudes towards contraceptive use began to change.

## Cultural Changes

The creation and implementation of family planning policies and programs led to a fundamental shift in Chinese culture, driven by women's changing attitudes towards family planning and their changing role in society. From the start, a stated goal of the policies was to create a voluntary small-family culture, but through enforcement, the policies were far from voluntary. Despite this, over a few decades with the aging of younger generations who were born under these policies, the culture did shift to a voluntary small-family mindset. Women were more inclined to prefer having only one or two children, as it allowed them to pursue opportunities outside of the home, and cyclically, the more educated and the higher income women earned, the stronger the support for the policies and the fewer women wanted to have multiple children. Additionally, women were less willing to bear the large financial burden of multiple children.

Before these intense reproductive policies were passed, the fertility rate in China was nearly 6, meaning that on average, women were giving birth six times in their life. Women had many children for multiple reasons, the most obvious being they did not have access to contraceptives or family planning assistance programs. However, it was more than simply not having the means to control fertility. China, a country with one of the oldest and richest histories, has a long cultural tradition of filial piety, a Confucian value of obeying, respecting, and caring for one's elders, and passing on the family line through sons. Historically, when couples were married in China, the bride would leave her family to become part of the husband's family, moving to their home and taking care of his parents. "That's what a wife is for, open the door and establish descendants... the more children, the more prosperity. You give birth to as many as your fate has in store." (Hinton, 1985, 18:54-19:13) Males, however, were the guarantee to passing on the family line and having security in old age. When men married, for the most part, they did not leave the home and the eldest son was responsible for caring for his parents in old age. This cultural norm is reflected in the language.

In written Chinese, the character that means "to marry a woman" is 娶 (Qǔ). When broken down into its components, the top half of the character is 取 (Qǔ), which means "to take," and the bottom half of the character is 女 (Nǚ), which means "woman." To marry a woman is to take a woman. On the other hand, the word that means "to marry a man" is 嫁 (Jià). When this is broken down, the radical component is 女 (Nǚ), which means "woman," and the right side of the character is 家 (Jiā), which means "home" or "family." The makeup of this character reflects the idea in traditional China of the woman leaving her home and joining another family and household when she marries a man. Today, a more neutral term for getting married is used often.

Families would have a lot of children to ensure they had sons to carry on the family line. There was also the fear that if they had only one son, something might happen which causes him to be unable to care for the family adequately, so they wanted to have multiple sons to ensure their future. Another reason why families were large is that, until recently, China has been primarily an agrarian and rural society. Families needed more bodies and hands to work in the fields to sustain their crops. This was a longstanding traditional belief in Chinese culture that was not going to be driven out easily, hence the severity of the policies and repercussions for violating them.

However, by 2004, after a little over 30 years of the family planning policies being in place, the average fertility rate had fallen to just 1.7 (Hesketh et al., 2005, p. 1172) and it has remained at 1.6 or 1.7 since (World Bank, 2018). Even as policies began to be relaxed in the 2000s and eventually repealed, fertility rates have remained low and pose a challenge to China's future. Today, it is largely by preference and voluntary for women to want fewer children. Particularly the younger generation of women feel that they have been liberated from the hold of traditional, feudal China in which they had to remain in the home, essentially as baby-making machines. While the enforcement of the policies was largely not in the best interests of women and their rights and liberation, but primarily focused on the nation's best interests, this was still a result of the changes in family size and structure. A very traditional way of thinking, referred to in Mandarin as “男主外女主内”, meaning “men go out to work and women stay at home” was being challenged and changed over time. Women had better access to higher education than before and had more opportunities in the job market that gave them a higher socioeconomic status (Chen et al., 2010, p. 40).

The role that men played in the families created a culture in which sons were preferred to daughters. During the implementation of the one-child policy, this cultural belief was exacerbated in many ways. Due to the new technology of ultrasounds and the introduction and normalization of abortions in China, even though it was illegal, sex-selective abortions were common because of the societal pressure of having a son. When the female child was not aborted, female infant abandonment and infanticide were also common practices (White, 2003, p. 193). Today, the sex preference of children has changed, but some bias in favor of having sons still exists. “Although infanticide of girls is probably very rare now, less aggressive treatment of sick female infants is known to occur.” (Hesketh et al., 2005, p. 1173) Though younger generations were more supportive of the one-child policy and having smaller families, “regardless of which generation they are a part of, women have all felt pressure to have sons.” (Hardee et al., 2003, p. 74)

While in some cases the preference of having male children was exacerbated, in other ways, attitudes began to change towards the value of daughters that challenged this traditional belief. Families were having fewer children, so each child’s worth to providing for the family was increasing. Additionally, because of the market reforms, young women were able to find employment in urban areas and provide for their parents. Daughters tended to be more diligent and consistent at sending money back home to their families (Zhang, 2007, p. 867-68), which contributed to dispensing of the idea that only sons could take care of their family. Furthermore, parents were expected to raise quality citizens who could participate in advancing China’s economy (Zhang, 2007, p. 869), encouraging parents to invest in the education and development of their children, regardless of gender. If parents failed to provide well enough for their children, they lost face and were considered to be bad parents (Zhang, 2007, p. 857), further motivating



them to care equally for their sons and daughters. Additionally, because of the imbalanced sex ratio at birth as a result of the slow-to-change preference of having sons, there are now fewer women. This inherently elevated the status of daughters in the family and women in society, dispensing with the idea that daughters were only a small happiness to their families.

## **Chapter 4: Other Factors in Women's Changing Attitudes**

“No matter if it is a white cat or a black cat; as long as it can catch mice, it is a good cat.”

Deng Xiaoping infamously stated this regarding China's market reforms, indicating a shift from China's primary focus on political ideology to economic growth. This way of thinking led the Chinese to embrace various market reforms that utilized some characteristics of capitalism to rapidly grow the economy and catch up with the West. These policies were implemented alongside the state birth planning policies and programs, both of which intended to save China from the drain of overpopulation on the country's resources.

While the family planning programs impacted women's lives on a largely documented scale, these economic changes also impacted the lives of women, and in many ways, gave them more options and better access to the labor market, education, and empowerment opportunities. Had the family planning policies not been accompanied by this market reform in China, women's attitudes towards childbearing would not have changed so drastically. The prevalence of contraceptives and the state's involvement in planning births showed women what their lives within the household could look like with fewer children, but their role outside the home still would not have changed significantly if their access to these opportunities did not increase. The economic reforms allowed for this fundamental shift in gender roles, thus contributing to women's changing attitudes towards family planning and childbearing. However, as there is a massive rural-urban divide in China, both the family planning policies and the market reform policies were implemented in different ways in different areas of the country. Thus, rural women and urban women had different changes in their attitudes towards family planning, as well as rural-urban migrant women who then returned to their rural communities and impacted other women's views.

## Urban-Rural Attitude Discrepancies

In rural areas, the family planning policies, in general, were less stringent in enforcement than those in urban areas with higher and denser populations. Rural families were often granted exceptions and allowed to have another child under certain circumstances, sometimes enforcement was relaxed and instead of preventing illicit births, local enforcers allowed them to happen and simply fined families for violating them or excluded their children from accessing resources. This contributed to impacting women's attitudes towards the small-family culture because there were more exceptions and historically, rural families were larger than urban ones. The fertility rate is certainly influenced by more than just official reproductive policies and women's individual choices. Women's education opportunities, labor market opportunities, empowerment, access to contraceptives and family planning programs, and many other factors influence fertility rates (Cao et al., 2009, p. 360). This is a common trend seen in western countries. With the elevation of women's status and opportunities, fertility rates and the desire for children decreases. In urban areas, the enforcement of family planning policies was strict, as these areas were highly populated and contributed to the drain on resources the most. Exceptions were not as common and enforcement was more standardized, as the government's presence in urban areas and large cities is relatively strong.

In urban areas, women generally had better access to higher education and job opportunities, which led them to have higher education than rural women and higher-income jobs than rural women. This directly impacted their desire to have children and their support for the family planning policies. There is a strong positive correlation between education achievement levels and support for China's family planning policy. Nearly 65% of women with

lower education supported the policy, 81.59% of women with a high school degree supported the policy, 87.68% with a bachelor's degree supported it, 93.59% of women with a master's degree support it, and 96.15% of women with a Ph.D. support the policy (Cao et al., 2009, p. 370). This could be a function of a few different influences. Women with higher education generally have “higher socioeconomic status and greater exposure to the influence of modern values than women with less education receive.” (Chen et al., 2010, p. 40) Women with higher education in China also could understand the government's rationale better behind implementing the family planning policies, leading them to support it more actively.

The type of work in rural and urban areas is also quite different. Some common jobs for women from rural areas tend to be farmers, migrant laborers, factory workers, or be unemployed, whereas women from urban areas tend to work as government employees, business managers, teachers, other professional jobs, or as students (Cao et al., 2009). There is a correlation between the type of employment and support for the government's family planning policies and attitudes towards childbearing. “The number of children that women were willing to bear was lowest for students, business managers, teachers, and government employees and highest for unemployed women and farm women.” (Cao et al., 2009, p. 362) Additionally, in a survey completed in 2001, 57% of women indicated they would prefer to have two children, while 35% said they prefer only one child. Among these women, only 1.9% of women in urban areas wanted more than two children, while 5.8% of women overall wanted more than two children (Ding & Hesketh, 2006, p. 372).

These differences between rural and urban women are highlighted by the experience of rural-urban migrant women as they return to their rural homes. Women who returned to their homes after migrating to urban tended to bring urban ideas back with them, including better

knowledge of contraceptive use, female empowerment in terms of making decisions about marriage and family planning, and more. “Return migrant women who had been living in a large city were 37 percent more likely than rural nonmigrant women to desire a one-child family without son preference.” (Chen et al., 2010, p. 38) When they returned, nonmigrant women in rural areas would interact with them and be influenced by their ideas and perspectives. In this way, return migrant women acted as informal purveyors of China’s family planning policies and assisted in changing the culture to a small-family mindset.

### Women’s Growing Value to Society

Another result of the changing economic situation in China was greater awareness of the burdens that more children would bring families and particularly women, even if the government relaxed policies and encouraged larger families. Women cited concern about greater economic burden as the primary reason for not choosing to have more children even if the government allowed it, and the second most cited concern was difficulty in finding employment for the children (Cao et al., 2009, p. 369).

Hong Zhang (2007) argues in his article that there are “four emerging socio-economic and demographic factors that help facilitate new fertility trends and behavior,” (p. 864) namely new attitudes about child-rearing as the primary means of securing old-age support and methods of coping, the changing meaning of filial piety or paying respect to one’s elders, new standards of what it is to be a good parent, and an evolved understanding of the link between fertility behavior and poverty.

As families were having fewer children in accordance with government policy, each child became inherently more important and economically valuable to the family. Since families had

fewer chances at having a son due to strict birth control policies, many became reliant on their daughters as well. Given the economic changes and the new opportunities for women in China, daughters became increasingly more valuable to parents as they could now feasibly provide for their parents in old age. “Young women were more likely to find urban employment than their male counterparts” (Zhang, 2007, p. 867) and they “were often more generous and more consistent in sending money home” (p. 868) than sons were. In addition to the economic advantage seen in having girls, there were campaigns to promote having girls. One billboard in Hebei province reads, “生男生女都一样，女儿也是转后人,” meaning “There’s no difference between having a girl or a boy – girls can also continue the family line.” (Hesketh et al., 2005, p. 1173) Given these factors, the traditional Chinese belief of a son being a big happiness and a daughter being a small happiness (Hinton, 1984) was being challenged. In the wake of the one-child policy, though seemingly counterintuitive with the occurrence of female infanticide and sex-selective abortions, a daughter’s status in the family was elevated.

In Chinese culture, children are expected to care for and support their parents in old age. But as times have changed, so has this expectation. With the reform and opening-up policies and the mass industrialization of China, rural-to-urban migration increased at exponential rates. Most of the rural youth fled the countryside seeking work in urban areas, some of whom never plan on returning. The central government began to focus on enhancing “the quality of China’s people for participation in a modern globalized economy,” (Zhang, 2007, p. 869) relying on the parent’s aspirations for their children to live a better life than they did. Naturally, parents began to do all that they were capable of to provide a better life for their children and ensure they were high-quality citizens that could contribute meaningfully to China’s growing economy. This was reflected in the greater emphasis on education for rural Chinese children, regardless of gender as

their children were equally valuable. Hence, parents became more inclined to invest in their child, rather than in having many children (Zhang, 2017, p. 152).

This mindset was in large part a cause of the continued low fertility rates in China because families wanted to concentrate their resources to give their child the best chance at success. If they had multiple children, these resources were stretched thin and neither child was given the best education. Parents were now under the societal expectation that they provide all of their children with a good and quality education, and if they could not afford to do so, they were viewed as bad parents (Zhang, 2007, p. 871). The fear of this backlash led more families to willingly have only one child, even if it were a girl and even if they had been allocated an exception to have a second child. In one county between 1992 and 2001, “at least 22,484 qualified couples decided not to apply for a “second-birth permission certificate” and gave up their chance for a second birth voluntarily.” (Zhang, 2007, p. 857) With younger generations of women, the preference for sons was becoming an antiquated idea. “37% of women (predominantly young urban women) claimed to have no preference for one sex over the other,” (Hesketh et al., 2005, p. 1173) which was a significant increase from the past.

As children moved to urban areas to work and marriages between longer distances became more common practice, generations of families began to live separately, and expectations regarding filial obligation changed. “*Liangbian Dianli*” marriages became more commonplace as a direct result of the one-child policy, which allowed for the bride and groom to remain filial to and financially responsible for both sets of parents (Zhang, 2005, p. 69). Raising children was no longer understood as the best guarantee to good living in old age because there were fewer children and increased independence, and in its wake, elderly parents became more self-reliant and self-sufficient. Since having fewer children helped relieve the financial burden,

as they often migrated to urban areas, parents dealt with empty nests earlier on, giving them time to work and invest in their own future. While parents were more aware of this change and capable of adjusting to it, they still hoped that they had raised filial children who would support them in old age. Often, given they provided well for their child, they would indeed be paid back (Zhang, 2005, p. 75). This issue of having fewer children to care for their parents and grandparents has become known as the 4:2:1 phenomenon, meaning that “increasing numbers of couples will be solely responsible for the care of one child and four parents.” (Hesketh et al., 2005, p. 1174) While there is concern about this filial duty not being fulfilled, the idea of “saving face” is an especially important cultural aspect in China, in which people will try to create a positive public image of themselves and their families and would not risk doing something to destroy that. Not taking care of your elder family members would be “losing face” in the public eye, and this is inherently an incentive for children to take care of their family members in old age.



## Chapter 5: Analysis and Evaluation

The family planning policies of the 1970s began a large change in China's society, demography, and culture. While in urban areas, as early as the 1930s families were already becoming smaller and women had more career opportunities than rural women, the family planning policies exacerbated the decline in fertility rates and the economic reforms accelerated women's liberation, particularly in rural areas which tend to change more slowly than urban areas. At first, these policies resulted in families in both urban and rural settings involuntarily becoming very small. However, over three decades, alongside the economic reforms, women's attitudes towards family size and their role in society changed quite quickly, and they began to voluntarily have fewer children.

The fertility rates in urban areas are on average lower than that in rural areas, in part due to the stricter policy enforcement but also in part due to the natural desire for smaller families that comes in urban places. With limited space, more career opportunities, higher expenses, and less of a practical need for many children, as is often the case in rural areas, urbanites tend to desire fewer children as is. However, in urban and rural China, fertility rates have stayed extremely low, and this is due to women's attitude changes in which they voluntarily prefer small families. As evidenced by the research presented in this paper, women are desiring fewer children for a myriad of reasons.

In the 1970s, when birth policies were first established, their coercive implementation forced women to have fewer children, which over time allowed them to see the different kind of life they could have without being tethered to the home and raising children. The stringent one-child policy at first exacerbated the traditional Chinese preference for sons, leading to an increase in female infant abandonment, female infanticide, sex-selective abortions, or general

neglect of female children. Over time, however, this indirectly elevated women's societal status as they became more valuable to the family, as well as society-at-large due to the shortage of women as the sex ratio has become unbalanced.

As the market and educational opportunities opened up to women with the economic reform of the 1980s, women's roles in the family continued to change and they became even more valuable. With these new opportunities outside of the home in the labor market and education, women began to desire fewer children and to marry later (Yu, 2015), leading to a consistent low fertility rate. The family planning policies and China's market reform changed women's attitudes towards childbearing, family size, and sex preference of their children, therefore accelerating the shift from China's once patriarchal and feudal culture to a more equal culture that values women more, resulting in continued low fertility rates despite the relaxation of family planning policies.

Due to this unexpected long-lasting attitude change, in which women are desiring fewer children, China faces a myriad of issues moving forward. Simply relaxing the family planning policies is not doing enough to bring fertility rates back up to a sustainable level to address China's aging population and the 4:2:1 issue. Fertility rates have continued to stay low despite families being permitted to have more children and interviewed women said they would not be inclined to have more children even if the government encouraged them to do so, because "they could not afford the cost of supporting and educating additional children." (Cao et al., 2009, p. 364) Other cited reasons for not wanting to have more children were concerns about both the mother and the child's employment opportunities, as well as simply not wanting to go through childbirth or risk their health again.

The family planning policies were only intended to create a short-term voluntary small-family culture in order to balance population and economic growth at a sustainable level. However, the long-term effects on women's attitudes towards family and fertility rates were unexpected. The policies were focused on the short-term with an impending fear of economic collapse. Between the first policy of "later, longer, fewer" and the implementation of the one-child policy, fertility rates experienced the most drastic change to date, dropping from 5.81 to 2.75 (Zhang, 2007, p. 860). This change occurred in less than a decade, but China still chose to create the stringent one-child policy in 1979, indicating that they had not yet achieved their goal of a voluntary small-family culture, or that the growing population was still deemed a threat to economic growth. However, fertility rates did not drop to below 2 until 14 years later, sitting at 1.8 in 1993 (World Bank, 2018). When the policy was relaxed in 2013 and then repealed in 2015, fertility rates remained at the same low level.

I believe these rates and the government's actions demonstrate the change in family culture from being involuntarily small to voluntarily small. Between 1970 and 1979, enforcement had been coercive and harsh, resulting in various forms of resistance on a large scale. The first policies succeeded in lowering fertility rates, but not at creating a voluntary small-family culture. The one-child policy certainly was not any more voluntary than the policies of the early 1970s, yet over the next few decades, a voluntary small-family culture emerged in both rural and urban areas – an impressive feat, though not a short-term change because the economic reforms also contributed to changing women's attitudes.

To address the issues arising from the exceedingly low fertility rates, there are several avenues of change the Chinese government could pursue. While China is currently operating under relaxed family planning policies, if the government were to completely repeal these

policies, fertility rates would likely continue to remain low because women's attitudes towards childbearing and their role in the family, as well as family culture in both rural and urban areas, has changed significantly. If the Chinese government wants to increase fertility rates to address their aging population and other socioeconomic problems, it is going to have a difficult time doing so without incentivizing families or considering the long-term effects of policies and campaigns. Though, the Chinese government historically has tended to solely focus on the short-term.

A good starting point to increasing fertility rates would be to survey women as to why they do not want to have more children and work from there in creating policy. For example, women were primarily concerned about being able to afford the cost of not just having children, but adequately funding the education of each child. The government could begin to address the additional costs and the competitiveness of education in China to curtail this concern. Another reason why women were hesitant to have more children was the mother losing her employment. The government could begin implementing social safety nets or protections for women in the workforce that would address these barriers preventing them from having more children. While an unorthodox approach to creating policy in China, it could prove to be extremely useful and effective in increasing fertility rates to a stable level. Women also cited the experience and health concerns of childbirth as a reason against having more children, the government could also begin here by examining the healthcare system in regard to childbirth. While these policy changes would potentially increase fertility rates, they do not address the other existing issues as a result of continued low fertility.

It is difficult to conjecture what policy China will choose to pursue. The Chinese government tends to use a top-down approach in creating policy with heavy-handed

enforcement. If China were to completely abolish all family-planning policies, it would likely do so under the guise of success. However, I do not expect that they will fully abolish all family-planning laws as the state may not be ready to release control over birth planning. The government may choose to launch a pro-fertility campaign operating under existing or slightly loosened policies, encouraging families to have more children using nationalist slogans, as their political history would suggest. Nonetheless, economic development also contributed significantly to lowering fertility rates, and the government is not likely to try to reverse these changes, but simply changing family planning policies will not adequately address fertility.

I think the most important lesson here for China to learn is to consider the larger picture and the long-term when enacting policy. Politically, Chinese history relies on short-term campaigns, participation on a mass scale, and fervent acceptance and support of the policies from the Chinese people. Often, the government has not acknowledged mistaken policies or wrongdoings, such as the Great Leap Forward Famine, suggesting the government likely will not admit fault with these policies. The family planning policies were considered to be an emergency measure, but in tandem with socioeconomic changes, have resulted in unforeseen consequences that will need to be addressed.

## Conclusion

Starting in the 1970s, China embarked on one of the most ambitious family planning programs in the world, primarily to address population concerns. What began as moderate policies and political slogans soon developed into intense, strict, coercive policies that did not prioritize the well-being and interests of women but used them as objects to save the country from economic ruin. These policies changed over the 1980s and 1990s, and the stringent one-child policy was eventually repealed in 2015. These policies were intended to create a voluntary small-family culture and slow down population growth, and they were incredibly successful at accomplishing this objective. However, even though the policies have been relaxed, fertility rates remain low, which are causing new issues. The family planning policies not only succeeded in slowing population growth but also accelerated the changing traditional cultural beliefs about the family and the role of women in society.

In the past, Chinese families were large and emphasized the role of sons as the primary caretakers of the family and the best way to preserve the family line. However, due to the impact of the family planning policies, the implementation of these policies, and the concurrent market reforms, the cultural viewpoints and family expectations changed dramatically. Women were open to having fewer children, but the enforcement of the policies was drastic and resisted at first. Over time as women began to see the way their lives changed with fewer children; they felt liberated from the oppressive nature of the traditional family in China. The government intended to use the family planning policies to increase women's status in society, but in 1979, they largely abandoned that goal in favor of saving the nation by controlling women's bodies (Greenhalgh, 2001, p. 854).

Despite the government shifting its focus to the economic crisis, women were liberated. They gained better access to education, the labor market, and were more empowered than they had ever been in the past. Women's status increased as they were playing a large part in the market and the nation's development, but also because the value of daughters increased. China slowly began to move away from the traditional preference for sons over daughters. Children, no matter their gender, became more important in securing the future for the family. Families wanted to provide the best education possible for their children, including the girls, to raise quality citizens that could contribute meaningfully to their country.

China's family planning policies, initially imposed to limit population growth, have established a new culture that has upended centuries-held familial beliefs and traditions. This new culture prefers small families and is beginning to value daughters as equally as sons. It has also liberated women from the feudalistic past, raising women's status in society.

## Challenges Moving Forward

China's family planning policies in conjunction with the opening up and reform of the market have led to significant changes in cultural beliefs, the demographic makeup of China, and the economy. While the policies adequately solved China's overpopulation issue, they have created various new challenges that will need to be addressed in the future to maintain a strong and healthy China. The family planning policies in China succeeded at slowing down population growth and creating a small-family mindset. However, as a result of the low fertility rates and the imbalanced sex ratio, China has new problems that the country will have to address moving forward. These issues include "leftover men", a rapidly aging population, the 4:2:1 problem, and women's resistance to increasing fertility rates.

One of the most pressing issues is the imbalanced sex ratio. The sex ratio in 2001 was 1.17 (Hesketh et al., 2005, p.1172), which means today, there are approximately 34 million more men than women in China (Ng & Tan, 2018). These men are referred to as “leftover men” and the imbalance is said to be caused by the “lost girls” who were aborted, abandoned, or killed as an infant under the influence of the one-child policy. This is disrupting the social balance, particularly when it comes to marriage. While the culture in China has become slightly more progressive than in the past in terms of women’s liberation and status relative to men, there is still immense pressure on young people to marry. “The shortage of women may have increased mental health problems and socially disruptive behavior among men and has left some men unable to marry and have a family.” (Hesketh, 2008, p. 1173) Additionally, because of the scarcity of women, there have been kidnappings and trafficking of women for men to take as their wives, as well as more sex workers, which creates the possibility of a rise in sexually transmitted diseases (Hesketh, 2008, p. 1173).

If fertility rates continue to stay low, as they have in other East Asian countries such as Japan, people ages 65 and older will vastly outnumber those between 20 and 34. This creates a plethora of issues that will have to be addressed by the government and policymakers in China. The labor force will be significantly smaller and unable to continue China’s impressive economic growth. This relates to the 4:2:1 issue mentioned earlier, of more couples having to care for both sets of parents and one child because there would be a large dependency on the state to step in and provide care for the elderly population (Basten & Jiang, 2015, p. S97). Older generations in China throughout their lives have been reliant on the government to provide security for them. However, with the change in demographics and the government’s new priorities, the aging population is at risk of being forgotten.



It seems very possible that fertility rates will continue to stay low, even if the government were to encourage women to have more children. Some 51% of women surveyed indicated they would not have more children, even if the government encouraged it, because “they could not afford the cost of supporting and educating additional children.” (Cao et al., 2009, p. 364) Nearly 22% of women said they would not have more children because they were concerned about their own and their child’s employment opportunities, and 13.8% of women simply were not willing to go through childbirth again and risk their health (Cao et al., 2009, p. 365). Other than these reasons, women are more liberated than they ever have been in China and are enjoying this newfound freedom from the patriarchal and oppressive culture they have faced in the past. They simply do not want more children, and this is a result of the family planning policies that created a small-family culture.

While the Chinese government was focused on the short-term threat of a population bomb that would severely hinder the country’s economic prosperity, it did not fully consider the long-term consequences of the family planning policies and the deep effects it would have on culture. To increase fertility rates to address these issues, Chinese policymakers need to find a way to incentivize women to have more children. According to the reasons women gave for not wanting more children, it seems if the government were to cover or lessen the costs of providing for and educating children, women would be more inclined to have additional children.

Women are also concerned about their job security and opportunities if they have more children to raise. One way the government could address this would be to create “powerful social safeguards... such as protecting the right of women to advance their careers despite the additional burdens of childbirth and raising children.” (Cao et al., 2009, p. 373) While women’s rights have made large advances in the past forty years or so in China, there is still room for

improvement and ways that the government could encourage greater equality between men and women.

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