

## “One or Two?”: Fertility Decisions After the One-child Policy in China

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### ABSTRACT

The one-child policy, as a government-guided family planning and birth control policy, lasted for nearly thirty years beginning in the 1970s. As the decreasing fertility rate in modern Chinese society caused many problems, such as a demographic imbalance, the government decided to establish the universal two-child policy in urban areas in 2015. However, the fertility rate did not rise as much as the government expected. To study the reasons for the continuously low fertility rate, I conducted 20 semi-structured qualitative interviews with 20 young married heterosexual couples in the city of Jinan, Shandong province, China. Throughout this paper, I focus on the role of kinship and the socioeconomic barriers to having a second child in urban Chinese families after the establishment of the two-child policy. The main reasons explaining the unexpected low fertility rate after the universal two-child policy in urban areas are first, increasing cost of investing in children, and second, the lack of interaction with cousins. This research outlines demographic policy and how fertility ideology and family decisions changed through policy changes.

**Keywords:** child policy; kinship; China; fertility

The elimination of the one-child policy in China in 2013 has challenged existing ideologies of family planning and family structure. The policy not only institutionally regulated individuals' fertility decisions, but also gradually challenged Chinese fertility culture around having multiple children. However, to increase the fertility rate and slow down the aging of the population, it became necessary for the Chinese government to abolish the one-child policy and replace it with a new two-child policy. Yet, young people's conceptions of family likely changed under the influence of the one-child policy over nearly 30 years, raising the question of if and how young families will revise family-planning decisions under the new law. The concept of filial adjustment in Chinese society refers to changes from multiple children to single children at the beginning of the one-child policy among urban families, and the purpose of this paper is to examine people's different attitudes towards family planning and filial adjustment in urban areas by doing qualitative interviews with young urban couples in the process of family planning. The research question is therefore: what considerations do young couples in urban China make when facing filial adjustment while considering family planning under the new two-child policy?

Drawing on theories of family and fertility, I suggest that changes in line with the Demographic Transition Model (Hanks, 2019), socioeconomic concerns and cultural changes are potential influences on young urban couples' choices regarding fertility and the number of planned children in modern urban China. This research aims to complement demographic research that may guide further population policy in the future. To begin, I provide background on China's one- and two-child policies, and then I briefly discuss the

differences in urban and rural areas with regards to these policies. Second, I review two possible considerations that young couples make when they are thinking about their fertility and the reason why using qualitative methods rather than quantitative methods is necessary when studying fertility-related research. Third, I present the qualitative research methods that I used. I then analyze the qualitative data from the ten couples. Finally, I summarize and compare the qualitative data and previous research to draw conclusions from this research.

## **Background: China's One and Two Child Policies**

The most important issue that has affected family planning in China in recent years is the one-child policy. The one-child policy was established in the 1970s to promote economic growth. According to Zhang (2017), in 1969, China's population exceeded 800 million, and economic growth had stagnated. Therefore, China primarily implemented the one-child policy because its excessive population growth was detrimental to economic and social development. This family planning campaign was a success, and China's total fertility rate dropped by half between 1971 and 1978 (Zhang 2017, 141-143). While the population growth rate under the one-child policy was reduced, it also changed the traditional family structure and created a sex ratio imbalance with over 10 percent excess male births in the population (Feng, Gu and Cai 2016, 83-86). The traditional family structure and concepts of family were challenged, and people's desires and attitudes towards childbirth changed. Further, although per capita income has increased, the aging population has also become a serious concern (Feng, Gu and Cai 2016, 83-86).

Because the one-child policy has brought about these negative effects of demographic imbalances, the Chinese government decided to abolish the one-child policy in October 2015, and they established the universal two-child policy to replace it (Zeng and Hesketh 2016, 1930-1933). The two-child policy states that in rural areas, if the first child of a family is a girl, then they can have a second child. In cities, families can have two children regardless of the

gender of the first child (Zeng and Hesketh 2016, 1930-1938). However, the universal two-child policy has not had the expected impact on the population structure in China. According to Li et al. (2019), scholars estimated that the fertility rate would be 2.1 children per family after the new policy, but it was only 1.8 children per family – far lower than anticipated. Therefore, evidence suggests that fertility policy alone cannot explain family planning decisions in China.

However, the importance of doing qualitative research on fertility decisions was seldom discussed by researchers in China. Although quantitative research directly showed the demographic flows, the reasons why fertility rates change were often ignored. Commenting on family planning in Italy, Krause (2012, 362) argues that “The truth of the matter may be that this narrow conceptualization of human behavior—in leaving out emotions, desires, and ideologies—exposes the limits of a paradigm.” The reason for doing qualitative research on fertility decisions is to delve into the stories and experiences behind the quantitative data. Krause's study of fertility in Chinese contexts also pointed out the significance of challenging the rationality of quantitative research. The cultural logic and rationale of doing qualitative research is that, according to Krause (2012), even though both Italy and China faced a declining population for different reasons, the aim of doing demographical qualitative research is to explore reasons for fertility culture change rather than simply defining shifts as 'rational' or 'irrational'. Settles et al.'s research (2013) explains the challenges confronting families after the implementation of the one-child policy through a small in-depth qualitative study. This research qualitatively explores the challenges behind the demographic changes that occurred after the one-child policy was implemented and its potential problems associated with education and childcare. Ultimately, both Krause (2012) and Settles et al.'s (2013) research highlights the importance of doing qualitative research within the context of fertility research.

Deutsch's research (2006) explored fertility decisions and family planning through ethnographic research among the first cohort

born under the one-child policy. Deutsch mainly interpreted how the one-child policy changed notions of filial piety and patrilineality in traditional Chinese families. (Deutsch 2006). Short et al. (2001) use qualitative methods to explore the changes within traditional Chinese families under the one-child policy. According to Short et al. (2001, 918), “the in-depth interviews provide detailed information on caring for children, including the importance of caregiver involvement and how and why care varies for different children.” Ultimately, qualitative research highlights the detailed differences and perceptions of individuals, and it provides researchers with multiple angles to explore the detailed perspectives of each participant.

## **Potential Explanations for Low Birth Rates Under the Two-child Policy**

Various demographic theories suggest that China's economic growth would have reduced fertility rates independent of the one-child policy. Demographic Transition Model (DTM) countries develop from one demographic stage to the next over time as certain social and economic forces influence birth and mortality rates (Hanks 2019). Weintraub (1962) discovered that the relationship between the birth rate and per capita income is thought to be negative; it is normal for the birth rate of the population to decrease when a society experiences an economic growth, according to the third stage of the DTM.. Specifically, in the third stage of this model, due to the improvement of economic conditions, the improvement of women's status and access to contraceptive measures, the birth rate gradually decreases (Hanks 2019). Most developing countries are in Stage 3, where the growth rate of the population is low while population growth continues more slowly. As Kirk (1996) explains, China is currently in Stage 3, marked by wealthier small families in cities and increasing industrialization, leading to an increase in the cost of raising children at the same time as the possibility of children contributing economically declines within the household. According to Cai (2010), the year 1970 marks a point in time when the national fertility rate would have entered a continuous

downward trend due to the DTM, and in 1979, China implemented the one-child birth control policy. Therefore, it is challenging to disentangle what effect the one-child policy had on fertility rates independent of natural demographic trends. Specifically, after the two-child policy was established, the fertility rate remained low in Chinese society (Li, Zhou and Jia 2019, 183-203). This phenomenon is in line with what the DTM would suggest when there is no absent fertility policy and demographic transition flows naturally. However, the DTM could only predict the natural population flow. The one-child policy thus artificially and swiftly decreased the fertility rate, which created a unique process which is different from how the birth rate naturally diminishes at certain demographic stages. The influences behind the policy and model are worth studying in this research.

The DTM suggests that a downturn in a country's birth rate is related to social development, especially economic growth. Raising a child also became more expensive in urban China throughout this time period. As Cheng and Maxim (1992) explain, as a society develops, it tends to experience increasing urbanization, and industrial production gradually replaces agricultural production. A society's economy is no longer based on agriculture, and the working units shift to the signing of labor contracts between employees and enterprises. According to Zhang (2017), in the 1960s and 1970s, South Korea, Mexico, Thailand, and India had a slower decline in fertility rates than Chinese cities, but by 2010 their fertility rates were as low as China. This suggests that similarly situated developing countries experienced a natural decrease in birth rates without the one-child policy. Therefore, in the initial stage of introducing fertility policies, the one-child policy reduced China's fertility rate, but in the long run, the main reason for the decline in China's fertility rate may be social and economic development, not government policies.

More specifically, as the proportion of traditional agriculture in the economy decreases, the demand for labor is greatly reduced. Consequently, the requirements for the quality of labor are higher, so the financial investment in training the next generation is

also higher, especially with education. Qian and Smyth (2011, 3392), drawing on a 2005 article in the *People's Daily* newspaper, reported that expenditure on children's education was the top reason for poverty among urban and rural Chinese. Increasing the number of children in the family means that the financial output for children is substantially higher. For instance, according to Qian & Smyth (2011), when the second child in the family reaches school age, a family's education expenditure will increase by 95%. If the second child reaches secondary school, then the family's education expenditure will double. Therefore, even if the country starts to implement the universal two-child policy in urban areas, because the cost of raising children is so high, Chinese families may still choose to have only one child or no children at all.

Several gaps in the theoretical and empirical literature emerge regarding the shift from the one-child policy to the two-child policy. Here, I focus on a major research gap regarding the unknown reason(s) why the two-child policy has not yet raised the fertility rate as anticipated. Although the DTM showed that the fertility rate will decrease naturally, it does not take into consideration cultural factors when exploring modern Chinese society. A lower fertility rate highlighted the effects of government-guided fertility policy in Chinese society, and quantitative research could only show the statistical results of the low fertility rate. However, low fertility rates among young couples in urban areas did not explain the formation of the small family culture which means the family size decreases when compared with traditional family sizes in the past. To further understand how young couples make fertility decisions under the two-child policy in Jinan, qualitative research is necessary to explore the nuanced reasons that the one-child policy influenced fertility decisions over a long period.

## Methods

This research study used in-depth, semi-structured interviews with ten couples living in the city of Jinan, Shandong province, China, who are currently in the process of family planning



under the new two-child policy. My semi-structured interviews were open-ended interviews that provided some structure while allowing new ideas to be brought up during an interview because of things participants say organically (Watson 2015).

The combination of structure and flexibility in the interviews not only provides reliable information and a logical structure but also space for exploring ideas that had not been previously considered by the researcher. Semi-structured interviews also focus on lived experiences and can address theoretically-driven concerns of interest (Galletta 2013). Importantly, semi-structured interviews allow for participants' engagement during the interview. According to Firestone (1987), social phenomena are not entirely explained by logical causality like natural phenomena are. It is thus difficult to strictly control for variables when studying social and cultural phenomena. The advantage of this type of qualitative research is therefore that knowledge can be obtained through descriptive research and direct interviews to elucidate theoretical explanations (Firestone 1987, 16-18). The ways that modern urban Chinese families make decisions about fertility and family planning under the new policy are unclear when understood solely through statistics, and qualitative interviews are best suited to help fill this gap given their flexibility.

The study population of this project consisted of ten young, married, heterosexual couples who are both only children. Some couples did not have children but planned to have their first child in next two years, while others already had one child, and/or were planning to have their second child in the next two years. These groups were selected as the target population because young, married couples were likely to have the highest probability of actively and purposefully considering their fertility decisions. The sample was limited to heterosexual, married couples because social norms in China mean that same-sex and non-married parenting is very rare. Moreover, homosexual couples are not allowed to marry and have children in China at present. Of the ten couples I interviewed, two couples

already have a second child, two couples have no children yet, and six couples have one child and have decided not to have the second one within the next three years. Interviews were conducted separately with each partner in public places for about an hour to allow for freedom of expression and any gender differences to emerge without influence from the other partner. Participants from all socioeconomic backgrounds and statuses were encouraged to participate to maximize the diversity of the sample.

I recruited participants by asking existing contacts in my social network to put me in touch with potential participants, in person or via social media. I also asked existing participants if they could suggest other potential participants (snowball sampling). In the end, due to limitations of time, all participants were recruited through contacts in one large workplace.

The interview guide contained five main thematic sections. First, I collected general background and demographic information, including questions about the participants' demographics, their family of origin, and their childhood. Second, I asked about participants' relationships with their partner. Third, I asked about socioeconomic influences on fertility decisions in relation to the first and second mechanisms proposed in the literature review, including the DTM and how policy changes culture through daily practices. Fourth, I probed participants' opinions on the one-child and two-child policies. This part of the interview aimed to examine the connection between policies and fertility culture among the couples from the single-child generation. Fifth, I asked about interpersonal influences on the participants' fertility choices, focusing on family and peer pressure on fertility decisions. While the interview guide was divided into these categories, I also allowed the interviews to flow naturally and for participants to bring up other topics that they felt affected their fertility decisions.

I audio-recorded all interviews, while taking notes about the participants' nonverbal cues. I transcribed the interviews verbatim and entered the transcripts and notes into the qualitative data analysis software NVivo. I took

an inductive approach to coding because the study is exploratory, and thus, the codebook was constructed based on the findings after doing the interviews (Deterding and Waters 2018). To analyze them, I used multiple rounds of coding. Specifically, the coding process started with descriptive coding, and then I coded iteratively to generate thematic codes. All coding used the qualitative coding software in NVivo.

Prior to beginning the study, I obtained approval from Dalhousie University's Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Board. In line with Canada's Tri-Council Policy Statement (TCPS2) expectations, the risk to participants was minimal because it would not exceed the risks they experience in their daily lives in relation to this topic (Government of Canada 2018). There was a small risk that the interviews and collection of sensitive data would cause some negative emotions in participants, especially, for instance, if fertility had been challenging for them. However, since participants knew the purpose of the study before agreeing to participate, they were expecting questions about fertility. Participants could also skip questions, take a break, stop the whole interview, or withdraw their data, without consequences.

## Reproducing Childhood Kinship Experiences

From the macro perspective, the traditional concept of kinship influences the couples' fertility decisions. However, family interaction also plays a vital role in the micro perspective of making fertility decisions. In this section, my analysis will focus on how kinship relations and childhood experiences have influenced fertility decisions. According to the interviews, fertility decisions from young couples are partially related to their experiences of family interactions in their childhood. Hence, a couple's fertility decisions and preferences refer to their past family and kinship relations which means a couple's enculturation into a particular family structure and existing kin relations impacts fertility decisions.

Participants discussed two main issues related to kinship relations. On the one hand, they focused on the child-parent interaction,

citing issues of the "spoiled child" under the one-child policy as the main reason that they would like to have a second child. Helping their first child to practice engaging with peers and socialization with family relations is an additional consideration. On the other hand, parents' experiences in childhood with other peers or family, for example their cousins, influenced their fertility preferences. Whether they had peers or not when growing up had a significant impact on further fertility relations among young couples. Participants unconsciously choose to reproduce their childhood family experience in their current family relationship. Childhood kinship experiences with cousins are a core issue when making fertility decisions. Interview data showed that participants with closer relationships with their cousins in their childhood prefer to have a second child in their own family. Cao, who had a close relationship with his cousin, said that:

When my daughter said she wanted a little brother or sister to hang out with during the holidays, it reminded me of my childhood experience with my cousin. We both lived with our grandparents together, and the happiest experience with my cousin was after school when we went home together talking about our days. Also, Spring Festival and other traditional festivals were also interesting together. I immediately understood my daughter's feeling when she asked for a little brother or sister.

Parents would like to create the best conditions for their children to grow up in, especially in their own family. When their parents have positive memories of their own kinship experiences and consider them to be enjoyable, they often want their children to have the same experiences. A second child could have the same function as a close cousin that helps children to socialize and have company with peers; this is enjoyable based on their parents' past experiences.

However, participants without close relationships with their cousins when growing up made the opposite decision when talking

about having a second child. Some of my interviewees argued that growing up alone benefitted them. According to my informant, Zhang, "The one-child policy benefits me a lot. I enjoy fully using our family resources by myself. Growing up with my grandparents without cousins makes me happy too. My grandparents really like me because I'm the single child in our family." Zhang and Cao had distinctive experiences in their childhoods. Zhang also told me, "I only want one child in our family... I enjoy spending time alone and with my grandparents. Also, I don't have closer cousins when growing up because my parents divorced and our relatives did not often visit each other." These experiences suggest that participants reproduce their childhood experiences when considering the next generation. Even though some of them did not recognize the reproduction of their childhood experience when making fertility decisions, it still became a major issue when choosing whether to have a second child.

Whether or not people considered their childhood experiences to have benefitted their lives, this influenced fertility decisions for the single-child generation. Some of the participants claim this aspect as their "personal preference;" however, their fertility decision still stems from childhood experiences of kinship under the one-child policy. According to my participant Xia who already has one child, "I would not consider to have a second child even though my wife disagrees with me. I was not close to my cousins when growing up. Even though I enjoy being a single child in family, sometimes still want to experience childhood life with peers." Past experiences of having cousins did not benefit him as a child. In this circumstance, fertility decisions are all about personal preference, and reproducing childhood experiences that benefits the participants. Interviewees who had closer relationships with their cousins wanted the next generation to experience the same joy and happiness that they had in their childhood. Similarly, people who benefitted from having no cousins in their childhood create a family environment that benefits their child the most according to their past experiences.

All of the couples in my study agree that they want to give the best living conditions and life experiences that they can to their child. However, their perspectives on what these best conditions are are limited based on their own experiences. Although they considered their past experiences to be beneficial to them, they have not experienced different family situations. For example, participants without a closer cousin may not consider whether having a cousin in childhood would have had a better or different impact on their own development. Therefore, in this case, they will give the child the option that they think is the best based on their experience. However, some interviewees like Di and her husband did not express their children's feelings or preferences. So, they applied ideal assumptions to their children's childhood experiences based on their own experiences. The impact of the one-child policy is subtle when making fertility decisions. Even if the participant denies the cultural and familial impact of the one-child policy, it still influences the experiences of kinship and family relations, in turn influencing fertility decision-making.

## **Ideals of Child Rearing**

Not only did the participants rely on their past experiences to make fertility decisions, but they also had their own expectations of fertility and how to better educate the next generation. There are two things that interviewees cited as necessary to successfully raise their child and to prepare for school. First, participants cited socialization within family interactions with peers as important, including learning to share with and respect other people. Parents seek to prevent their child from being bossy like a "little emperor" or "little princess." Second, parents wanted to keep their child from being lonely. One of my participants, Song, stated that, "since me and my husband are both doctors, we are very busy working at the hospital every day. If we only have one child in our family, he/she will lack company in daily life." When parents talked about the loneliness of the single child, they always mean a lack of company when their children are growing up. These two reasons for having the second child were frequently mentioned by my participants.

The idea of the “little emperor” or “little princess” was commonly used during the one-child policy period by media and newspapers (Chung, Holdsworth, Li and Fam 2009). It refers to the spoiled single child in the family. There are two reasons why a spoiled child is called a “little emperor” or “little princess.” On the one hand, these terms were used to describe the poor temperament of a single child, attributed to over-attention from the grandparents and parents. Single children also tend to receive all the family resources, and parents tried their best to satisfy their needs as long as they were not too excessive. This made the single child think that they deserved all the of family resources as a matter of course. Once they failed to get what they wanted, they would show their spoiled temperament to help them garner more family resources.

The benefits of having a second child from the parents’ point of view includes the ability to socialize their child through family interactions to prevent them from behaving like a “little emperor/princess.” Having another child in their family can accomplish this. According to Cao:

My daughter always asks me when her little brother or little sister will be born. She feels excited to have a sibling in our family because I have been pregnant for about seven months. Some of her classmates also have siblings, and I talked to their parents about educating and socializing our child in family interactions. It actually helps children to get a sense of sharing.

Cao is not the only interviewee who mentioned sharing and socializing in the interview. Other participants also have the same concern about a single child’s socialization. According to Song:

Even though I currently don’t have children right now, I still don’t want my child to be like a ‘little emperor/princess’ as the media showed. For me, the sense of sharing and respect for other people is the most important quality that I would like to teach to my children. Having two children means I could easily teach them the sense of sharing in

family life and allow them to more easily get along with classmates in school.

However, parents also worry about the relationship between two children in a family. When planning fertility, they not only consider the socialization needs of children, but the mental wellness of the next generation.

## Loneliness of the One-child Generation

Eight out of ten interviewees put much attention on their child’s loneliness as a single child. According to Song, “As I mentioned in our previous questions, having two children is not only important for me to learn new things with my kids, but also for my children, so they could accompany with each other in the future.” Growing up with peers both prevents children from being lonely and helps them socialize at an early age through family interaction. Di and her husband said:

To ensure the mental well-being of our kid. Having a second child is necessary for the first one. Remembering my childhood experience, I always felt lonely when I went home from school. I don’t want my children to experience the same thing as I did. Also, me and my husband are busy working so there is less time for us to stay with them. At least they can accompany each other.

Ideally, eight out of the ten couples preferred to have a second child not only because they want to, but also to help with the education and socialization of their first child. To provide their children a good environment for socialization is a core component of raising them before they attend school. The ideology of sharing and respecting others was frequently mentioned by the interviewees. Meanwhile, the mental health, especially the loneliness, of a single child is also a significant aspect of successfully raising a child. However, there is a prerequisite for fulfilling these wishes – that is, the financial status of every family.

## Discussion

The conflict over the one-child policy’s repeal centers mainly on the conflict between ideals and practical issues. Although all participants



grew up in a one-child culture, the close interaction with cousins created a similar upbringing to the non-one-child generation. This factor makes them believe that having the second child is necessary for the next generation when they are growing up. However, practical issues such as the increasing cost of education and cost of living have forced them to give up their vision of having a second child. These realities can often overcome participants' inner desire for a second child, as they are unwilling to lower either their standards pertaining to education or living conditions.

Having a second child is the ideal situation for most participants. Almost all participants who had close relationship with their cousin showed their willingness to have the second child after the two-child policy. According to the interviews, the results revealed two reasons that the desire for a second child was cited among eight of the ten couples. First, childhood relationships with cousins played a role in instigating fertility decisions. The participants who had closer interactions with their cousins in daily family activities preferred to have a second child in their own family. This factor seems to be predicated more upon personal desires than kinship relations. In fact, an individual's kinship relation is hardly influenced by the environment. According to the different attitudes between participants who grew up with cousins and without cousins, their preference of having a second child relies on their past family interaction with their cousin rather than their parents' expectation of having many children in their own family. Only one of the participants mentioned that their fertility decision relies more on their energy, free time, and economic condition rather than other external aspects such as how many children their peers and colleagues have or how many children their parents think is perfect for a family.

The second factor affecting the preference of having how many children a family has is the traditional perspective of having multiple children in Chinese society. Obeying the traditional ideology of Chinese fertility culture, people first considered the possibility of having a second child rather than only having one child

under the two-child policy. Traditionally, having multiple children in a family is a normal phenomenon which influenced participants' fertility decision culturally.

Even though most of the participants showed their desire for a second child, my results show why the fertility rate did not rise as expected after the establishment of the two-child policy. There are two major barriers to having a second child according to my interviews. First, the increasing cost of children's education became a major issue for parents to consider when deciding whether to have a second child. Parents did not want to lower the second child's investment in education and preferred to give both children the same opportunity to get an education. The financial condition of their family might not be able to support both children to get a great education. The main reason for this is the cost of investing in both children, especially in urban areas. Parents not only spend money but also energy and time on their children. Even though their financial condition may have improved through economic growth, the cost of raising children has grown over the years. For a single child, there is no competition within the family which means no matter how terrible the financial condition is, the child will get the best educational investment. However, a family deciding to have a second child, according to the previous quotes from the participants, would prefer not to lower the standard of educational investment for the second child. Interviewees would rather sacrifice their own needs to pay for a child's education. So, in this circumstance, only wealthy families can easily make the decision to have the second child. However, as the participants in this snowball sample were already financially well off compared to the majority of people in Jinan, the fertility rate after the two-child policy will not increase as quickly as the government expected. The major concerns of having second children for parents are time investment and the financial consequences of raising them. Since the participants in this study are considered economically well off compared to the majority of people in Jinan, they decided not to have second children because of cost and the fact that it will reduce the first child's quality of life.

The second reason why the fertility rate did not rise after two-child policy was initiated is that, even though young couples saw the one-child policy as a temporary interruption and a necessity, inflation and the rising cost of education meant that the reality and the ideal could not be reconciled. In these circumstances, the fertility rate after the two-child policy will not show an increasing trend if the cost of raising a child does not change. The one-child policy does not change the cultural concept of how many children are best in a family, but on the contrary, it changes the cultural concept of what constitutes an appropriate investment in children. Unsurprisingly, all ten couples were willing to sacrifice their daily spending to invest in their children's education. Na and her husband both agreed that "taking extra courses outside of school is necessary. I would like to buy fewer clothes or accessories and put the money into the extra curriculum activities for my kid, no matter one or two." No matter how many children a family has, parents are willing to guarantee the same opportunity in education for the next generation.

The reason why the participants kept talking about the educational investment for the next generation is shown in the DTM. In Stage 3 of the DTM, improved economic conditions result from improved access to education and, therefore, educated workers. According to one of my participants, Xin, "the cost of raising one child is 40% of the family income." Qian and Smyth (2011) claim that the requirements for quality labor are increasing and so are the costs to produce quality labor, such as education, which is passed on to the families. Wahlberg (2020) claims that ideologically, previous generations understood having more children as a cultural responsibility, whereas the one-child policy turned that ideology upside down by insisting that having only one child was now the more responsible action. Cultural and social norms are often elusive. People are not always aware of how their thinking has shifted or has been shifted by the dominant message. According to the DTM, China is currently in Stage 3; wealthier smaller families and increased industrialization support this conclusion (Kirk 1996). This model cannot necessarily prove that the one-child policy became a cultural norm that is directly related

to the decrease in fertility rate. Ultimately, the interruption of the one-child policy is affecting the normal DTM prediction of fertility rates.

Even though the interview data tracks most closely with the DTM, it is impossible to conclude from a small qualitative study if the demographic change truly caused changes in fertility. The DTM suggests that after Stage 3, the fertility rate will naturally experience a downturn because of the developing economy. Similarly, the purpose of establishing the two-child policy after 2015 was to encourage couples to have more children because the fertility rate had declined below replacement levels during the one-child policy. Even though Stage 3 of the DTM showed a downturn in the fertility rate, the one-child policy had a large impact on China's decreased birth rate during the 1970s. At the same time, the DTM would suggest the same decline even without policy interventions, which means the population will naturally decline, whether the government implements the one-child policy or not. Because the one-child policy began at a time when other social factors were contributing to change, it is impossible to know whether it can claim any responsibility for fertility rates or was merely one factor in the reduced birth rate.

Furthermore, the theory that the one-child policy changed Chinese culture is not supported by my analysis. Culturally, the one-child policy gave couples a common understanding that having a single child was normative for the current generation. Although some of the interviewees claimed that they are a "traditional" person, they were still not willing to have a second child. Financially, the conflict between the ideal and reality manifested in the way family financial conditions influenced their willingness to have the second child in their family; in other words, it changed the culture of childrearing. The policy not only provided a common cultural understanding that having a single child is normal among young couples, but also contributed to the higher expense associated with raising a child in an urban family. The current situation does not match the theory of how policy influenced culture because eight of the young couples decided not to have their second child within two years.

However, for the filial adjustment theory, no participants regarded this as an important factor when making fertility decisions. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, fertility decisions were more about family financial conditions and personal preferences. Since all participants were able to support their own family, couples' opinions seem less influential than participants' own consideration of themselves and their own family.

While the research design is supported by qualitative data and theories, there are three limitations of my qualitative research. First, the sample size of this research is small. Compared to previous researchers, this study only interviewed ten couples which is not representative enough to show the trend of the entire country and population. Second, this research only focused on Shandong province, which is not representative of the whole country. The province is located in a relatively rich area, although it is not the richest area in China. In richer areas like Beijing and Shanghai, the financial pressure of owning an apartment and investing in children is much greater than in Shandong province, potentially creating additional pressures on parents. Thus, from a socio-economic point of view, the probability of having a second child is likely higher in Shandong province compared to Beijing and Shanghai, but lower than in some less expensive cities. Third, due to the snowball sampling method of recruiting interview participants, eight out of ten the couples in this sample were collected from a single workplace. Almost all couples have a relatively high income compared to most people in Jinan. This also makes the data not representative enough of the whole country's population, or even the entire city's.

Further research thus needs to be conducted among a larger sample population and should cover all income levels, not only in Shandong province. To ensure the results can be more representative for a larger population, the data collection process should not only use snowball sampling in future research. Despite these limitations, my research has highlighted the cultural interpretations of government policy and the potential reasons for lower fertility rates for high income people in Chinese society.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, what does this research suggest about the demographic trends in China in the post- one-child policy era? This research showed two factors of concern for couples making their fertility decisions. The first factor centered upon the reproduction of kinship relationships from childhood experiences. The second was related to socio-economic factors impacting fertility, including apartment ownership and investment in children's education. To study the fertility decisions in the whole country, the economic growth of a certain area should be one of the core aspects under consideration. From the government and policy-maker point of view, mandatory fertility policies such as the one-child policy will only lead to an unbalanced demographic structure. The government should consider a more comprehensive policy on fertility instead of focusing on the rapid decline of fertility. Moreover, from the governmental point of view, an important intervention to encourage couples to have a second child will be to increase subsidies for young couples proportional to the number of children, control the rising price of owning an apartment, and increase the quality and affordability of education for children. Even though the ideology from the one-child policy era will not be easily changed by establishing the two-child policy in a short period of time, it will continuously influence the next generation's fertility decisions when society gradually solves the problem of high educational investment and housing prices.

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