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Decision Making on Fertility of Married Urban Women in China

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by

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Dedication

For my family.

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Table of Contents

ABSTRACT

The persistent fertility decline that has been spreading from Western European countries to the rest of the world has been a heated subject of research. It not only has serious impacts for local demographics and labor markets, but also affects global trends of population mobility. The Second Demographic Transition (SDT), a theoretical framework based on the study of social dynamics in Western Europe and other developed societies, has been widely adopted and examined by scholars around the world since its introduction in the 1970s. The mechanism of SDT is based on shifts in values, rather than a result of structural evolutions like the First or Classic Demographic Transition (FDT), which gives the theory a more culture-specific nature. Is the SDT as globally applicable as the FDT? Scholars offer different perspectives.

Many theoretical and empirical research on fertility trends in Asian countries emerged in recent years. In the case of China, for example, only part of the characteristics of current fertility trends are consistent with the Second Demographic Transition, and the unconformable rest are results of China's specific cultural influences (Yu and Xie 2019). This paper studies interviews of 18 urban middle-class women about their reproductive decision-making process, including their meaning-making of children and their strategic plan on having children. The result shows that urban middle-class women's values on fertility and the structural factors that shape their fertility decision both present remarkable generational differences. However, these shifts did not necessarily affect their ideal number of children. Under multiple influences of social norms, economic development and political agenda, China appears to be experiencing the First and the Second Demographic Transition partially and simultaneously.

INTRODUCTION

First demographic transition (FDT) indicates the shifting process of population from high fertility, high mortality to low fertility, low mortality. It was first observed in the 18th century in Western Europe, where industrialization and modernization achieved world-leading progress. Due to the advancement in technology and medical services as well as improvement in living standard and hygiene conditions, mortality declined and life expectancy lengthened. High fertility behavior intended as an adaptation to high infant mortality was thus rendered less necessary. In addition, the professionalization of the job market and the establishment of the modern education system has changed people's living arrangement and raised the cost of child-rearing. As a result, parents chose to have less children in order to optimize the economic outcome of the whole family. FDT projects that fertility will decline to a replacement level and persists; population growth will arrive at zero due to the ultimate balance of fertility and mortality. This trend is considered a necessary evolution of all human societies (Coale 1989). It has spread from Western Europe to other parts of the world, and was estimated to be completed globally by 2100 (Lee 2003). By the second half of the 20th century, most developing countries have started this transition and most developed countries have completed it. Although after World War II, the Baby Boom occured in the 1960s as an short-term phenomenon of economic recovery and social stability, it was soon followed by a Baby Bust in the 1970s towards the replacement level, signifying the ending phase of the FDT in most of the developed countries.

However, since the 1970s, the developed countries have witnessed a further decline in fertility to sub-replacement level. Scholars coined it as the Second Demographic Transition (SDT), a result of a systematic postponement of marriage, a rising divorce rate, and increasing choices of cohabitation and extra-marital births (Van de Kaa 1987; Lesthaeghe 1995; Lesthaeghe 2014). Different from the First Demographic Transition, the SDT is a more culturally motivated shift in values. One prominent reason is that women are increasingly empowered by rising participation in the labor force after WWII and more access to higher education. Marriage was then widely postponed due to longer time spent in education systems and an increasing desire for career achievements. Ample research and studies on many developed and developing countries

across the world have documented a high correlation between low fertility and rising socioeconomic status of women (Balk 1997; Davis 1986; Dharmalingam and Morgan 1996; Phan 2013). In addition, a rising share of cohabitation is disintegrating the dominant position of marriage, and the connection between marriage and childbearing has been deconstructed: married couples might choose childfree lifestyles for self-fulfilment, and unmarried individuals might choose to have extra-marital births (Cherlin 2004; Van de Kaa 2004). These changes were enabled by higher access to more effective contraceptives. Instead of a preventive measure, couples nowadays use contraceptives as an active tool for family planning (Van de Kaa 1987).

Based on a value shift of people, however, the Second Demographic Transition model was hugely subject to culture-specific influences, which indicate that it might not apply to other societies as neatly as to Western Europe. In fact, scholars have observed different patterns of population decline. In Romania, for example, Rotariu (2006) found that despite the emergence of a significant fertility change, the contemporary attitudes on family mode, size and values remained little altered from the traditional value systems. He concluded that the transition was more of a result from a wide range of macrostructural and institutional transformations.

In the case of China, the process of demographic transition was more complicated and should be studied under specific measurement such as strong influences of politics and traditional culture. Under a series of forceful state policies on fertility, the population plunged immediately to around the replacement level in less than ten years. During 1970 and 1979 alone, the total fertility rate (TFR) in China decreased from 5.8 to 2.7 (Jing 2013). Under the goal of reaching a population growth rate of 1 percent in 1980 and zero growth in 2000 (Kane and Choi 1999), Chinese government issued the One-Child Policy to accelerate the population decline. Apart from numerous implementation deficits that violate human rights, this policy-driven abrupt drop in fertility led to an even more intense demographic crisis of the aging population and shortage of labor force, as well as a severely imbalanced age cohorts facilitated by the lingering son preference culture (Jing 2013; Kane and Choi 1999). As a result, China's TFR declined from 2.94 in 1978 to 2.14 in 1991, and further to 1.6 in 1999, then rebounded to around 1.7 in 2019 (The World Bank 2019) due to the enforcement of Two-Child Policy in 2015--still under replacement level.

Although the draconian political interference did contribute remarkably to the rapid demographic decline in China, scholars argued that it is not the only cause for the persistent low fertility. Substantial socioeconomic development and urbanization processes started in the 1980s were also instrumental to the population transition (Cai 2010; Guo et al. 2012).

Studies on the demographic transition in China often focus on macro-level factors, such as the increasingly aging population, shrinkage of the labor force, the imbalanced sex ratio at birth, etc. Meanwhile, the micro-level household and individuals, their fertility patterns and incentives receive comparatively less attention. Even scarcer studies have focused on women, instead of households, and discuss the decision-making process of their fertility choices. Therefore, this study seeks to explore all the factors influencing women's fertility plans, behaviors and family planning ideals within a gendered context, from women's perspective. Through qualitative approaches, this study attempts to draw a few fertility patterns of urban married women in contemporary society, and to depict their negotiations with China's patriarchal society.

Fertility decision is not only one of the most important planning in an individual's life and family, but also the component of the macro-level demographic changes. To make a decision of fertility, one generally goes through two steps: whether to have children and how many children to have. The former suggests the meaning-making of children while the latter concerns a more quantitative aspect: how much should be invested on children and how many children should be sharing that limited time and resources, etc. Fertility decisions indicate what children mean to contemporary parents, what role they are playing in the urban households and what expectations they bear from both parents and the society, which reveals the cultural and structural background such as the pattern of gender ideologies, family and life ideals, economic level and political agenda, etc. For example, parents who demand children primarily for old-age economic support could be indicating an underdeveloped pension system, a relatively low cost in child rearing, or a strict ideology of filial piety that emphasizes what children owe to their parents. Women who

consider motherhood essential to womanhood might be indicating a persistent social norm that defines women with their fertility behavior.

During the decision-making process, women's degree of autonomy in their fertility decision is also crucial information that sheds light on women's empowerment, the existing patriarchal norms and contemporary family dynamics. In consideration of the interwoven nature of cultural and structural factors' impact on women's fertility decisions, this chapter analyzes their decision-making process in three sections: why children, number of children and autonomy in decision. In each section, cultural and structural factors are collectively reviewed through analysis of quotes from interviewees.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Second Demographic Transition

Van de Kaa (1987) concluded four main features of the second demographic transition that emerged in developed countries in West Europe and North America during the 1980s. First, a shift "from preventive contraception to self-fulfilling contraception". Prior to the second demographic transition, contraceptives were used to passively prevent excessive births out of one's economic capacity, while nowadays contraceptives are used to actively plan the family size to satisfy more self-fulfilling desires. Second, cohabitation as a new form of household organization is rising in share and threatening the domination of marriage. Couples raise children together without the necessity to go into a wedlock, because the law system has advanced to secure the rights and life quality of children born out of a marriage. Third, families are shifting from "children-centered" institutions to more and more "couple-centered". Childbearing was once an indispensable procedure in life and the primary function of a family, because children used to be guarantees of persistent economic resources and the possibility of upward mobility for families. As the cost of childrearing increases, and the couples are more likely to prioritize their individual ideals and goals. Fourth, pluralistic families and households increase to take a significant part.

As a result, most of these countries rely on welfare policies that encourage women to have more children or policies that attract immigrants to fill in the blank of the local labor market. However, as the statistics of global fertility show, governments generally have fairly limited influences on its attempt to stimulate population growth. Most of the developed countries' fertility level remains below replacement level and the population growth of some European countries even declined further below zero.

Alternations of the Theory

However, some scholars have also considered the theory of the second demographic transition inadequate in explaining the declining fertility trend in certain countries. Second demographic transition is based on the shift of people's value systems that strongly affects their

attitudes towards family models and personal fulfillment, which, in other words, emphasizes the subjective and individual factors. To examine this theory, Traian Rotariu (2006) researched on the attitudes towards family mode, size and values during a significant fertility decline in Romania, and found that the contemporary attitudes remained little changed from the traditional value systems. He thus argued that the fertility change resulted from a wide range of macrostructural and institutional transformations. Individual factors of shifts in people's values and lifestyles, while do interact with the structural factors, remain mostly a reflection of the latter.

BACKGROUND

Household and Intergenerational Transfers

Households observed during the fertility policy era in China had a major shift from a large, patriarchal one to a smaller, pair-centered one. Chinese traditional household ideal or personal life goal of a big patrilineal family where multiple generations co-reside can only be realized through a relatively high fertility rate and a low infant and adult mortality rate. With strict population control policies enacted, this ideal was systematically sabotaged by the low fertility rate. Internally, after the average education level of people rises, they intend to lead more self-fulfilling lives instead of limiting their life goal to only reproduction and spending their lifetime caring for their huge household. Especially, when women were exposed to higher education and more job opportunities, they tend to get liberated from the burdensome child-rearing practices and turn to more self-fulfilling practices to establish their social security and sense of belongings in the world which is previously missing from the patriarchal system. This tradition is facilitated by the historical patriarchal dominance and low social status of women in the family. In Wolf's (1972) studies on rural Taiwan, women's fertility behaviors were decided completely by their husbands and parents-in-law.

"Wan-Xi-Shao" (1972-1979) and One child policy (1980-2015)

The major population decline in China started in the 1970s when demographic policy "wan-xi-shao" (late, large spaces, few) was enacted and culminated in the One-Child Policy era, which means political propaganda and strict regulations play crucial roles in this abrupt demographic transition. However, it does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that Chinese people had no decision on fertility plans. According to the 1990 Population Census of China, the overall proportion of first-child births in 1989 was only 49.5% to all births of that year. About 31.7% of the total births were second-child births, and more than 19% of children born in 1989 were third or even higher order births in their families (People's Daily, 1991; Population Census Office, 1991). Although One-Child Policy had greater impacts in urban areas through severe punishment and examinations in careers, it is common for parents desiring more than one child

to go through all the troubles, such as submitting fines and traveling to another country or region, in order to have more children. In brief, political restrictions acted as a potent external factor on people's fertility choices but not necessarily the decisive one.

Implementation in Urban and Rural Area

One-Child Policy had different effectiveness and efficiency when implemented in the urban and rural areas. Overall, the urban area generated a more successful outcome after the enforcement of the policy. In Shanghai, for instance, the fertility rate was around replacement level even before the full implementation of One-Child Policy. Reasons for this effectiveness include both internal motives and external influences. Internally, residents in the urban area generally have higher education than those in the rural area, thus less incentives towards having children. First, people with higher education generally obtain more economic opportunities and resources, therefore, they do not have the urge to raise children for old age economic support. Second, urban residents were more vulnerable to the politic punishment because a large part of them

Empowerment of Urban Daughters and Mothers

Despite numerable problems it created such as work force sustainability and heavily tilted sex ratio, One-Child Policy did enable the empowering process of women in the urban area where it was carried out more successfully. The only daughters born during this era subsequently acquired more access to family resources that were previously reserved for the sons.

Economic Reform and "Open-Up" Policy (1978)

According to previous studies on fertility trends and the model of second demographic transition, besides the wide spreading knowledge of contraceptive uses, women's socioeconomic status and education attainment acted actively in shifting values towards family composition, child-rearing and self-fulfilment, which directly facilitated the fertility decline. In China, a major shift in macro-level environment, a milestone of economic development started at the same time as the demographic policy -- the market economy reform in 1978. The resulting soar of average

people's socioeconomic status in China exerted significant influences over people's fertility choices.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This research focused on urban ever-married women with children. Considering the promulgation of Two-Child Policy in 2015, I intend to interview women who are able to have two children legally during their fertility period. According to the National Health Service (UK), the menopause usually occurs between 45 and 55 years of age. Therefore, the oldest age cohort to be in their reproductive years when Two-Child Policy started is people born in the 1960s. Concerning that the legal marriage age in China is 20 for women, I will interview 18 women born in the 1960s to the 1990s in Shenzhen online and analyze the answers they gave.

The theory of SDT attributes the population decline mainly to the shift of values towards marriage, ideal family pattern and self-fulfillment throughout decades. To examine these historical alterations in a closer lens, I selected people living in Shenzhen----a top-ranking urban city in mainland China----and identified as middle-class to participate in my online interviews. Within this identification, interviewees' socioeconomic status and educational attainment are relatively similar. Therefore, their diverse values on family and children mainly reflect the intergenerational differences that are facilitated by economic development, political influences, and the shifting gender norms over time.

To examine these differences, I divided my interviewees into age groups for comparison. In America and some other English-speaking countries, generations are often defined and divided with regard to significant historical events such as abrupt demographic change--Baby Boomer, or the revolutionary lifestyle facilitated by technology--Gen Z. In China, however, generational identification nowadays often comes with the unit of decade, such as "after 80", "after 90". These identifications have been widely used in media and daily life since the 1980s. A key reason for this rising consciousness of generations is that a series of historical events happened to take place in China at the turn of 1980s. One-Child Policy, officially begun in 1979, has turned "after 80" the first generation of single children. Economic Reform and Opening-Up Policy, enacted in the end of 1978, replaced planned economy with market economy and started China's active participation in globalization. Society was highly concerned about the epochal transformation of the whole nation, and the media started to use the term "after 80" to portrait

this first generation born into the new era. Older generations always tend to view young people through skeptical and critical lenses. Apart from the applause for their international sight, “after 80” are more often than not accused of being “self-centered”, “irresponsible”, “difficult”, and “fragile” etc., under the rising individualism. In the elders’ eyes, they were spoiled to grow up in a society with such abundance, and concerned more about individual well-being than politics. They became the “Beat Generation” in China. When “after 90” came up on the stage, they inevitably became the new target of bias.

Therefore, in order to discuss age cohorts more indegenous to the culture, interviewees were divided into “60s” “70s” “80s” and “90s”.

CHAPTER ONE

Why Children: Meaning-Making of Fertility

> I think, as a woman, if she doesn't have a child, her life is incomplete. You must be a mother. From a daughter, and then getting married, after that you should become a mother, otherwise your life is incomplete.
>
> —— Li, born in 1967.

> I think it's people's own choice. Do you need the role of children in your family? Does your ideal family include children? Do you desire the existence of children in your life… I think these are the most important criteria in fertility decisions… People have different family of origin and social backgrounds, so I respect their own choices. As long as they are happy, it's not much of a problem.
>
> —— Hua, born in 1982.

To investigate the root motivation for reproduction sounds peculiar at first sight, since it has been an animal instinct restored in our genes from the dawn of human history. It was this inheritance that maintained human species on earth. However, as human society evolved, the survival value attached to the reproduction process has transferred into diverse cultural norms and practices in different societies. Like many other societies in the world, Chinese society, or to be specific, culture of Han ethnic, has long been adopting a patriarchal system that authorizes the patriarch of the family, values filial piety, pays substantial respect to the patrilineal family line, and practices patrilocal marriage, etc. (Ebrey 1990). While Phan (2013) reached the conclusion of "patriarchal cultural factors are often associated with lower levels of women's empowerment and higher fertility" by her studies, this correlation is already made explicit in famous quotes of Confucian icons. Mencius, a philosopher as well as a major representative of Confucianism said, "there are three things which are unfilial, and to have no posterity is the greatest of them." Filial piety, one of the central values of Confucianism cannot be practiced without reproduction. Carrying on the family lines, the ultimate way to pay respects to one's ancestors, thus becomes a

life purpose and a virtue for Chinese people. Regarding the high mortality rate in Chinese history prior to the second half of 20th century, high fertility was the only measure to secure at least some offspring of a family name.

In addition to the aspect of extending the patrilineal family line as a task or a familial responsibility, it does benefit individuals in a more philosophical way. Margery Wolf (1972) infers in her work on women and family structure in Peihotien, Taiwan: residents there are obsessed with the continuance of their family line, because this long family history connecting the past and the future provides individuals with a sense of belonging and value of one's limited life in the indefinite time, helping them navigate themselves through the wide, dangerous world.

Entering the 19th century, global mortality first reached a steady decline in northwest Europe due to advanced medical techniques, awareness of personal hygiene and improvements in nutrition. By the early twentieth century, many other countries with lower income had also obtained a secular mortality decline and a longer life expectancy, which further accelerated after World War II. During 1950 and 1955, China's life expectancy was 41 on average, and that figure rose to 70 during 1995 and 1999 (Lee 2003). Decreasing mortality has rendered high fertility less necessary, and the increasing survival rate of infants and longer life expectancy of mothers has reduced the fraction of women's adult life spent in child-bearing and child-rearing, from 70 percent in 1800 to about 14 percent nowadays (Lee 2003). Time spent in motherhood has been physically shrinking. After WWII, women began to participate in the industrial labor force significantly on a global scale and thus rising to a larger share of economic and political power. As social roles and expectations for women changed, the role of motherhood has also been losing its central position in womanhood. During the Second Demographic Transition starting in the western Europe in the 1970s, childbearing became more and more of a personal choice than a designed path or task bound with marriage.

In China, prior to the founding of PRC, some urban Chinese women have already ventured into the public area and experienced unprecedented freedom out of the patriarchal domestic constraints (Judge 2005). In Maoist era, the advocacy of gender equality laid its emphasis on the equal entry of women into production and labor. As Deng Yingchao (1953), chair of the All China Women's Federation, wrote, "Ten years of practice has proven that

mobilizing the masses of women to participate in production is the basic key to improving equality between men and women and to achieving the thorough liberation of women." Women became laborers, soldiers and group leaders. Visual femininity was criticized as "bourgeois" and women experienced a masculinization that alienated their own sexuality (Honig 2002). However, reproductive behaviors were also included in a political agenda, as high fertility was seen as adding strength to the new republic.

In the post-Mao era, economic reform replaced planned economy with market economy, while open-up policy involved China into globalization. The socialist order disintegrated and a wave of individualism swept over China. These structural and cultural changes have further broadened women's career opportunities and upward mobility, as well as increasing their incentives for self-fulfilment. However, their desires to achieve economic independence still clash with the persisting social expectation for them to enter marriage and perform traditional female roles. On one hand, as Yu and Xie's (2019) statistics show, first marriage is postponed, the rate of cohabitation and divorce gradually rises; on the other hand, most people still plan to enter marriage at some point, while deliberate childfree marriages and children born outside of marriage remain rare, which indicates that marriage and childbearing are still tightly associated. Nonetheless, the economic incentives for childbearing declined, since GDP rose, economic conditions improved and the welfare system established.

In brief, fertility choices experienced stages of survival intentions, norm or expectation, and personal preferences throughout history. My interviews also suggest generational differences in some aspects of meaning-making of children. Generally, more "60s" and "70s" considered social norms their major motivation of fertility behavior, while the "80s" and "90s" tended to stress their personal affection towards children. The definition of womanhood also shifted from older to younger age cohorts, with the former centered more on motherhood, and the latter more decentralized and diversified. Although many interviewees across the age cohorts mentioned the phrase "extension of life" as their reason for having children, their implication varied through generations. The notion of carrying on the family line, on the contrary, does not suggest evident generational differences, but appears to be more affected by regional cultures. Finally, familism and the need for emotional support from children still prevail in contemporary society.

Norms and Tasks

Not until several conducted interviews had I realized that, my questions in the section "why children" are designed with an assumption that all my interviewees possess clear ultimate purposes in having children and are aware of their deep, original motivations such as old age care, desire for lifelong company or even just personal preference "I like kids", which is why it is a little surprising that many, especially the "60s", answered my question with a hesitating denial: "there's no why." More often than not, this answer is followed by a set of comments centering on the words "should" and "everyone". "You should have kids after marriage," "having kids is something women should do," "everyone has kids, so should you." Even scholars have shown the strong social norms among Chinese people that combine marriage and child rearing, it was still unexpected that people admitted to be primarily motivated by these, instead of other feelings or practical concerns. These replies made me re-examine the pivotal position of social norms in the decision making on child-bearing. They seem to be entirely accepted without doubts, among four out of five interviewees in the "60s" group, three out of five in the "70s", one out of five "80s" and one out of three "90s".

> Actually, for our generation childbearing is simple, we didn't consider that much. Because you are married, and when you are pregnant you just naturally choose to have the child. It feels like a natural law, of fertility.
>
> —— Yong, born in 1964

> Well… I just think that, when you are married you should have kids. It's just natural and everyone does that. It might seem strange to others if you don't have kids after marriage, personally speaking.
>
> —— Hong, born in 1971

> At that time we weren't thinking that much. Everyone else has kids, so we also have a kid. I think at that time we were simple, we weren't thinking that much.
>
> —— Liu, born in 1970

> It's like, a traditional thinking, like, after marriage you should have kids, also like, for carrying on the family line.
>
> —— Cathy, born in 1985

> Umm, I didn't think about it specifically, I think maybe it's a Chinese traditional thinking that you should have children after marriage, you should pass it on. Your life obtains certain meaning after you have children. Something like that.
>
> —— Lu, born in 1992

The pattern of married life with kids is so ingrained in people's (mostly people in "after 60" and "after 70" groups) mind that most of them claimed they were too "simple" to consider other purposes for having children. Childbearing is less of an active family plan or a life strategy deliberately designed for a better experience of womanhood, but a "natural", "regular" and "normal" path to follow, in order to evade potential risks of other uncustomary life styles. Under this path dependence and herd behavior, child-bearing is considered more of a "task" or "mission" in women's married life, as some of them express their feelings after childbirth, especially those who endured more unpleasant experiences in preparation for childbirth:

> I was just thinking that I have reached this age. Get married as you are supposed to at this age, have children as you are supposed to at this age, so you just do whatever is proper for your age. Not so much of a sheer desire for children, thinking "I must have children", no. You want a child, and you have one, it's like *finishing a task*. If you don't have one, a regret.
>
> —— Hong, born in 1971

> At that time, when I finally gave birth successfully, that kind of mixed feelings...It's like, *mission accomplished!* All the sacrifices are worthy.
>
> —— Ming, born in 1966

> Q: Have you considered having two children before your pregnancy?
> A: No! No… I just think that, one child counts as a "mission complete", done. Not another… I think I cannot shoulder the responsibility.

—— Wang, born in 1974

Admittedly, though this system of customs or norms on child-bearing serves as a major motive for women's decision to have children, this is not the whole picture. Most women I interviewed who stressed the effect of traditions on their fertility decision also mentioned other reasons for plans of childbearing. For example, they might also think children are cute, or consider children the only reliable source of lifelong emotional support. Decision to have children for them is not rational or motivated enough, yet not reluctant or struggling either. Perhaps it is among those women who expressed their doubt about children or even disfavor against children before childbirth that we can perceive the pervasiveness of cultural norms in women's fertility decisions. Three interviewees out of twenty mentioned their uncertainty towards child-rearing before marriage. Hong, born in 1971, has a daughter who just returned from college overseas. She came to Shenzhen in 1995 from Shandong, a province in northern China and got married the same year. She was then pregnant in 1996 but unfortunately had a miscarrige. Three months after the miscarriage she was again pregnant and immediately returned to her hometown to keep the baby. She repeatedly mentioned her fear of losing this child and the inability of having children ever again, although she appeared to be very ambivalent towards the concept of children:

> You see before J (her daughter), the stilborn, it has been less than 3 months since the miscarriage when I was pregnant with J. At that time we were afraid that the uterus might not be fully recovered, so I took a lot of things to keep the baby, fearing the loss of this one, and all sorts of examinations, everyday. I already quit my work that time, and stayed in the house everyday, fearing the possibility of miscarriage. Because you have already lost one, you are just too scared… When you don't want children you don't feel it, but when you want to have children but can't succeed, you have different feelings. So after I lost the first one----unable to get pregnant for over two years after the marriage, and then a miscarriage, and then this one----you put great focus on this one, just too scared of losing it or unable to be pregnant again. That was really stressful. At that time I just forgot about myself, fat or slim, doesn't matter. I just didn't care that much about myself. …

> When I was young I didn't think of it. I really hate kids. And now, to be honest, I don't really like other kids either. I was just thinking that I have reached this age. Get married as you are supposed to at this age, have children as you are supposed to at this age, so you just do whatever is proper for your age.

Throughout the whole interview, she did not mention old-age economical sources, life-long emotional support, fun in life, affection for children, or other purposes often associated with childbearing decisions, but only it's the "proper thing to do" at a certain age. This rule has overcome her distaste against children, turning her to painstaking efforts including quitting her job and accepting all the possible (most of them painful) treatment in order to have a child of her own.

From another perspective, the norm of marriage with children suggests a principle that, women's decision to enter marriage should be her tacit approval of having a child. In other words, women who decide not to have children should not enter a marriage. Ming, born in 1966, questioned: "If you don't want children, why bother entering a marriage? " Wang, born in 1974, just gave birth to a son in 2019 at the age of 45, after seven years of marriage. She is now one of the core members of an NGO. When asked about why children, she first said it was a crowd-following decision, then admitted that it was all for her husband. She is also the only interviewee that made a clear statement on her disfavor against having children, and stressed her career as a life center and a security source.

> Q: So why do you choose to have a kid?
> A: Umm... Doesn't everybody have kids? So I shall have one too, just like that.
> Q: I see… So do you like kids too? Or is it like, I should have one so I did.
> A: More like "I should have one". After the childbirth I really like the kid. But before it, not so much.
> Q: Not so much before… so you grew fond of kids during your pregnancy? Or…
> A: I only began to like kids after childbirth I guess… During the pregnancy it's more like everyone has one… it seems strange if you don't… And many people said that, after 50, if you don't have kids, you will blah blah blah… So I decided to have one before 50.
> Q: Have you considered the need for children's company, or other kinds of thought?

> A: Umm, according to myself honestly, no, I haven't thought that much… It's simply just what my husband's family seems to want… like, simply, my husband wants a child, then I was like, *fulfilling his wish*. I haven't thought about my dependence on the child, no.
> Q: So between you and your husband, he wants children more.
> A: Yes, yes. He wants more. I'm like, not that into it.
> …
> A: I think childbearing is just… too much responsibility. The reason why I don't want children all along is that, I think I'm not enough, (that I) cannot become a very responsible mother. I also have my life centered on work too much, my career gives me more security than I can obtain from my family. So I prefer my career.

To Wang, her fertility plan was entirely a result of her husband's (and part of his family's) wish. Interestingly though, her husband didn't insist on children at first. She mentioned that her husband said "childfree is ok" before marriage, so they were "letting nature take its course" for the first few years. According to her, after he took a job in investment in education, he started to change his mind: most of his colleagues have children, so he was often asked about his family, and "felt pressured". He began to bring up the topic more and more often, and finally she agreed to give it a try. However, her preparation for children went rough, even threatening their relationship. On the verge of divorce, her husband's "understanding" touched her, made her more determined and finally succeeded.

> At that time I was seeing the doctors, but after one year still nothing happened. I was taking Chinese medicine everyday! Chinese medicine, west medicine, this and that… Then I said, how about we just divorce… I think I cannot take it anymore. Before marriage he didn't say he wanted a kid so desperately… now I can't stand it. I said, you can find someone suitable, younger and more fertile, and we get a divorce secretly… He once told me that it doesn't matter whether we have children or not. If worse comes to worst, we can still adopt. This is what he said before marriage! Then, when he asked for children so badly, I was really in torment… so I suggested he finds someone else. Then he said, "I didn't say you must have a kid, but you should at least go through the process." So you *have to make that effort*, if there's still no success, then he can accept

> it… When he said this I was actually pretty moved. I think he makes sense. We don't have to have our own children, but now that we are a family, it's *not an unreasonable request* for me to want children. If you don't even try, and just go straight for adoption, he might feel regretful. I think I can accept this. So I made up my mind and made efforts, and now this.

In Wang's case, rather than accusing her husband for pushing her to settle with an unwanted fertility plan, one should reexamine their perception of the institution, marriage, which seems to have been the major cause that persuaded her into having children. Although she was clearly not desiring children at first and tried to reach an agreement with her husband, her entrance into a marriage is considered as a compromise to a possible change of mind in the future, because desiring children is "a reasonable request" in marriage. Moreover, this compromise not only includes changing her life plan, but also a possible painstaking effort to reach the goal. "You should at least try." The possible suffering and hardship of childbearing is also a "reasonable" sacrifice for women in marriage.

> For me, first of all, being a part of a family you cannot be too selfish. This is also what some of my closest friends as well as great mentors have told me. They said, you cannot be too selfish as a person. When you want to hold a family together, you have to take everyone's feelings into consideration. When their requests are *reasonable*, you need to accept them and compromise, that's the first thing.

The social norm that deems childbearing as the default setting of marriage and a legitimate task of all married women outweighs the practical purposes of childbearing in these women's fertility decisions. Corresponding to scholars' findings (Yu and Xie 2019), the impact of this social norm shows generational differences. There is a roughly declining influence from the older groups to the younger groups. Most people from the "60s" and "70s" group consider childbearing a required task of married life instead of a life strategy or a family plan, since back then forming a nuclear family was the crucial criteria for success and fulfilled life. No alternative lifestyles are considered proper or happy. Those who do not possess any negative expectation toward children naturally follow this path, while people who originally hold ambivalence or even

disfavor against children are still assimilated and conformed to similar life choices. However, as the society developed, meaning-making of life diversified, and alternative family compositions emerged. Childbearing became a choice that requires careful considerations, and people in the later generations started to emphasize their personal fondness for children or strategic purposes of having children. As a result, my interviewees in the "80s" and "90s" group tend to have more varied reasons, thorough considerations and active participation in their fertility choices, while the choices of their older counterparts were more shaped by traditional values and the heterogeneous social expectations.

Affection for Children

It might sound most reasonable to answer the question "why children" with a simple "I like children". After all, when fertility is less of an economically rational choice, what else could motivate a woman to become a mother? It turns out that, as discussed above, the all-mighty social norms are capable of outweighing personal preferences. Although all interviewees undoubtedly love their children, consideration of personal affection for children as motivating their fertility decision varied generationally. For interviewees from "60s" and "70s", only one of them explicitly expresses her love of children. Yuan (70s), who took the risk of going to Hong Kong in order to have a second child, said she "liked children from a young age." "I remembered begging my mom for a younger sibling…" she laughed, "I don't know, maybe I'm just that kind of 'mom person'."

Four out of five "80s" and all three "90s" all expressed their favor for children prior to the childbearing. Chen, born in 1981, came to Shenzhen in 2001 and married in 2005. She had her first child in 2006 and the second in 2017, both daughters. She claimed that her affection for children is the primary reason for her childbearing.

> Personally, I think that I was born to like children. I think it mainly depends on individual personality and preferences… This (preference) takes up a major part of the reason for me having children.

Liang was born in 1989, Hebei. She is an only child of a single mother. She came to Shenzhen in 2012 and married in 2019. She just had a daughter this January. A teacher in a preschool education agency, she seems to have a lot to talk about children.

> I love kids and I really enjoy interacting with them. That's why I took my job in education! They are cute, pure and inspiring… Before meeting my husband, I had been single for quite some time. I was even thinking about having kids on my own, like finding a sperm donor. You see, my mom divorced when I was very little and she raised me up alone and well, so I don't think that's a problem.

Hua (80s) also mentioned the thought of having children on her own, if "things don't go well" between her and her husband. Their thoughts represented a trend of extramarital childbearing that has been gaining popularity in Western developed countries while gaining awareness in China. While the "60s" and "70s" were motivated primarily by norms of marriage-children combination, younger generations have already been exploring other life paths. Lu, an only child born in 1992, was married in 2015 and had her first child the same year, at the age of 24. At first, she admitted that she was not planning to have children at such a young age, but her love for children gradually increased after marriage. She mentioned social media as a part of the cause.

> I have just worked for two years. My original plan was to have children after I had some savings. But after I got married I found myself obsessed with mommy vloggers on Weibo (China's Twitter-equivalent). The kids are so cute, and time spent with them are so full of surprises and fun… and the experiences they share make motherhood seem less terrifying… So I just thought, why not have children when I'm still young and energetic enough!

Due to the development of social media, personal interests and motivations are strengthened by tons of personalized information delivered to users. The younger generations that grew up in this environment are undoubtedly more influenced by this technology. Generally, "80s" and "90s" were more willing to express their affection for

children prior to childbearing, and consider it a major reason for their fertility behavior. Compared to their previous generations of “60s” and “70s”, they seem to have less concerns of traditional norms, and thus obtain more autonomy and certainty in their fertility decisions.

Extension of Life: Family-Benefiting or Self-Fulfilling

When asked about the core reason for having children, seven out of eighteen participants without clear age-oriented differences mentioned a phrase “extension of life”. It seems to suggest a certain degree of similarity in fertility choices among all age cohorts. However, their follow up explanations indicate that they attached rather different definitions to this phrase, which also shows a generational variety of values towards womanhood and child-rearing. Two interviewee from the “60s” connected this phrase with the mission of carrying on family’s name, one “70s” and one “80s” explained it as a sense of accountability to parents, while one “70s”, one “80s” and one “90s” interpreted it as a prolonged existence of individuals, or some traces left in the world.

Ming was born in 1966, Shandong. She has four siblings: two elder brothers and two younger sisters. Married in 1993 at her hometown, she then followed her husband to Shenzhen in 1995, and took a job in a Hong Kong enterprise. She had a son in 1996, and was considering the possibility of having another child in Hong Kong or abroad. Unfortunately, things went rough and the attempt failed. When asked to explain the phrase “extension of life” she brought up as a reason to have children, she mentioned an inherited value on continuing the family surname.

> Our generation is still relatively more traditional. Especially in my hometown, people still put much value on these things. Although my consideration for carrying on the family line has not been as deep as generations before me, there's still some implicit influence… It is a more traditional concept… but it does not affect my preference for boys and girls. Because now girls can also be recorded in the genealogy, so there’s not much difference.

Similarly, Pang, who was born in 1964, also explained this term with a stress on the continuation of her bloodline. This sense of a contribution made to "my own blood's" prosperity takes a significant part in the meaning-making of their fertility choices.

Interpretation of this term has a slightly different emphasis for Yuan. She was born in 1975, Qingyuan, Guangdong. She has one elder sister and one younger brother. She came to Shenzhen in 1998 fresh out of college and got married in 2000. Soon she was pregnant and gave birth to a daughter in 2001. For her, apart from her own wishes, having children is no longer a choice benefiting her clan, but a sense of accountability towards her parents.

> (Extension of life) It's like… from my ancestors to my parents' generation to me and then to my next generation, I guess. This extension, continuation… It's not that you have to have someone to bear the surname or anything, it's just that having a child makes you feel accountable to yourself and your parents.

When it comes to Hua, things have changed further. She was born in Foshan, Guangdong in 1982. Born during the One-Child Policy period, she is an only child just like most of her peers. She went to a renowned university in Guangzhou, Guangdong and accepted a job offer in Shenzhen in 2005 after graduation. She also got married immediately in 2006 but was not pregnant until last year. She claimed that she was "letting nature take its course" for the first two or three years, with a relatively weak desire for children. However, she gradually changed her mind as she turned 30.

> Because… humans are also mammals. So if we have our own offspring, have our genes existing in this world, I just think it's… well maybe this is kind of idealistic, but it's like, even if I perished one day, there's still *something of my own existing*… Actually I think, when I was younger—I got married really early. I married at the age of 24. Right after marriage I didn't have that strong feeling, or desire to have kids. But when I turned 30, I thought to myself that my quality time in life was reducing, less than before. It's like, as time passes you think increasingly often about *what you can leave for this world*, except for your own contribution… When I aged this thought occurred to me.

Hua later admitted that she, as the first generation of the OCP, tends to be more "self-centered" and does not think about her responsibilities to her big family very often. Zhu, born in 1994, Guangdong, shared a similar aspect of self-satisfaction in childbearing. Her family moved to Shenzhen when she was in kindergarten and stayed here ever since. Married in 2018, she had a son in 2019, and is considering having another child 2 to 3 years later. In her perspective, this extension of life, or in her word "human project" that she took charge gave her a sense of achievement.

> I felt a sense of accomplishment when I gave birth to him... No I don't think it's something I owe to my family, it's just a feeling that belongs to myself… Children are like the most important project of life that requires full engagement, so successful cultivation of a human project surely gives me more life satisfaction.

To sum up, Ming and Pang expressed her responsibility to the family clan, Yuan was more concerned about accountability or filial piety towards her parents, while Hua and Zhu was seeking the sense of a prolonged existence or accomplishment of a child project that fulfilled themselves. The target group on which each person projects her fertility meaning is narrowing in size: clan, direct relatives, oneself. To take it further, Ming and Pang's connection between herself and the world was achieved through their blood-related clans, Yuan's through her nuclear family, while Hua and Zhu appear to be only in charge of their own direct, individual interactions with the world.

Carrying on the Family Line

The worship of patrilineal family line is one of the core inheritances from Confucian and has influenced Chinese culture for thousands of years. However, in contemporary society, urban citizens have gradually abandoned this traditional mindset and embrace a more modern view towards fertility. Most of my interviewees from all age cohorts indicated that carrying on the family line is no longer a concern for this era. "Having children is my own business," Li (60s) answered. "I don't think this mindset still prevails in our generation, especially in cities," Chen, who was born in 1981, said. Hua (80s) shared her thoughts on this traditional practice.

> First I think it's definitely not for carrying on the family line, not like the stereotyped… because historically, societies were dominated by men. The social definition of women was more like a fertility machine. When I watched historical TV series, I was like thank god I wasn't born in that era! It's so pathetic… I think it's because our generation, the "80s", had access to much more things, and the social resources we enjoyed are much richer than generations before us, we have more space for this self-consideration.

Except Ming (60s) who was mentioned in the previous section, only one "80s" and one "90s" admitted that the need for carrying on the family line was still considered during her fertility decision-making process. Cathy was born in 1985, Dongguan, a city adjoining Shenzhen in Guangdong province. She was then brought to Hong Kong by her parents at the age of 12 or 13 and stayed there ever since. After the outbreak of the pandemic, she came back to mainland China and settled in Shenzhen. She admits that she is more "traditional" on fertility issues, but also stressed that this is mainly a result of family influence.

> It's just a traditional thought, like after marriage you should have kids. Also the notion of "carrying on the family line" is quite deep… I actually don't have much gender preference myself, but if the first child is a boy, there would be less pressure. After all, if your first child is a daughter, elders in the family will definitely urge you to have another, and say things like "hurry up and have a boy!" Maybe our *Cantonese* elders still have this notion ingrained.

Judy, born in 1995, is the first generation to be born and raised in the city of Shenzhen. She is an only child. Her parents are both from Chaozhou, a coastal city in eastern Guangdong. After graduating from the most renowned high school in Shenzhen, she went studying in the States and met her husband in the university. She was pregnant in 2018 and married right after graduation in the same year. To her, this tradition is an inheritance of certain regional cultures.

> To be honest, there are some (of this concern). My parents are both from *Chaozhou*, so they are more influenced by the familistic values, including myself… But when I was

> born, One-Child Policy was very strict, and my mom did not recover well from giving birth to me, so they ended up having only one child… kind of regretful. It's not like they don't like daughters, they will definitely treat us the same if they could have a son. It's just… having no son will always draw much more pressure and rumors from the big family. So my mom always urges me to give birth at an early age for health concerns, and the chance to have more babies.

Noticeably, three interviewees who claimed to have been influenced by the traditional fertility thoughts have all stressed their connections with a certain regional culture, a factor that I did not take in my research design previously. Hua (80s) also mentioned her impression of Judy's hometown, Chaozhou.

> Umm… in our everlasting Confucious society, people are brainwashed. Sometimes, I think this brainwash is really effective… We often say that in Chaozhou of Guangdong, or Fujian province, most women will persuade themselves into obeying these traditions, like once I get married I will have kids. It's the mindset bred by traditional male dominated society. I have two Chaozhou women as neighbors, both young and quit their jobs immediately after marriage. They told us everyday that they were preparing for pregnancy… Even high education has little effect on their judgement in this kind of thing. This kind of regional culture has a really big effect. I think in Chaozhou, both mothers and wives really accept the idea that sons and husbands are my everything. Maybe it's getting better now for younger people. I have a friend who is married to a Chaozhou husband. She told me that the first time she went to the family for dinner, there's no dinnerware for women on the table, only dinnerware for men. And it's a really well off family! I think their male-centered culture is really ingrained.

Chaoshan area is the east coastal area of Guangdong province that includes four cities--Chaozhou, Shantou, Shanwei and Jieyang. In the late Qing period when the whole country was practicing a closed door policy, Chaozhou was one of the five ports that were forced open by the foreign invaders, and the whole area soon became one the largest trading centers (Cheng 1997). In the open-up policy in the 1970s, Shantou became one of the few coastal cities that were

established as a Special Economic Zone (SEZ). In such a trading area with considerable affluence, features of clan society were largely maintained, and familism prevailed in the age of individualism (Luo et al. 2019). According to the Department of Civil Affairs of Guangdong Province, the divorce rate of three cities in the Chaoshan area-- Shantou, Chaozhou, and Jieyang in 2018 are the first to third lowest in Guangdong, while Shanwei ranked the sixth lowest. In contrast, Shenzhen obtained the highest divorce rate in Guangdong. This area is previously famous for its obsession with high fertility and incredible male dominance. Even in the strictest years of OCP, none of my Chaoshanese classmates are single children. A family with two is still a rare case. They often went for three to five children. Judy recalled that one of her Chaoshan classmates has eight siblings, all female including herself. "It went famous in our school, we referred to them as 'The Nine Sisters'." She then commented that, "some families just won't stop until they have a son, so it's common to have families with several elder sisters and one young brother."

The Chaoshan area is only one example. There are many other places that present unique values and customs derived from regional cultures. Ming (60s) also mentioned worship of family line as some more common practice "in my hometown", and she is from Shandong province, the hometown of Confucius. Generational clashes on family line obsession are more often presented between the "60s" "70s" and their parents or in-laws. Therefore, it appears in my interviews that the consideration of family lines varied more regionally than generationally, among urban middle-class women from the "60s" to the "90s".

Motherhood Central to Womanhood v.s. Special Experiences

Are women born or built to have children? How is womanhood defined? What does childbearing mean to a woman's life? These questions have raised heated debates over the century, particularly when the concept of DINK (Double Incomes, No Kid) spreaded in China in the 1980s. When I asked my interviewees about their opinions on women who choose not to have children, all interviewees in the 60s and three in the 70s group suggested that women without children were "incomplete" in life experience, and women deliberately made this choice are more or less "self-centered" or "irresponsible". These comments reflect a notion that

centralizes motherhood in womanhood, and considers an intended childless lifestyle a result of problematic personality.

Pang was born in Guangzhou, Guangdong, 1964. She came to Shenzhen in 1984 seeking more opportunities, got married in 1988 and had a son two years later. Having retired, she is now living with her husband. She commented that having no children is a loss in life and that childfree women have a rather incomplete life experience. Li, born in 1967, Beijing, got married in 1993 and gave birth to her son in 1999. She came to Shenzhen in 1995 to work as a saleswoman, and retired in 2017 at the age of 50. She was on a vacation in Hainan alone by the time of the interview. Her attitude is also explicit.

> Q: So why do you choose to have a child?
> A: I think, as a woman, if she doesn't have a child, her life is *incomplete*. You must be a mother. From a daughter, and then getting married, after that you should become a mother, otherwise your life is incomplete. So I'm… quite traditional.
> …
> Q: Do you think having children is an indispensable part of a woman's life?
> A: Of course! That's why I don't quite understand why nowadays some girls don't want to have children. As a woman (without children) her life is incomplete, she hasn't been a mother, how can she… I think after a woman becomes a mother she becomes more *tender*, that's why I think you must become a mother. After (having children) her whole worldview and feelings will be different, more *sensitive*.

Different from the norm of marriage-children, this expectation of childbearing is not tied to marriage, but to being women itself. Since the uterus is one of the most essential biological structural differences between women and men, childbearing is considered to be a unique life experience that distinguishes womanhood from manhood. A rejection of motherhood is a waste of such endowed ability that leads to a rather incomplete life as a woman. What's more noteworthy is that Li also mentioned that the changes—becoming more "tender" and "sensitive"—that occurred to women after childbirth are also solid reasons for the necessity of motherhood. Childbearing is not only the central experience that defines womanhood, but also a process that strengthens traditional feminine quality, making a woman "more woman".

Pang (64s) commented that people who choose to go DINK might be “dodging responsibility” and more “self-centered”. She showed sympathy for people who could not afford to have children, but also said that generally the economic barrier in raising children is manageable. Hong (70s) suggested that people who insist on going DINK might have experienced certain abnormality.

> Because I think you can just let it be, have children when you physically can, lead a childfree life if you can’t. It’s okay. If it’s really determined, like you just don’t want kids, that might be… for us we might not understand… Nowadays many men and women are sterile/infertile… But if there’s no such (objective) problems, and you just decided this way, I think there must be some kind of problem, maybe the effects from their families of origin, or the genetic disease… There must be some kind of reason.

On the contrary, two “70s” all the interviewees in “80s” and “90s” expressed their understanding for women who choose to go DINK. Although they admit that having children is one of the most special and cherished experiences they have ever had, they still show substantial respect and empathy for women who make other life choices. Hua (80s) and several other interviewees of “80s” and “90s” told me about their childfree friends.

> People have different family origins and social backgrounds, so I respect their own choices. As long as they are happy, it’s not much of a problem. I have a Hongkong friend who’s about 50. She and her husband are pretty well off. She doesn’t want kids. Firstly, she might not like this… idea of kids. She might think she doesn’t know how to get along with kids. Then, she’s a very positive, out-going woman, so I can imagine that even when she gets old she can call a bunch of besties together and have a happy life. Maybe for her to take care of a much younger person with blood relation, to worry much for him/her is a bit too much.

Wang, (70s) the only interviewee that considered childbearing a complete compromise to her husband, later expressed her gratitude for her husband’s demand for a child, because everyday she “loves her son more”, and experienced the joy of motherhood that she previously

did not understand. However, when asked about attitudes towards women who choose to go DINK, she still expressed her great appreciation for people who have the courage to adopt a childfree lifestyle.

> I think they are truly happy! Women who don't want children, I applaud them. They are my idols. That's the status that I really desire. And they… must be full of happiness. And these women must be less likely to catch disease. And they must have greater longevity. What kind of people lead a DINK life? I think they must be enjoying their life very much. And their life must be reaching a certain level of quality in all aspects, because, how confident they are! They are capable enough to handle all the things in their life, so they choose this lifestyle… When you have children you will understand! So exhausting.

It is clear that among my interviewees, younger people present more acceptance and understanding for childless lifestyles than older people, indicating that society is becoming increasingly inclusive towards women's fertility decisions. The emergence of increasing family structures in our age is deconstructing the norm that defines womanhood with motherhood, and creating more alternative life paths for women.

Emotional Support and Old-Age Care

Xie and Yu suggest in their qualitative research (2019) that, in contemporary China, the familistic complex is still prevalent and that cases of childfree marriage or extramarital birth are still relatively rare. Apart from influences of traditional cultures that prevailed in East Asia, the market reform has given rise to individualism while simultaneously elevating people's interdependence in families. According to Song and Ji (2020), "the care duty" that was "shifted back from the socialist state to families" in the marketization process has led to clashes between ideologies of individual fulfillment and familistic values. Family or kinship is still the major and irreplaceable source of emotional support and care. The purpose of having children as a life-long companion and social safety net still serves as a main reason in women's fertility decisions to this date. Most of my interviewees from all age cohorts expressed their desire for children's company, especially when they age. Liu (70s) suggested that, "it's mainly for the consideration

of old-age… because I think when you are aged and don't have children by your side, or if you are sick there's no one there to pay you a visit, you might get really lonely." Yuan (70s) expressed a similar concern: "there will be one day that you and your couple finally get too old and sick to look after each other. What could you do without your children's help?" Hong (60s), Liang (80s), Cheng (90s), and Zhu (90s) claimed the company of children "irreplaceable." They all expressed the notion that kinship is the only stable relationship throughout their lifetime. Within this ideology of familism, people possess high expectations and dependence on family and believe that this norm will restraint family members from being estranged. In general, familism still prevails as one of the major reasons in having children, and this ideology does not show evident generational differences in my interviews.

CHAPTER TWO

How Many Children: Strategic Plan on Fertility

> "I would consider at least two, so that they can accompany each other… Three is too much. I won't have enough time and energy for them… We did not consider the economic condition as a major factor… Raising children was not that costly back then. It's mainly on education. One or two, doesn't make much difference. My daughter went to public schools all along, so the tuition is very cheap. Sending her abroad was the only thing that cost some money… "
>
> —— Zeng, born in 1968.

> "I think two children are enough. Three… I think I can't afford three. And also not enough time and energy… Economic condition is quite important I think. Personally, if you don't have a solid economic base for your second child, it's unnecessary to have one. Firstly, it only adds to your burden. Secondly, I think maybe you can't support his/her education well enough. So I think a second child should definitely be based on adequate conditions. "
>
> —— Zhu, born in 1994.

Historically, China has maintained a high fertility rate. "More children, more blessings" served as a major fertility mindset that prevailed for centuries under the domination of Confucianism. The value of family solidarity and prosperity in East Asia has penetrating affects through the modernization process. Starting from the Maoist China, fertility behaviors were given meanings to the nationalist discourse. One of the most famous quotes of Mao Zedong indicated, "Ren duo liliang da (The more people, the stronger we are)," which suggested a development ideology that associated high fertility with the prosperity of the nation. During the post-mao era, two major reforms transformed the whole society together with people's fertility behavior drastically. One-Child Policy directly forced people's fertility plan, especially that of the urban residents, into a one-child style. Fertility decision was once again taken into a broad political picture, only this time with the intention to reduce it. Economic reform which initiated the marketization process nationally has drastically elevated the GDP level and contributed

hugely to the advancement of living standards (Ellman 1986). Meanwhile, the prices of commodities and real estates soared, while the cost of child rearing has boosted and is expected to continue going up. Apart from political agendas, having less children is also an economically rational choice for most parents. In addition, the professionalization of housekeeping and baby-sitting services in the past few years provided urban middle-class families with more convenience and flexibility.

All of my interviewees intend to have one to two children, with a majority across all age cohorts preferring two children, but they also show generationally varied concerns on their family planning. Their strategic plan on fertility, to be specific, is mainly the decision of the number of children they would like to have. While both strongly influenced by policy changes, the older generation suggested more limitation on time and energy and less economic worries, while the younger generations expressed more economic but no less time and energy concerns.

Economic Influence

The direct costs of children seems to increase due to changes in young adults' earning power and living standards. Song and Ji (2020) argued that the family's "economic functions" had been "redefined under the socialist economy in the 1950s-1970s", and have been "rediscovered under the market-oriented reforms since the 1980s." The widening of wealth gap and narrowing upward mobility have caused the intensification of pressure of competition and anxiety. Thus, parents put more and more emphasis on their children's education in hope of realizing upward mobility or resisting downward movement. The cost of child rearing rose at an unprecedented level.

All the "60s", three out of five "70s" and one out of five "80s" claimed that their fertility decisions were not much affected by their economic status, because back then child rearing was not a large expense. Hong (70s) did not feel much economic pressure raising her daughter J, because she sent J to public elementary and secondary schools, which is nearly free if you are locals. Chen (80s) did a full calculation of expenditure on children from diapers to cram schools to show me that children do not cause much economic burden.

However, two out of three interviewees in “90s” and three out of five “80s” suggested that economic condition is very important. Liang, born in 1989, complained that the tuition fee for kindergarten was two times higher than six years ago. Zhu (90s) claimed that economic condition is the major forces that shape her fertility decisions.

> I think two children are enough. Three… I think I can’t afford three. And also not enough time and energy… Economic condition is quite important I think. Personally, if you don’t have a solid economic base for your second child, it’s unnecessary to have one. Firstly, it only adds to your burden. Secondly, I think maybe you can’t support his/her education well enough. So I think a second child should definitely be based on adequate conditions.

If the economic prospects appear unpromising and the social welfare system is still underdeveloped, do younger generations express more interests in financial support from children? The answer is no. None of my interviewees demanded for old-age financial support from their children. They all stated that by the time of retirement they will have enough savings and pension for their own old-age security, and some of them are even willing to help their children “out of trouble” or “achieve something”. They stressed that their generosity for children was not intended for returns, and would be content enough if their children are able to lead a happy, safe and unregretful life. Some of the “60s” and “70s” said that they would be satisfied enough if their children ever reached complete financial independence.

Time and Energy

Material resources are only one aspect of responsible parenting. Healthy family relationships and children’s psychological well-being depend heavily on quality time that parents spend with their children (Crouter et al. 2004; Desha et al. 2011). Although it is widely believed that contemporary children are less emotionally affected by their parents than their earlier counterparts due to more time spent with peers and in social media, scholars argue that parents remain a significant influence to their children’s mental health status and personality development (Reinfjell et al. 2008; Desha et al. 2011). In fact, more and more parents are starting to be concerned about their participation in each of their children’s lives. As a result, parents tend

to have less children to share their limited “time and energy”, and pay close attention to each of them.

While all of my interviewees stressed the importance of time and energy in their fertility decision, none of them considered three or more as their ideal number of children--except one “90s”, who was preparing for the second pregnancy, and leaving the possibility of three. Yong (60s) thinks one child is enough, due to her limited time and energy.

> Q: How many children do you originally plan to have, regardless of any external factors?
> A: At first I just think one is enough. And there is also the policy, so I chose to have one.
> Q: So it’s like, even if there’s no such policy, you still think one is enough, right?
> A: Yes. Because… I think I myself can only handle one… it’s like, for example, after the childbirth you need to educate them, you need to spend your time and energy on them. So I think for my time and energy, one is enough.

Ying (70s) holds a similar concern. “Childbearing is relatively easy, but childrearing is really exhausting. It’s all about time and energy.” For the “90s”, limited time and energy continues to be a major reason for ideal children numbers.

Political

For the parents born in the 60s and 70s who generally have their children under the One-Child Policy from 1980 to 2015, fertility choice on the number of children is substantially narrowed. OCP was officially enacted in 1980, relaxed in 2013 to a partial Two-Child Policy, where couples are allowed to have two children if either one of them is an only child, and replaced by Universal Two-Child Policy in 2015. During its enforcement, urban scrutiny and punishment for violating OCP are more manageable, thus more threatening than those of the rural areas. Couples with non-agricultural household registration status (*hukou*), who make up the most part of urban residents, would face heavy fines calculated with level of personal incomes and the city’s average incomes, as well as high risk of losing employment (especially in state-owned company) and the right to register their children to healthcare and education if they have more than one child (Gu et al. 2007). In 2005, the one child rate of women born between

1961 and 1970 who mostly reached the end of their fertility years exceeded 40 percent, which varied from less than 20 percent in some western provinces such as Guizhou and Yunnan, to about 80 percent in urban centers like Beijing and Shanghai. This share was above 90 percent for couples with non-agricultural *hukou* in ten Chinese provincial regions (Feng et al. 2013).

None of my "60s" and "70s" interviewees are single children in their families, and all of them, except one "70s", have only one child. Yuan, born in 1975, came to Shenzhen in 1998, and married in 2000. She had a daughter in 2001, and after "weighing the pros and cons meticulously", decided to go to Hongkong and had a son in 2005. Yuan and her husband were both employed in wholly foreign-owned enterprises (WFOE), and were thus exempt from the risk of losing their jobs. Going Hongkong or abroad was a widely utilized legislative loophole to evade OCP for those who can afford it. Yuan described their hesitation before this decision, and gratitude after it.

> In fact, at first we did not plan to evade the policy although we really like children… After all, the price is still relatively high. Fine is just a small part, it's mainly children's education that we worried about. And most of my mainland peers have only one child, so we didn't think much… But you see, my husband and I were both working in foreign-owned companies, so we had a lot of Hong Kong colleagues who have two children. I was really envious, and thought that it's still better for children to have some company of their age. Our daughter was also desiring a little brother or sister. We then had this idea… The process is truly troublesome, but it was still much more convenient for us than people who lived in inland areas, because Hong Kong is just by our side! … Finally I told my husband that the trouble is only for a short while, but if we succeed, the child can accompany us for a lifetime… And the future is unknown. If the regulation becomes stricter, it will be too late to regret… You see now, the fertility policy has been loosened, but many friends of ours cannot have babies anymore. I have friends who are very envious of us, always saying things like, look at your family! A boy and a girl, how blessed! We are always glad to have that courage and determination at that time.

Except for Yong (60s) and Li (70s) who think one child is enough considering the limited time and energy one could spare, and Wang (70s) who did not plan to have children, other women who were restricted by the OCP all expressed their wish to have two.

> Actually, before the One-Child Policy, we were planning to have two, because one child might be lonely. But the OCP happened to enact, so one it is.

However, some also claimed their lack of consideration because of the choiceless situation. Hong (60s) said:

> Emm, at my time, when I was pregnant with her, I still worked in a state-owned company. Basically the national policy only allowed us to have one child, so I haven't even thought of the question of having how many children. Just thought to have one.

Conclusion and Discussion

In accordance with the previous qualitative research on China, the result shows that contemporary urban middle-class women's values on marriage and fertility, individual fulfillment and families did present noticeable generational differences.

In Chapter one, I explored how these women make senses of giving birth to their children and the rationales behind such decisions. Their generational disparities are highlighted during this process. People in the 60s are heavily influenced by gender norms. These norms are generated through traditional patriarchal values that attach marriages to childrearing. People in the 80s and 90s are instead heavily influenced by their only child status. They show great affections toward their children. Such disparity might also be resulted from the disparity of their children's ages. But people in the 80s and 90s also have greater autonomy that comes with different rationales of having children.

In Chapter two, I discuss the role of one-child policy and two-child policy in people's decision-making. Economic reform and open-up policy, which brought private marketization to Chinese economy also have their impacts on people's decision-making. Younger generations are facing greater cost-of-living, which makes them frugal parents. But all age groups show significant consideration of the financial and mental cost of child-rearing.

All in all, only part of the phenomenon described in SDT theory is shown in my project. The result shows that urban middle-class women's values on fertility and the structural factors that shape their fertility decision both. However, these shifts did not necessarily affect their ideal number of children. Under multiple influences of social norms, economic development and political agenda, China appears to be experiencing the First and the Second Demographic Transition partially and simultaneously.

While both strongly influenced by policy changes, the older generation suggested more limitation on time and energy and less economic worries, while the younger generations expressed more economic but no less time and energy concerns.

In conclusion, China is still in the process of First Demographic Transition and at the start of Second Demographic Transition.

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