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PLANNING BIRTH: CHANGES IN FERTILITY CULTURE IN A CHINESE VILLAGE

Yunxiang Yan

OF ALL THE STATE-SPONSORED CAMPAIGNS of social engineering in the People's Republic of China, birth planning (*jihua shengyu*) is perhaps the most dramatic and far-reaching. To date, most studies of the campaign in rural China focus on the powerful and frequently coercive implementation of birth control policies, or on their large-scale demographic consequences. There are, however, few scholarly accounts that examine how individual villagers actually cope with such a dramatic change in everyday practice (Greenhalgh's research is a noticeable exception).

A closer look at the lived experiences of villagers shows that in their response to the birth control program many had transcended traditional fertility ideals and adjusted their reproductive behavior, while others resisted to it by various strategies and also paid a dear price. What is at stake is the agency of the individual. When facing the intrusion of a powerful state in this intimate sphere of private life, villagers were not merely passive reactors and victims; instead, they made various choices and adopted different strategies. My central question is thus why the differences in choices and strategies?

And, what are the consequences and implications of these individual choices and strategies? To address these issues in the following pages, I will first briefly review the development of the birth control campaign in a northern Chinese village during the 1980s and 1990s. Then I will examine how the villagers coped with state policies, arguing that more attention should be paid to individual strategies and internal variations within the village community. In the third section I will analyze the sociocultural factors that have contributed to individual choices and strategies, which also led to the emergence of a new fertility culture.

The present study is based on data collected from a series of fieldtrips conducted from 1989 to 1999 in Xiajia village, Heilongjiang province, northeast China. With a population of 1,492 in 1998, the village remains a farming community after the rural reforms (decollectivization occurred in 1983), but villagers' livelihood has been closely tied to the market by a new mode of commodity production. To make more profit from farming, villagers all switched to growing high-yield maize that is used as fodder. They sell the maize to the state and private buyers, and then purchase wheat and rice from the market for their own consumption. While some families also produce a small quantity of high-quality grain for consumption, their major cash crop is still maize.

There was no rural industry in Xiajia village under collectivism; several grain processing factories and husbandry units were established in the 1990s, all of which were small family businesses. Secondary occupations provided families with some desperately needed cash income (in which women played the central

role). By the summer of 1999, more than 30 percent of Xiajia families were raising dairy cows, selling milk to a joint venture Nestlé factory in the county seat, and several dozen families ran chicken or pig farms. After the late 1980s, seeking temporary jobs in the cities became another important channel for earning cash income and, for those villagers who were too young to receive a share of collective land in 1983, it was also the most plausible way to survive. In 1991 there were 106 Xiajia laborers working regularly outside the village for longer than three months per year; this figure increased to 167 by 1994. The trend continued throughout the second half of the 1990s; an increasing number of unmarried young women also joined the force of temporary migrant laborers, constituting approximately one third of the out-migrant seasonal workers.

Xiajia's heavy reliance on agriculture has been one of the major obstacles to economic development since decollectivization. The average *per capita* income in Xiajia remained slightly below the national average ever since the rural reform; it was 528 yuan in 1988 and 616 yuan in 1990, while the national average for these two years was 545 yuan and 623 yuan, respectively. The situation was exacerbated during the 1990s, and the living conditions of most villagers showed little sign of improvement in comparison to the 1980s. Official figures during the same period, however, were less reliable as the village economy stagnated and cadres were under pressure to inflate their achievements. For instance, the reported *per capita* income in 1997 was 2,700 yuan, a figure that even the village cadres openly admitted to being false. Nevertheless, all villagers

I interviewed agreed that living conditions had improved to a great extent in comparison to those of the collectivist period. Some households have been able to take advantage of the new opportunities of the reform era and have become quite affluent in recent years, contrasting sharply with others who have been left behind [Yan 1992].

Two decades of birth planning

In Xiajia and the surrounding areas, the birth control campaign first began in a rather moderate form during the late 1970s, relying mainly on propaganda and educational meetings. Although many villagers openly rejected the idea of birth control, some found it a helpful solution. According to the official records, nine Xiajia women voluntarily underwent sterilization between 1978 and 1979 because they did not wish to have more births.

State policies became much stricter in 1980 and, in order to rapidly reduce the population growth, the single child policy was implemented, first in cities and then expanded to the countryside. In Xiajia village, a fine of 700 yuan was imposed on all those who had second or more births after April 1, 1980. Married women of childbearing age were required to use contraceptives, and newly-wed couples had to apply for permission to have their first child. These policies encountered strong resistance from many villagers whose lifetime goal was to have as many children as possible, especially sons [Li 1993; Wasserstrom 1984]. To reduce the massive discontent and anger, Xiajia Production Brigade had to subsidize 420 yuan of the 700 yuan fine that was imposed on violators.

It was not until 1983 that Xiajia villagers truly experienced the impact of the powerful birth control program. Unlike in the previous years when the focus was on propaganda and education, the emphasis in 1983 was on IUD insertions and female sterilization (tubal ligation). All women of childbearing age who had had a son by 1983 had to undergo sterilization, except those with serious health-related problems. Those women whose first child was a girl had to accept IUD insertion. Individual wills were totally ignored. For instance, six middle-aged women had voluntarily used contraceptives long prior to the campaign and they asked to be spared the sterilization because they did not want to have more children in any case. Their requests were rejected and they still had to undergo the operation. There were even rumors of fixed quota for the number of sterilizations in each village. In addition to the government imposed fines, the collectives would punish birth control violators by withholding grain rations and other benefits for newborn children. Most informants agreed that they were terrified by the very strict campaign and few individuals dared to resist.¹

By the end of the 1983 campaign, 102 women in Xiajia village had undergone sterilization. This means that virtually every family had either an immediate or a close relative who had had the operation. As informants recalled in the 1990s, anxiety, discontent, grief, and strong feelings of helplessness had been typical emotional responses in 1983. Men who did not have male offspring reacted the most strongly and, for a short period of time, despaired husbands were commonly seen drunk on the streets. Two men screamed in the

hospital while their wives were undergoing the operation.

Women suffered even more, as they had to endure both physical and emotional-psychological pain [Greenhalgh 1994]. According to the recollection of female informants, four women were taken to the operation table literally by force when at the last minute they had refused to undergo the operation. At that time, the local hospital was poorly equipped for such a large number of operations both in human and material terms – it did not have enough beds or painkillers to treat all the women who underwent the operation. One woman told me that she had been rushed to the county hospital in the middle of the operation because of massive bleeding. “I felt I was dying right there on the table. But I kept thinking of my three children and that helped a lot,” she recalled. After the operations, the women were transported back to Xiajia village in small groups by tractor-drawn wagon. As the wagon bumped roughly along the unpaved country roads, many women could no longer control themselves and cried out loud.

Villagers believe that when a woman undergoes sterilization, her *qi*, that is, the essence of her body, flows out. She simultaneously loses both her reproductive abilities and her physical strength. In fact, many women who underwent

1. The collectivized economy had been successful in Xiajia village, reaching its peak by the early 1980s. Under strong leadership at the brigade level, the four production teams had the best headquarters and agricultural machinery, and also boasted being the richest in the commune. Consequently, cadres in Xiajia enjoyed more power and latitudes than their counterparts in neighboring villages when enforcing birth control policies.

the operation complained that for a time after the sterilization they felt weak and easily became ill. In addition, both men and women regard female sterilization as akin to male castration. They use the word *qiao* to refer to female sterilization, which usually is only used for gelding and spaying animals, especially pigs. Although the medical term for both male and female sterilization is *jue yu*, ordinary villagers do not refer to it in this way.² The fact that villagers insist on using the term *qiao* indicates that female sterilization produces a great deal of anxiety and discontent.

To compensate the women who had lost part of their bodily essence (*qi*) and to ease the anxiety and despair among both the women and the men in the community, a gift-giving ritual was created by women and it was supported by men. As on other ritualized gift-giving occasions [Yan 1996: 52-67], relatives and friends would visit the woman who had undergone a sterilization, bringing eggs, brown sugar, canned fruits, preserved meat, and other kinds of food considered by the villagers to be nutritious. According to my informants, large-scale gift-giving began when one woman fell seriously ill after being sterilized; thereafter all women who were sterilized began to receive gifts. Hence a new ritual of gift exchange was created.

As in other rural areas, the local government and cadres in Xiajia village relied on the imposition of fines to force the villagers to comply with the birth control regulations; the amount of these fines were constantly increased. To a certain extent, the heavy fines did have a special effect. When asked why they did not continue to try to have a son, a number of villagers who had had multiple unplanned births gave

me the same simple answer: '*fa pa le*,' meaning they were afraid of the repeated fines. Table 1 opposite summarizes the amounts of the fines imposed during the 1980s and 1990s.

Not only was the amount of the fines frequently increased, their imposition had become more and more arbitrary by the late 1990s, as a wide range of fines was created for each category of unplanned births. Xiajia villagers complained to me that in practice the local government always imposed the heaviest fines possible, because the government benefited economically from them. In cases where a family owed too many unpaid fines, the village office had the power to confiscate the family's contracted land as a further punishment. The fines taken from the villagers had to be shared between the village office and the local township government. The village office could keep 40 to 60 percent of the fines, to use as rewards paid to one-child households. The rest of the collected fines went to the birth planning committee in the local government to be used as part of its operating budget. For obvious reasons, therefore, both the local government and the village office were keen to impose and collect the fines.

A large-scale campaign of female sterilization was launched every two or three years after 1983, but it never was as coercive or massive as

2. It should be pointed out that sterilization is performed by tubal ligation. This does not include oophorectomy (removal of the ovaries); it is merely contraceptive and does not ablate the woman's sexual hormonal secretion. Nevertheless, Xiajia villagers do not make a distinction between tubal ligation and oophorectomy, and they insist that the sterilized women are deprived of their reproductive capacity.

Table 1
Changing fines for unplanned births, 1980-1999
(unit : yuan)

Period	Fines for first birth*	Fines for second birth	Fines for third or higher-order birth
04/80-01/83		700	700
02/83-12/87		1,200	1,200
01/88-09/89		1,400	1,400
10/89-01/90	2,200	4,200	6,200
02/90-06/94	3,000	6,000	9,000
07/94-present	1,000-5,000	5,000-30,000	10,000-60,000

the first. The last campaign took place in 1994 when twelve Xiajia women were mobilized to undergo sterilization. Since then state birth control policies have been relaxed. Women with a son no longer have to undergo sterilization; instead they are allowed to use an IUD or to take pills. In addition, as for 1987, those couples whose first child was a girl were also allowed to have a second child, providing that the wife was 28 years old or older and the interval between her first and second birth was four years or more. These policy changes eased the worries of villagers who wished to have at least one male heir. More importantly, new fertility ideals were created among the younger generation in the 1990s.³ Table 2 below summarizes the demographic changes during the 1980s and 1990s.

The obvious and most important change is the dramatic drop in higher-order births. As shown in Table 2, there were a total of 383 births from 1979 to 1998 (not including stillbirths); among them, 221 were first births, 102 were second births, 37 were third births, and 23 were fourth or subsequent births.⁴ A clear line

can be drawn in 1992 when the last third and the last fourth births occurred. Actually, fourth (or subsequent) births were rare as early as 1984, with only two cases during the fifteen years that followed. Similarly, the number of third births was also reduced to one or two per year after 1984.

As a result of the reduction and eventual elimination of higher-order births, the total number of births per year dropped from 34 in 1979 to 11 in 1998, and the percentage of first births among all births increased from 32 percent in 1979 to 91 percent in 1998. This means that, by the end of 1990s, not only had the fertility rate

3. For a recent overview of changes in family planning policies and demographic structure, see White [2000].

4. These numbers are drawn from the official records of family planning that reflect the current demographic situation in Xiajia village. However, they do not include those villagers who migrated and transferred their household registrations out of the community. In this sense, the total number of births in Table 2 is incomplete.

Table 2
Distribution of births by parity, 1979-1998

Year	First birth		Second birth		Third birth		Fourth or higher-order birth		Total no. of births	Total no. by sex (male vs. female)
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%		
1979	11	32	10	29	8	24	5	15	34	16:18
1980	11	35	12	39	6	19	2	6	31	15:16
1981	9	32	7	25	4	14	8	29	28	16:12
1982	10	34	11	38	5	17	3	10	29	14:15
1983	11	48	7	30	3	13	2	9	23	12:11
1984	12	67	4	22	1	5.5	1	5.5	18	8:10
1985	14	74	5	26					19	8:11
1986	7	41	9	53	1	6			17	8:9
1987	10	45	9	41	2	9	1	5	22	9:13
1988	12	60	6	30	2	10			20	9:11
1989	13	72	3	17	2	11			18	8:10
1990	7	50	6	43	1	7			14	9:5
1991	10	77	2	15	1	8			13	7:6
1992	13	76	2	12	1	6	1	6	17	10:7
1993	11	79	3	21					14	8:6
1994	14	82	3	18					17	10:7
1995	13	93	1	7					14	6:8
1996	12	100							12	6:6
1997	11	92	1	8					12	7:5
1998	10	91	1	9					11	6:5
Total	221		102		37		23		383	192:191

decreased significantly, but birth parity had shifted to a predominantly first-birth pattern. It should also be noted that in the 1990s there was only one unplanned second birth; all other

cases of second birth conformed to the revised policy that allowed couples whose first child was a girl to have a second child. Consequently, the percentage of second births also dropped

dramatically from 29 percent in 1979 to 9 percent in 1998.⁵

The sex ratio (the ratio of males to females) is another interesting point reflected in Table 2. Although the sex ratio of newborns fluctuated from year to year during the 1980s and 1990s, overall, there were 192 boys and 191 girls born during this twenty-year period. This constitutes a surprisingly low sex ratio of 100.5:100. However, a closer look at the numbers reveals that the low sex ratio was derived from the first decade of birth control during which there were 115 newborn boys and 126 newborn girls, creating an extremely low sex ratio of 91:100. Taking the element of birth parity into consideration, it then becomes clear that if we look at the higher birth order, we can find more girls, which is a direct result of the efforts of those parents who tried several times to have male offspring. This trend took a remarkable turn in 1990 when newborn boys exceeded newborn girls by almost two times, and this continued in most years during the decade. As a result, the sex ratio increased to an alarming 118:100 during the second ten-year period, echoing the national pattern that resulted from a strong male preference among Chinese parents in both the cities and the countryside.⁶ Paralleling the rise of the sex ratio, the number of unplanned births declined significantly. This suggests that some villagers might have taken a more positive strategy to secure a male offspring, a rather common nationwide phenomenon in the 1990s.⁷

Xiajia villagers are clearly aware of these demographic changes and they attribute the radical drop in the number of births to the new mentality of the younger generation (more on this below) as well as to the continued state

birth control campaigns. Ms. Wang, who was the birth control cadre in Xiajia since the late 1970s, told me that her job became much easier in the 1990s, as many young couples preferred to have fewer children and parents had also given up the old ideal of *duozi duofu* (more sons more happiness). Consequently, Xiajia village maintained an excellent record of birth planning for six successive years after 1993, with only one case of unplanned birth. According to the official birth quotas that were set in late 1998, Xiajia village was allowed to have eleven first-births and two second-births in 1999. These quotas, Ms. Wang told me, were

5. A decline in the fertility rate has been a national trend since the 1980s. According to the 1993 statistics, the total fertility rate in China was 2.0 per woman, which is even lower than the rate of 2.1 in the United States [Gu 1996: 118]. It should also be noted that Heilongjiang province has had one of the lowest total fertility rates – 1.71 as shown in a 1990 national 1-percent sample survey. See Wu, Gui, and Zhang [1996: 216-219] and Gu *op. cit.*: 115].

6. According to Tyrene White's recent review, the sex ratio at birth in 1995 was 117.4 boys for every 100 girls, up from 116 in 1992, 113.8 in 1989, 111.2 in 1985, and 107.2 in 1982. "By 1997, the sex ratio reported in China's annual population yearbook for ages four and under was 120 males for every 100 females. This relentless trend left no further doubt about the reality and seriousness of the skew toward males in late twentieth-century China." [Op. cit.: 10] For views on this issue from a Chinese perspective, see Zeng Yi *et al.* [1993].

7. There were rumors that several couples had taken advantage of ultrasound technology, which is available at the county hospital, to help them select the sex of their only child. Although the practice is illegal, it is not impossible if one has the right connections and is willing to pay a large amount of money. However, I was not able to collect solid data on this topic.

more than enough for Xiajia; on the basis of past records and her own information, she predicted that one or two birth permits would remain unused.

Simple evidence of this new trend, Ms. Wang said, were her difficulties in issuing second-birth permits to the qualified couples. In the late 1980s, the application fee for such a permit was only 20 yuan. A number of young couples applied for the permit, but not all of them had a second child. In 1992, the local government decided to add a registration fee of 500 yuan, making the permit much more expensive. The purpose of this policy change was, according to the villagers, solely to increase the revenue of the local government, particularly that of the birth planning committee. This proved to be a bad strategy, at least in the Xiajia case. Ms. Wang told me that only ten couples applied for the permit between 1992 and 1997, nine of which actually had a second child. "Unless a couple has made a definite decision, they don't want to spend the 520 yuan for a piece of paper. Who knows when state policies will change again," she explained, as she showed me several blank permits for a second birth. Not long ago, these permits had been regarded as scare resources.⁸

Ironically, by the end of the 1990s, cadres in local birth planning agencies had begun to worry about the radical changes that they had contributed to bring about. As fewer and fewer villagers violated the state policies, the cadres were not able to collect much revenue from fines and the sale of second-birth permits. Consequently, they faced a serious shortage of revenue. As a schoolteacher humorously noted, Xiajia village's perfect score in birth planning

can be regarded as bad news for many cadres in the local government.

Individual choices and reproductive strategies

After carefully examining the interactions among the central state, the local state (represented by the village cadres), and the ordinary villagers, Susan Greenhalgh suggests that the family planning program in rural Shaanxi has been 'peasantized' in the sense that both the state and the villagers have retreated from their original positions. The state was forced by strong peasant resistance to change its original radical policies and it gradually relaxed the single-child policy, allowing some villagers to have a second child if their first child was a girl. This actually reinforces the traditional male preference in human reproduction. On the other hand, villagers have begun to change their perceptions about the ideal number of children they should have and they have reached a new conclusion that the ideal is one son and one daughter – the 'optimal two' coined by Greenhalgh [1993].

What I find most inspiring from Greenhalgh's study is that nothing was immutable in the two decades of birth planning in rural China, and the results were derived from the

8. According to Peng and Dai, many people in the villages of southern Jiangsu province prefer to have an only child, thus creating a new pattern of fertility culture. "Actually, in one of our field sites, Yuexi village, there has not been a second birth for many years. The officials from the birth planning committee of Taicang county said that they had to mobilize some qualified villagers to have a second birth, 90 percent of whom voluntarily gave up their quota for a second child." [1996: 180]

dynamic contestations and negotiations among the parties involved. In light of Greenhalgh's findings, I went further in my own research and tried to understand, at the individual level, who makes what kind of choice and why, taking into consideration the interactive relationships among the state, the local cadres, and ordinary villagers. Some clues about individual strategies can be gleaned from Table 3 below.

The data presented in Table 3 are different from those in Table 2 in several respects. First, the numbers represent the couples, instead of actual births, whose status in childbearing is defined by the last birth of their child(ren). A couple with three children is still counted as one couple in the category of "unplanned third or subsequent births." Second, as mentioned above, enforcement of the birth control policies in Xiajia began on April 1, 1980. Prior to that,

villagers did not have to make any choices about childbearing. So, couples who had children before 1980 are not included here, but the five couples who had their first child in early 1999 are. Third, in grouping the individual cases, I distinguish a first period ending in 1986 because after 1987 some couples qualified for a second child due to aforementioned policy changes. Another divide occurs in 1992 when the birth planning program in Xiajia took another turn, as shown by the near disappearance of unplanned births thereafter.

Facing increased pressure from the birth control policies, villagers had to make a fundamental choice between complying with or defying the policies, that is between planned and unplanned births. Customarily, local birth planning cadres classify households into two large categories: *jishenghu* (planned birth households)

Table 3
Villagers' childbearing status defined by last birth, April 1980-July 1999 *

Period of child-birth	Planned Birth			Unplanned Birth			
	Only daughter	Only son	Second birth	Second birth		Third or higher-order birth	
				did not have a son prior to this birth	had a son prior to this birth	did not have a son prior to this birth	had a son prior to this birth
1980-1986	6	10		21	17	16	6
1987-1992	21	32	12	10	7	10	1
1993-1999	32	38	9	1			
Total	59	82	21	32	24	26	7
				56		33	

* As my latest field research was conducted in July-August 1999, birth data for 1999 is incomplete. Four first births and one planned second birth were expected when I left the village.

and *chaoshenghu* (extra-planned birth households). The former are represented in the first three columns of Table 3 – there are 162 couples who observed the birth control regulations and had either an only son, an only daughter, or two children with a planned second birth after 1987. The other four columns contain 89 couples, or, extra-planned birth households, who defied the state policies by having more children, including both unplanned second births and higher-order births. Now let us take a closer look at both groups.

PLANNED BIRTH HOUSEHOLDS

The 59 couples in the first column of Table 3 constitute the most interesting group because many of them were qualified to have a second child, but by the summer of 1999 they were still parents of an only daughter. Their unconventional choice challenges the widely accepted assumption that Chinese peasants universally prefer male offspring [Li *op. cit.*], thus drawing my immediate attention.

After conducting a focused survey of this group, I realized that I had to exclude the 32 couples who had their first child in or after 1993, because they were either qualified for a second child for only a short period of time or were too young to be qualified. In either case, it is hard to tell whether or not they intended to have a second child. In addition, of the 27 couples whose only daughter was born before 1993, 8 were unable to have a second child due to either health-related problems or the death of spouse. This narrowed my investigation down to the remaining nineteen couples.

The official birth control records show that among the wives of the nineteen families, sev-

enteen had IUDs and the other two had been taking contraceptive pills since giving birth to their first child. This is a clear sign that, up to the summer of 1999, these women had made an effort not to have a second child. Some of the women had had their first child in the late 1980s, and their only daughters were already in primary school. Had they decided to have a second child, the interval between children would have been nearly ten years. According to Ms. Wang, these couples were content with an only daughter, and all except one had expressed the intention of not having a second child. They were officially recognized as *dunuhu* (only-daughter households), while the other twenty-one similarly qualified couples who had given birth to a second child during this period were still referred to as “planned birth households” (see the third column of Table 3).⁹

Through interviews and household visits I found that these parents of only daughters share several things in common. They were born either in the late 1960s or the early 1970s (with one exception), and they all had established their conjugal households shortly after their weddings [Yan 1999]. Economically, they formed a rather homogenous group slightly above the village average – having a new

9. The new phenomenon of an “only-daughter household” has been reported in some rural areas. For instance, in 1991, 2,039 families in Yuyao county, Zhejiang province, voluntarily gave up their permit for a second birth and became an “only-daughter household.” [Li *op. cit.*: 158] In their comparative study of three rural areas, Peng and Dai found that in Taicang county, Jiangsu province, the majority were no longer influenced by male preference, and the sex ratio there remained at a normal level [*op. cit.*: 150-159].

house, major electronic appliances, and some savings (see Yan 1992 for economic stratification in the village). However, in terms of their consumption of food, clothing, and leisure goods, such as music tapes and DVDs, these couples led much better material lives than most, even qualifying as rich in some respects.

Moreover, many husbands in this group are landless laborers, because they were too young to be given a share of contract land during decollectivization in 1983. Actually, only two men had a full share of contract land, seven had received a half-share (because they were either 16 or 17 in 1983), and the remaining ten had not received any contract land. Seeking temporary work in cities, therefore, is the main channel of income for these young men, and, with one exception, they regularly spend six months or so per year working on various jobs in urban areas. Their experiences of working and living in cities have no doubt had impact on their mentality and behavior, transforming many of them into the most open-minded individuals in Xiajia.

When asked about the unconventional idea of having an only daughter, the most common answer from these parents of only daughters was “*yatou xiaozi buzhongyao, guanjian shi xiaoshu*,” meaning “it is unimportant whether the child is a son or daughter, the key is to have a filial child.” The wives seemed to be more open-minded and vocal during my interviews, and on several occasions they provided detailed stories about sons who had failed to support their aged parents. Among the six husbands whom I talked to, four admitted that they would probably have wanted to have a son had their wives agreed to having a second child;

but it was also fine with them to have an only daughter because many daughters were indeed better caretakers of their aged parents. Five men and eight women in this group also identified quality of life as their primary concern in deciding not to have a second child, and their excuses were either *yangbuqi* (cannot afford) or *zhaogu bu guolai* (cannot take care of [so many children]).

When I discussed my findings with Ms. Wang, about the birth control cadre in the village, she told me that these new ideas regarding childbearing actually emerged in the 1980s, and the first couple who decided to have an only son had made their decision in 1981. But, in the 1980s, most villagers were just playing with words, and it was only the late 1990s that more and more young couples became serious about having only one child. Ms. Wang then called my attention to another group – the 82 couples with an only son (see the second column of Table 3), and said: “I am not sure the parents of an only daughter won’t change their minds because they still have the time to do so. But, I can assure you these only-son families will stay the same, unless the government policies change again.” Her confidence was due to the almost perfect record of the birth control program in Xiajia village, which was also a reflection of Ms. Wang’s career achievement.

I found Ms. Wang’s statement convincing because most parents of an only son were in their early thirties or late twenties, and shared the same social background and economic status as the nineteen parents of an only daughter. Given the fact that some open-minded young couples have found an only-girl household to be an acceptable solution, it is very likely that

most of these eighty couples will continue to comply with state policies – although some may have chosen to do so by default.

EXTRA-PLANNED BIRTH HOUSEHOLDS

Now let us return to Table 3 and take a closer look at those individuals who, for various reasons, decided to violate the birth control regulations. By 1999, 56 couples had an unplanned second child and 33 couples had three or more children. Did they all want to have a son, thus ending up with more children than they were allowed to have? Some did, but others did not.

Among the 56 couples who were fined for having a second child, 32 did not have a son before the second attempt, while 24 already had a son. This means that only some of these couples made the decision to violate the state policies in order to have a son, while others were hoping to have a daughter, or simply wanted to have a second child. Male preference, therefore, is not the sole motivation for villagers to have a second child.

How many couples really achieved their sex preference goal when they risked having a second child? Table 3 shows that of the 32 couples whose first child was a daughter, 15 had a second girl, and 17 a boy. Similarly, among the 24 couples who already had a son but decided to have a second child, 13 had a daughter second child, and 11 had sons. If gender was their priority when they tried to have a second child, their chances of success were about fifty-fifty.

But, some individuals did not really care about the sex of their second child; instead, they just wanted to have another child. Several villagers explained to me that they felt it was

unfair for the first child to grow up alone. “Everybody needs to have siblings and relatives,” claimed one middle-aged mother. This is particularly characteristic of couples whose first child was a son. In other words, contrary to conventional scholarly wisdom, gender may not necessarily be the only reason for an unplanned second birth.

Male preference, nevertheless, seems to be the major motivation among those who had three or more children. The majority of the higher-order birth couples (26 out of 33) did not have a son when they had their third or fourth child, as Table 3 shows. Actually, by 1992, the last year during which a higher-order birth occurred, only 14 of the 26 couples had had a son, while the other 12 couples ended up having three, four, or even five girls. Again, this indicates that when couples tried to have a son on their second or third attempt, the success rate was about 50 percent. This may also explain why, in the 1980s, the sex ratio of newborns was unusually low, as many of the higher-order newborns were girls. As these couples had a much stronger male preference in the first place, an unsuccessful second attempt led them to third or fourth attempts; hence the concentration of higher-order births in this small group. Actually, of these 33 couples, 18 of them had three children, 9 had four children, 4 had five children, and 2 had six children. So, by 1992, these 33 couples had produced 122 children, which translates into a fertility rate of 3.69 per woman in this small group, much higher than the average of 1.8 births per woman among the cohort of reproductive age from 1980 to 1999 in Xiajia village.

Seven couples had already had a son by

the time they had their third child (see the last column of Table 3), but six of them had the high-order birth in either 1980 or 1981 when birth control policies were not strict. For these six couples, the direct cost of having a third child was tolerable because the collectives subsidized a major part of the 700 yuan fine. After the 1983 birth control campaign, however, fewer villagers challenged the state policies to have a third or fourth child unless they were driven by a strong desire to have a son.

The only exception is the couple who had their fourth child in 1989. It may not be accidental that in this particular case, the husband was known for being an extremely conservative and patriarchal tyrant at home, and economically the household was well below average in the late 1980s. Their repeated violation of birth control policy put the couple further in debt as they could not afford to pay the rising fines for higher order births – they were fined 6,000 yuan for their third child and 9,000 yuan for the fourth.

Low economic status is perhaps the most salient feature of this group. According to my household survey, 24 out of the 33 couples in the multiple-birth group fall into the category of the poor, while the other 9 barely reach the average level. Worse than that, 28 couples owed unpaid fines to the village office and many were also in debt to relatives. Although most husbands in this group were old enough to have received contracted land in 1983, their farms had long ago been confiscated by the village office due to their accumulated unpaid fines. The everyday struggle of raising several children dragged these couples further down. Their impoverished multiple-birth situation

was vividly described by fellow villagers as “*yue qiong yue sheng, yue sheng yue qiong*,” which means “the more poor, the more children, the more children, the more poor” – obviously a vicious circle. Consequently, many couples in this group were looked down upon by other villagers and thus they suffered from a lack of self-esteem as well as social prejudice against them. This made them extremely defensive about their reproductive strategies. For instance, a few couples in this group regretted their choices or were interested in rethinking their reproductive strategies, but the majority of them still insisted on the ideal of “more sons, more happiness.” Their insistence on traditional notions may also be explained by their age; they were generally in their early forties or older in 1999 and thus had spent their youth during the collectivist period (I will return to this below).

Understanding the new fertility culture

The above analysis demonstrates that villagers did not respond homogeneously when confronted with the birth planning program imposed by the powerful state; instead, they employed different strategies to cope with it. Any one-dimensional explanation, such as repression, resistance, or adaptation, can hardly reflect the richness and individual variations of their lived experiences in this sphere of their private lives. More importantly, the fact that a large number of young couples were content with having only one child – an only daughter in some cases – indicates that a new fertility culture had emerged by the end of 1990s, which can be examined in economic, demographic, gender, and communal terms.

THE COST AND UTILITY OF CHILDREN: THE ECONOMIC FACTOR

Economic considerations regarding the cost of raising children have contributed greatly to changes in fertility behavior among the young villagers.¹⁰ One will recall that a number of young parents of an only daughter cited *yang bu qi* and *zhaogu bu guolai* as the major reasons not to have a second child. Many parents of an only son held the same view, although they did not use it to justify their reproductive choice. The interesting point is that, as shown in the above analyses, parents of an only child tend to enjoy a better economic status than those who violate the birth control policies and have more children; yet, it is the former rather than the latter who take the cost of raising children into serious consideration when making fertility decisions. Having said this, I must stress that, by the late 1990s, all informants – regardless of their age, sex, and different fertility situations – agreed that they can hardly keep pace with the increasing costs of raising children.¹¹

When reviewing the cost of raising children, villagers seemed to be most concerned with *linghuaqian* (the incidental expenses); this newly emerged category, which covers non-essential items, has been rising rapidly. Toys are part of incidental expenditures, but more still food items, including candies, soft drinks, ice bars, cookies, fruits, fried instant noodles (which are consumed as snacks by children), and sausages. By the end of the 1990s, these incidentals had become a ‘must’ for families with small children, poor and rich alike. The average daily expenditure per child was 1 yuan in summer 1998, or 360 yuan per year, nearly one-tenth of the average annual household income

(4,000 yuan). Influenced by urban culture, young parents compete with one another to buy fancy toys and plentiful snacks to show affection toward their children (in many cases, their only child), which, interestingly, attracts little criticism from the older generation.

By the late 1990s, children had become accustomed to such daily luxuries and thus had developed a strong sense of entitlement. In a case I witnessed in the summer of 1999, when two children (aged 6 and 10, respectively) learned that their mother, a schoolteacher, had received a salary increase, they demanded that their monthly expenses be increased from 70 yuan to

10. Since the 1970s, theories of microeconomics have made an important contribution to demography by explaining fertility changes in terms of the changing cost and utility of children in family life, such as Gary Becker’s consumer demand theory [1976], Leibenstein’s utility maximization theory [1975], and Richard Easterlin’s integrated fertility model [1978]. Despite the important differences among these scholars themselves, they all view reproduction as an individual or familial behavior based on the rational choice of actors (parents). During this process parents calculate the various expenses to raise a child or children as well as the utilities (in both material and non-material forms) that children may bring to them. They will then decide, based on the principle of maximization, whether to have children, and if so, the number and parity of children. These theories were introduced to China in the 1980s and have been quite influential in Chinese demography. According to Chen and Mu, the cost-utility framework has been a leading theory in directing both fertility research and actual policy implementation in China [1996].

11. The rising costs of raising children can be attributed to the changing parent-child relationship, the newly emerged child-centered culture and, of course, the influence of urban child development. But these cannot be discussed in this paper due to lack of space.

100 yuan. The mother told me that her parents had never spent any extra money on her when she was young, except for basic provisions of food and clothing. "It is amazing that these little people [her children] dare to ask for a raise," the mother complained, while holding both children in her arms and smiling.

Although incidental expenses attracted a lot of attention, the more important and regular expenses are of course those to meet basic daily needs. According to several villagers' accounts, to raise a child from birth to age 20, a couple needs at least 200 yuan per year for clothing, 160 yuan for medicine and other emergency purposes, and 800 to 1,000 yuan for food. Since the late 1980s, education has become increasingly costly, and many parents complained that they could no longer afford to send their children to school. The normal cost of education was estimated at 240 yuan per year (an average of the costs of primary and secondary school).

The highest costs, however, are the ever-rising expanses entailed by marriage.¹² As I document elsewhere [1996: 176-209], the customs of bridewealth and dowry have flourished since the 1980s, and the average cost of marriage (for a son) has increased more than ten-fold over the last five decades, reaching as much as 30,000 yuan by 1999. Due to the young people's strong demand for conjugal independence and their awareness of individual property rights, a new house is now also a precondition for marriage. This means that a son's marriage normally costs his parents 40,000 to 50,000 yuan (in comparison, it is much less costly to marry off a daughter, as the parents need only to provide an acceptable dowry at the time of her marriage). In total, my informants

estimated, parents have to spend 70,000 yuan or more for a son and 40,000 yuan for a daughter over a period of twenty years.

Although the above figures are derived from individual accounts rather than a systematic survey, they still give us a rough estimate of the rising costs of raising children and their impact on the current generation of young parents. Actually, the estimations of the Xiajia villagers approximate those from survey results. For instance, a 1995 survey in rural Shaanxi shows that the total cost of raising a child from birth to age 16 was 30,120 yuan, but this figure does not include the largest expenditure – the cost of marriage [Zhu and Zhang 1996].¹³

While the costs are on the rise, the usefulness of children has been decreasing at an equally rapid pace. As is widely recognized in both

12. Here we see a fundamental difference in calculating the cost of children between western scholars and Chinese villagers. The former, regardless of their theoretical differences, normally define the duration of raising a child as 18 years, namely, from birth to the beginning of adulthood [Becker *op. cit.*; Leibenstein *op. cit.*]. The Chinese villagers, by contrast, also include the marriage costs for their children because they feel morally and socially obligated to help their children (mainly sons) to marry in style. Furthermore, according to Chinese cultural tradition, the child only becomes an adult after marriage, and in this sense the cost of marriage is indeed part of the cost of raising a child.

13. According to Ye Wenzhen's analysis, the cost of raising a child from birth to age 16 (by 1995-1996 standards) was 93,968 yuan in the southern city of Xiamen, 55,437 yuan in Beijing, and 30,120 yuan in rural Shaanxi [*op. cit.*: 208]. For some recent studies on children's consumption, see Davis and Sensenbrenner [2000], Zhao and Murdock [1996], and essays on children's food in the volume edited by Jing Jun [2000].

scholarly work and among the public, children are valuable because they can be: a) potential laborers for the family economy; b) future providers of aged parents; c) carriers of the family/descent line; and d) a source of parents' happiness and psychological fulfilment. Depending on the specific conditions of socio-economic development, the existence and importance of these roles vary from one society to another. In contemporary American society, it is the latter that matters the most, while in the case of rural China, scholars have long suggested, the first three motivate villagers to want more children.

The Xiajia case reveals some astonishing changes in this respect. First, due to the shortage of land and other employment opportunities, there has been a serious surplus of laborers since the early 1980s. It is to say least unwise to invest in children as laborers. This is obvious to the villagers because children born after 1983 – the year of decollectivization and land redistribution – did not receive a share of collective land, not to mention the collective land distributed according to the number of male laborers per household. Second, the new custom of early family division further reduced the potential of adult children to contribute economically to their parents' home, as they all left to establish their own conjugal household shortly after marriage. Third, the traditional notion of filial piety is fast weakening, and support of the elderly has become increasingly problematic. Although adult children (mainly married sons) still fulfil their responsibilities to feed their parents, a number of aged parents are forced to live alone to avoid heartbreaking conflicts with ungrateful sons. In terms of both ide-

ology and practice, the first two values of children – as family laborers and providers of support in old age – are quickly declining.

This particularly affects the marginal utility of high birth-order children. When it comes to supporting parents, married sons tend to shift responsibilities onto one another, while an only son has no such option because he is legally obligated. As a result, all else being equal, aged parents of multiple sons found themselves worse off than their counterparts with only sons. In this connection, it is noteworthy that a recent survey of 660 households from three different rural areas shows that 60 percent of aged parents live alone, whereas the more sons aged parents had, the higher the chance they would have to live alone [Peng and Dai *op. cit.*: 57-58]. The improvements in the medical system and the drop in child mortality have further undermined the marginal utility of multiple sons. By the end of the 1990s, villagers all agreed that the number of sons did not count for much in terms of old-age security; it was best to have one filial son. Similar reflections have been reported from many other areas of rural China as well [Li *op. cit.*; Peng and Dai *op. cit.*; Ye 1998].

A NEW GENERATION OF PARENTS: THE DEMOGRAPHIC FACTOR

Some Chinese scholars have disputed the applicability of the cost-utility model to rural China because the demands for children are deeply rooted in a cultural tradition that is characterized by familism and the worship of fertility. The perpetuation of the family line through reproduction is what makes life meaningful to Chinese villagers, and it is for this reason that

children (particularly male offspring) evoke an almost religious feeling of fulfilment that cannot be measured by economic gains or losses. Thus, the cost-utility model can explain neither why so many villagers had multiple children regardless of the price they had to pay, nor why, in some developed rural areas of South China, the fertility rate remained high even after the cost of children increased and a better social system of support for the elderly was put into place [Chen and Mu *op. cit.*: 127; Li 1993].

In my opinion, such a cultural perspective is certainly important to understand the persistence of the traditional fertility culture and peasant resistance to birth control policies. However, scholars who adopt this view tend to regard the conservative characteristics of peasant culture as timeless and immutable and also to assume that Chinese villagers homogeneously refuse to accept new fertility ideals. The Xiajia case proves otherwise in two ways.

First, traditional notions of fertility have changed to a great extent. By the end of the 1990s, fewer Xiajia villagers still upheld the old ideal of “more sons, more happiness” (*duozi duofu*); instead this stance changed to *duozi duo chou*, meaning “more sons, more worries.” Villagers also began to question the notion of *yang er fang lao* (raising sons for old age) and tried to increase old-age security by accumulating personal savings and cultivating close relationships with married daughters. Although most villagers still perceive the continuation of the family line only through sons, the pressures to produce a son for the family have been significantly reduced, as shown in the absence of third births among parents of two daughters and in the cases of only-daughter

households. Similar changes in the fertility culture are reported from other parts of rural China as well [Peng and Dai *op. cit.*].

Second, it is not accidental that the number of unplanned births dropped sharply in the early 1990s and that by the end of the decade none were any longer registered in Xiajia village. The secret lies in the demographic transition of parents of fertility age. The current generation of young parents was born in the early 1970s and grew up in a social environment where birth control was emphasized as a fundamental strategy for national development. This constitutes a sharp contrast to the social environment of their parents who grew up during the Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution, when the traditional notion of “more sons, more happiness” was translated into the Maoist slogan of “more people, more power.” These young parents, therefore, have been less affected by the legacy of the old fertility culture and are also more ready to accept that their fertility desires must comply with state birth control policies. The influence of mass media, particularly that of television, and their own experiences of working in cities and engaging in the market economy at home also help the young villagers to accept new ideas and ideals. Actually, few of them still consider the birth of a child as a purely private and family matter. On several occasions, young villagers asked me what it is like to live in a foreign country where one can have as many children as one wants, because they simply could not grasp this from their own life experiences. In other words, the notion of planned birth has been internalized into the mind-set of the young generation, and this alone may help us to understand the

relative ease with which young villagers comply with birth control policies.

Still, generational differences go beyond the impact of state ideology and policy implementation because many young parents view the meaning of life differently from their older siblings and parents. Based on data collected from 1989 to 1994, I elsewhere document the rise of a youth subculture in three villages of North China and argue that, among other features, village youth of the 1990s differ from their elders in terms of their strong desire to pursue happiness in their personal lives. Their notion of happiness is more individualistic than that of their parents or elder siblings and, more often than not, it is defined by material comforts, such as fashionable clothing, good housing, and better jobs [1999: 80-81]. The same group of village youth that I previously studied was married and had become young parents by the end of 1999. Following their footsteps through life, I could see clearly the culture of their youth still influences them in their family life, notably as regards fertility planning. Their pursuit of material comforts made them particularly aware of the rising costs of children. Their attachment to individual rights led them to cast doubt on traditional fertility notions, and the national trend of consumerism further raised their life aspirations [2000].

During fieldwork, I found that a major reason why young villagers so desperately want to take control of family property is their somewhat different perception of the meaning of property, particularly with regard to consumption matters. From a conjugal/individual perspective, a well-to-do extended family is characterized by a larger amount of accumulated family property

and a stronger labor force; but this does not necessarily imply a higher quality of life because individuals have less access to family property and less power over consumption. For the younger generation of villagers, money is meant to be spent, and goods are meant to be consumed. A simple yet interesting piece of evidence from Xiajia village shows that in general young people in nuclear households spend more money on food and clothing than do their parents or older siblings; they are also more likely than older villagers to follow consumer trends, such as replacing black/white TVs with color sets, or purchasing motorcycles. For the same reason, they are more reluctant to pay heavy fines for unauthorized births, since this, in addition to the high cost of child-rearing, would severely affect their life style. During my interviews, young parents frequently cited the difficult lives of their own parents as unsatisfactory and even unworthy of living, saying that they could not understand why their elder siblings paid heavy fines to have several children and ended up living in poverty. Such a change in mentality provides another clue to understand the lower fertility desire among young villagers.

WHEN A WIFE IS IN CHARGE: THE GENDER FACTOR

Not only do generational differences matter, but equally gender relationships. Through household surveys and interviews, I established a link between the choice of an only child, on the one hand, and a wife's status at home and the quality of the husband-wife relationship, on the other. For instance, of the nineteen couples whose only child was a daughter, twelve wives were in charge of family affairs at home, i.e. an impressive 63 percent; in contrast, only three

husbands were in a similar position of power. In the remaining four cases, husbands and wives enjoyed an equal relationship in decision making and household chores. Moreover, eleven of the nineteen couples were also known for 'having good feelings' (*ganqinghao*) for each other which, in local terms, means that their conjugal relationship was close and affectionate.

A similar pattern can be observed among the forty-seven couples whose only son was born before 1993, namely, the likely stable only-son couples. Again using the balance relationship between husband and wife as a measurement, twenty-seven only-son families were wife-led (57 percent), nine were husband-led (19 percent), and in the remaining eleven cases husbands and wives enjoyed a relationship of equality at home (23 percent). This suggests that when a wife is in charge of family affairs, the couple is likely to comply with birth control policies and, in some cases, young couples manage to overcome the age-old male preference.

Additional supporting evidence was obtained from the couples who defied birth control policies. Among the twenty-four couples who had had a son before having their second child, there were ten husband-dominant families, five wife-led families, and nine couples in which a relationship of equality prevailed. Considering that more wives are in charge of family affairs among the young generation, the percentage of husband-led families in this particular group is obviously higher than average. Had more wives played a leading role in this group, there might have been fewer unplanned second births.

Either way, the Xiajia case reveals that the status of women, particularly that of young

wives, may be one of the key elements in determining the choice of reproductive strategies. Couples in wife-led families tend to easily accept the new ideal of childbearing and most of them choose to have only one child. In those households where the husbands are in charge, the couples tend to follow traditional ideals and violate the birth control regulations in order to have more children or to fulfil their desire to have a son. This implies that it is likely the husband and/or the relatives of the husband who oppose the changes in fertility patterns. Since children are now less useful as a source of labor and less reliable as providers of support to the elderly, the continuity of the descent line becomes a major motivation to have more children; this concern is, understandably, more prevalent among the husbands and their relatives than among wives. Moreover, when the conjugal relationship is based on affection, respect, and companionship, and characterized by a more equal gender relationship, it is likely that the couple will pay more attention to the quality of their family life and will rationally assess the advantages and disadvantages of unplanned births.

In this connection, Hill Gates' findings from Taiwan and the city of Chengdu, Sichuan province, are particularly noteworthy. In both places, women who own small businesses tend to have fewer children, and their choice reflects a strategy for both work and life (including the realm of kinship practices). As Gates notes: "Chinese women do not choose to limit this burden only because childcare and childbearing are sometimes uncomfortable, painful, and exhausting, and at worst fatal. They do so as well because they have access to a secondary model of kinship relations that is submerged

within a more visible kinship ideology. This model, especially clear among petty capitalists, rationalizes childbearing as a measurable contribution made to meet a specific obligation, and also rationalize its limitation.” [1993: 255]

CUNFENG: THE COMMUNITY FACTOR

Finally, the community also plays a role in influencing villagers’ fertility desires and demands for children. When discussing issues of birth planning with me, Ms. Wang repeatedly pointed out that Xiajia village benefited from a good *cunfeng*, which literally means ‘village wind’ but may better be translated as the ‘village trend’ or ‘village mood’. What Ms. Wang was referring to were the established common practices in the community, which in turn establish the social norms for the villagers to follow.

In comparison to other villages in the surrounding area, birth planning work in Xiajia proceeded rather smoothly initially. This was mainly due to Xiajia’s strong and relatively clean leadership and its successful collective economy in the late 1970s and early 1980s, which gave the cadres enough resources to play a stick-plus-carrot card.¹⁴ The absence of serious kinship-based fights within the village also contributed to the emergence of a new fertility culture, and the established new fertility norms in turn regulated people’s behavior.

In addition to its economic function, a family’s manpower – the physical power of men – is socially important in rural communities where disputes and other conflicts are often resolved by kinship intervention instead of legal procedures. The number of sons in a family often serves as a direct gauge of a family’s weight and status and

this proves particularly true if kinship-based violent conflicts occur frequently.¹⁵ In Xiajia village, the kinship structure emphasizes marriage-based alliances rather than descent-based lineage power. The fact that more than 80 percent of the villagers in Xiajia are affines significantly reduced the perceived need to develop family manpower with a view to prevail in kinship-based conflicts. There have been violent conflicts between families in the recent past, but the new patterns of alliance-making depend more on friendship and affinal ties, and actual practice is even more fluid and individual-centered, as I document elsewhere [2001]. The need for manpower in violent conflicts alone, therefore, can no longer motivate Xiajia villagers to demand more children.

14. Remarkably, the cadres in Xiajia continued to comply with the major birth planning regulations throughout the subsequent two decades, except for a few cases of early marriage and early births (which meant a first birth without a permit). This, plus Ms. Wang’s diligent and detailed working style, certainly helped to ease the tension caused by the birth control program. According to some villagers, however, cadres did not resist because there was too much at stake if they violated the birth control regulations – they could lose their positions, which were worth between 5,000 yuan to 9,000 yuan for a cadre in the 1990s.

15. Inter-lineage hostility and periodic violent conflict are more evident in the rural South where kinship organization is historically stronger [Freedman 1966]. Along with the revival of kinship power in these regions during the post-collectivist era, organized and violent fights often broke out between feuding lineages [He Qinglian 1998; Xiao Tangbiao 1997]. In a 1991 case that occurred in Guangdong province, two lineages fought a seven-day war, involving more than 6,000 people armed with both traditional weapons and stolen rifles and handguns [Yang Ping 1994].

Established practices in a community have more regulating power on its members, and this is the underlying meaning of what Ms. Wang calls *cunfeng*, the village trend/mood. During my interviews, I frequently heard informants cite *sui daliu* – “following the big trend” – as their rationale for making a particular fertility choice. A middle-aged couple with two sons and three daughters told me that in their time (the late 1970s and early 1980s) many neighbors had several sons, “so we figured we must not have only one son.” After paying fines for their fourth and fifth children, the couple luckily reached their goal; but many others were not so lucky. Similarly, a number of young parents with an only son admitted that they did not want to have a second child because no one else did.

As a result of interactions and readjustments, a set of community norms have emerged and evolved over the years, and villagers now consciously use the new norms to guide their actions and judge those of others, labeling them as either *heli* (reasonable) or *buheli* (unreasonable). For instance, having a third child in order to have a son was regarded as reasonable until the early 1990s, but it came to be considered unreasonable during the late 1990s. Although the ideal number of children in a family was two, not a single couple with an only son had tried to have a second child after 1993, because it was regarded as not only unreasonable but also immoral to compete for the limited birth quota with those couples whose first child was a girl. Yet the nineteen couples with an only daughter were also regarded as a bit strange by the majority of villagers because they did not follow the big trend and went beyond the community norms.¹⁶

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Due to the long-term interaction among the state, its local agents, and ordinary villagers, birth planning had become a much easier task in Xiajia and a new fertility culture was emerging by the end of 1990s. By examining the villagers’ individual choices and reproductive strategies, I reveal how ordinary villagers adjusted their fertility desires in the face of an unprecedented intrusion into the sphere of private life by a powerful state. Passive resistance, the most popular form of peasant response, was certainly a part of their strategies, but they have done much more than that by developing a new fertility culture. It is time, therefore, to pay closer attention to villagers’ capability to transcend older values and norms (and to a certain extent even themselves) in the area human reproduction.

The new fertility culture, however, is still in the process of evolving, as most changes occurring thus far involve only the number – ideal or actual – of children. The result was a sharp decline in the fertility rate since the 1980s. Yet, we have not seen obvious changes in the other two,

16. My inquiry into the role of the community in birth planning was inspired by both Ms. Wang’s repeated emphasis on *cunfeng* as well as the work of Peng Xizhe and Dai Xingyi. In their 1996 book, Peng and Dai call for close attention to community culture in studies of fertility change in rural China. They argue that differences in local patterns of economic development, support of the elderly, public security, and interpersonal relations can be used to explain regional variations. A good example is the famous contrast between the so-called Sunan model and the Guangdong model: in southern Jiangsu, regional economic development has led to a decline in the fertility rate, while it led to a rise of fertility desire and unplanned births in similarly prosperous Guangdong province [*op. cit.*: 184-207].

equally important, aspects of rural fertility culture: the sex of children and the time of birth. The fact that nineteen couples intended to remain parents of only daughters certainly marks a significant development in the battle against the age-old male preference, yet the alarmingly high male-female ratio (118:100) among the newborns in the 1990s prevents one from being too optimistic in this respect. In terms of the timing of childbirth, state birth control policies only reinforced the traditional ideal of early birth, because fertility itself is now regarded as both a privilege and a scarce resource, and villagers certainly do not want to miss any chances. A common strategy, therefore, is to marry earlier and to give birth earlier, pushing the average age of first births among Xiajia women down to 21.¹⁷

The emerging fertility culture involves another significant change, namely the gradual shift from state-imposed birth control to a family planning program based on individual choice and family strategy. Back in the 1970s, villagers regarded childbearing as a natural matter determined by supernatural powers such as the goddess of fertility and one's own fate. The cultural construction of fertility as a natural/supernatural process lost its force in the early 1980s. Once the presumed innocence of fertility was destroyed by abortion, sterilization and contraceptive devices, individual choices and strategies became the new foundation for fertility desires and childbearing. Many parents of an only child are officially recognized as vanguards in family planning because their choices and strategies are sanctioned by state policies. Yet those who resisted the birth control program and managed to have extra children also actively engaged in family planning in their own way. In this sense,

the shift toward a more liberal form of family planning has begun, albeit initially due to the intervention of a powerful state.

Based on her fieldwork in the late 1980s, Susan Greenhalgh correctly points out that the Chinese concept of birth planning differs from the western liberal notion of family planning in that the role of the state is paramount and individual choice is either dismissed or repressed [1994: 6]. In the late 1990s, some Chinese demographers also reflected on the hitherto narrowly defined notion of birth planning (see Gu *op. cit.*). In this connection, the Xiajia case may shed new light on both scholarly inquiries and the continuing implementation of birth control policies in China. Now a key question is when the matter of family planning in Xiajia village will be based entirely on individual choice and family strategies, balancing the number and sex of children as well as their time of birth?¹⁸ The hope may lie in the continuing development of the new fertility culture and no less in the new generation of young parents whose mentality is increasingly shaped by the market economy and consumerism, instead of traditional family values.

17. These changes, again, echo the general patterns of demographic change that emerge from large-scale surveys in other parts of rural China. As Gu Baozhang notes, rural China is characterized by the coexistence of a low fertility rate and high population growth. This is due to the early time of birth and the concentration of reproductive women in the 1990s. Another serious problem is of course the unbalanced sex ratio [*op. cit.*: 88].

18. Some Chinese scholars argue that an uncompromising birth control program reinforced by the state is the key for any future changes in fertility culture [Li *op. cit.*].

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Abstract

Yunxiang Yan, *Planning birth: changes in fertility culture in a Chinese village*

This article examines how ordinary villagers made their childbearing choices and strategized fertility desires when they were facing an unprecedented intrusion into the private life sphere by a powerful state. In their response to the birth control program many villagers had transcended the traditional fertility ideals and adjusted their reproductive behavior, while others had resisted to it by various strategies and paid a dear price. Why such differences and what are the consequences and implications of these individual choices and strategies? The article also analyzes sociocultural factors that have contributed to the individual choices and strategies, which has in turn led to the emergence of a new fertility culture.

Résumé

Yunxiang Yan, *Planifier les naissances : nouveaux comportements en matière de natalité dans un village chinois*

Cet article envisage comment des villageois planifient les naissances et mettent en œuvre des stratégies reproductives face à l'intrusion sans précédent d'un État puissant dans la sphère privée. En réponse au programme de contrôle des naissances, bien des villageois ont dépassé les idéaux de fertilité traditionnels et ajusté leur comportement reproductif, tandis que d'autres s'y sont opposés à leurs dépens. Comment expliquer ces choix et stratégies différents ? Quelles en sont les conséquences et les implications ? Cet article analyse également les facteurs socioculturels qui ont contribué à ces choix et stratégies ainsi, à terme, qu'à l'émergence de nouveaux comportements.