

# From Resisting to “Embracing?” the One-Child Rule: Understanding New Fertility Trends in a Central China Village\*

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**ABSTRACT** From its initiation in 1979, China’s one-child policy has been controversial. Most critiques on the stringent birth control policy in rural China still focus on the resistance framework and there is very little research on whether Chinese peasant families are changing their fertility preferences and behaviours when confronting both the state birth control policy and the rapidly changing social and economic environment. Based on recent ethnographic study in a central China village, this article seeks to explore new fertility trends that indicate the shift from “active resistance against” to “conscious decision for” the one-child limit among rural families. In particular, it discusses the newly emerging social, economic and demographic factors that may have played a role in this fertility shift, and its social implications for the central tenet of son preference in Chinese culture and the norm of child-rearing as a means of securing old age support among rural families.

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In 1977, Qin Hongchang’s wife gave birth to their first child – a daughter, Qin Dongmei – in a Hubei village in central China. The Qin couple hoped to have another child, a son preferably, but they had to wait for three years according to the birth policy of “later marriage, longer space, fewer children” (*wan xi shao* 晚、稀、少) implemented at that time. Soon after 1978, under the new leadership of Deng Xiaoping, China launched economic reforms in a national modernization drive. Fearing that continued population growth momentum would stall modernization, the central government began to tighten birth control measures.<sup>1</sup> From January 1979, young couples were urged to have only one

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1 Wang Feng, “Can China afford to continue its one-child policy?” *AsiaPacific Issues*, No. 77 (2005), pp. 1–12. Susan Greenhalgh, “Missile science, population science: the origins of China’s one-child policy,” *The China Quarterly*, No. 182 (2005), pp. 253–76. Nancy Riley, “China’s population: new trends and challenges,” *Population Bulletin*, Vol. 59, No. 2 (2004), pp. 3–36.

child. And in September 1980, the official one-child policy was launched, asking “all couples to limit themselves to one child.”<sup>2</sup> Suddenly, the Qin couple in this Hubei village, like many others, found themselves running the risk of violating the one-child limit and incurring heavy fines should they try to have a second child to which they were entitled under the previous *wan xi shao* birth policy.

Ignoring the ban, the Qin couple went ahead to have a second child, hoping perhaps for a son; but they had another girl in 1980. As punishment for the couple’s violation of the one-child policy, the village cadres confiscated a shrine table from Qin’s home and deducted 700 workpoints.<sup>3</sup> In 1983, Qin’s wife was forced to undergo mandatory surgical sterilization in accordance with China’s population control policy at that time.<sup>4</sup> After she had the surgery, the couple’s confiscated furniture was returned to them and 700 workpoints were also restored, but their hope of getting a son was irreversibly extinguished.

Some 20 years later, in 1999, the Qins’ first-born daughter Dongmei got married in a uxori-local form, that is, instead of relocating to her husband’s family upon marriage, Dongmei stayed in her natal home while her husband settled into her family.<sup>5</sup> In 2000, Dongmei gave birth to a girl. In the winter of 2002, sitting in her family courtyard and watching her two-year-old daughter playing with a brand new tricycle, I asked Dongmei if she planned to have another child in a few years, which the local birth policy allowed. “No,” she said resolutely and with no hesitation. “Why give up your chance for a second birth?” I asked. “With one child, I can do my best to make sure that she eats the best, wears the best, and gets the best education. Why not just have one child?” Dongmei answered. “But she is a girl. Your next child can be a son. Are you sure you are fine with just a daughter?” I insisted. “What is wrong with having only a

2 Susan Greenhalgh, “The evolution of the one-child policy in Shaanxi, 1979–1988,” *The China Quarterly*, No. 122 (1990), p. 191. “Controlling birth and bodies in village China,” *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (1994), pp. 7–8.

3 The Qin couple was of course not alone. In Zhongshan village, more than two dozen couples suffered the same fate and the most common punitive action between 1981 and 1983 was to confiscate furniture and deduct work points. I was told that the village’s meeting hall was full of confiscated furniture between 1980 and 1983.

4 Fearing that strong peasant resistance could slow the process to lower the fertility rate quickly, the state carried out a nationwide sterilization campaign for all couples with two or three children. The magnitude of this coercive campaign could be seen in the official statistics later released. There were 5.2 million sterilizations in 1982, but in 1983, the number skyrocketed to 20.8 million of which almost 80% were women. See Judith Banister, *China’s Changing Population* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), p. 177; John S. Aird, *Slaughter of the Innocent: Coercive Birth Control in China* (Washington: The AEI Press, 1990), p. 33. In Zhongxiang county in Hubei province where the village under study is located, cases of female sterilization rose ten times from 226 cases in 1982 to 24,910 in 1983. See *Zhongxiang xianzhi* (*Zhongxiang County Gazette*) (Hubei: Hubei People’s Publishing House, 1990), p. 117.

5 In Zhongshan and this local area in general, uxori-local marriage was frequently practised both before and after 1949. Though considered less desirable, it was a legitimate local tradition. See Hong Zhang, “‘Living alone’ and the rural elderly: strategy and agency in post-Mao rural China,” in Charlotte Ikels (ed.), *Filial Piety: Practice and Discourse in Contemporary East Asian Countries* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), pp. 63–87; “Bracing for an uncertain future: a case study of new coping strategies of rural parents under China’s birth control policy,” *The China Journal*, Vol. 54 (2005), pp. 53–78.

daughter? A daughter can be as good as a son. A daughter can also support her parents ...,” Dongmei said back to me.

From her parents’ active resistance against the one-child limit in 1980 to Dongmei’s voluntary decision to raise a single daughter in the early 2000s, villagers in this locality have embraced new fertility norms and practices. Dongmei was not alone in her decision to raise a single daughter. In this village, as of 2004, at least 17 couples whose first child was a daughter and who were qualified for a second birth applied for the one-child certificate instead of the “second-birth permission certificate” (*ertai zhunsheng zheng* 二胎准生证). Another 14 couples did not apply for the one-child certificate, but had already gone more than ten years since the birth of their first daughters without a second birth. The village birth-planning cadre told me that it was unlikely that these 14 couples would have a second birth.

Apparently this trend is widespread and growing in this area. Birth control officials at the county level told me in 2002 that between 1992 and 2001 at least 22,484 qualified couples in the county decided not to apply for a “second-birth permission certificate,” and gave up their chance for a second birth voluntarily. Comparing the birth-control work since the late 1990s with that of the early 1980s, one birth official commented: “In the early days, couples tried all means to have births ‘ahead of time’ (*qianshen* 抢生) and ‘over the plan’ (*chaosheng* 超生). Nowadays, if their first child was a healthy boy, the couple would stop childbearing automatically. Some couples are allowed to have a second birth, but they don’t want to have it.” How can such new developments be explained? Are they simply the internalized consequence of the coercive state birth policy? Or are they indications of changing fertility desires and emerging family reproductive strategies?

From its initiation in 1979, China’s one-child policy has met with strong peasant resistance. While condemned by state propaganda as the persistence of “the remnants of feudal ideology and tradition,” resistance to the one-child policy has been variously viewed as peasants’ agency when confronted with an intrusive and powerful state or as evidence of weakened state control on peasant family life as a result of decollectivization and economic liberalization.<sup>6</sup> In the past two decades voluminous literature has been produced on China’s stringent birth control policy in rural China. Most studies still focus on the resistance framework.<sup>7</sup>

6 See Kate Zhao, *How the Farmers Changed China: the Power of People* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996); Tyrene White, “Birth planning between plan and market: the impact of reform on China’s one-child policy,” in Joint Economic Committee, US Congress, *China’s Economic Dilemmas in the 1990s: The Problems of Reform, Modernization, and Interdependence* (Washington, DC, 1991), Vol. 1, pp. 252–69.

7 Jeffrey Wasserstrom, “Resistance to the one-child family,” *Modern China*, No. 10 (1984), pp. 345–74; Zhao, *How the Farmers Changed China*, especially ch. 7 “Farmers engulf the one-child family policy,” pp. 176–205; Tyrene White, “Domination, resistance and accommodation in China’s one-child campaign,” in Elizabeth J. Perry and Mark Selden (eds.), *Chinese Society Change, Conflict and Resistance* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 102–19.

However, in their recent book *Governing China's Population*, Greenhalgh and Winckler have provided a most comprehensive and new account of China's population policies.<sup>8</sup> In this book, among other things, the authors examine the overemphasis on the resistance framework in the existing literature, and point out that China's population policy has not been monolithic but has altered since the 1990s, and that larger social and economic changes have also become new forces reshaping fertility preferences and behaviour in China. Among the many great insights and innovative analyses in this book, I highlight three new developments discussed by Greenhalgh and Winckler that are particularly relevant in helping to understand recent fertility trends observed in the Hubei village by the early 2000s.

First, Greenhalgh and Winckler argue that although overall China's population policy has remained firmly under state control in the past three decades, it has shifted from the heavy-handed Leninist approach focusing on the *quantity* control of the Deng era to a new focus on the *quality* of population and a more client-centred neoliberal approach in the Jiang (1993–2003) and Hu eras (2003–present).<sup>9</sup> While this shift signifies the state's intensified determination since the mid-1990s to produce a modern labour force capable of competing in the global marketplace, the state has also begun to devote resources to provide client-centred quality services and care that have begun to take women's reproductive health into consideration and provide more choices for contraception.<sup>10</sup>

Secondly, Greenhalgh and Winckler point out that beginning from the mid-1990s, China's population policy has shifted from "external regulation to self-regulation and self-cultivation" as the Chinese state continues to decentralize and embrace capitalism. In other words, as China's capitalist economy further takes hold, other social forces such as rising consumerism and individualism, privatization of health care and education, and changing labour and social mobility have also emerged and contributed to an increase in individuals making their own choices in fertility desires and childbearing behaviour by the early 2000s.

Thirdly, profound transformations in the social and economic arenas in the past two decades have underlain a dramatic decline in fertility desires even among rural families. At the same time, the Chinese state's new population policy shift to intensify the enhancement of population quality also taps into "widespread parental aspiration for the upward mobility (and future filiality) of their one (or two) children."<sup>11</sup> Therefore, by the early 2000s, both market forces and the adoption of client-centred reforms in birth programmes have led to "a

8 Susan Greenhalgh and Edwin A. Winckler, *Governing China's Population: From Leninist to Neoliberal Biopolitics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

9 *Ibid.* pp. 8–9, 15.

10 *Ibid.* pp. 149, 152. See also Joan Kaufman, "Myths and realities of China's population program," *Harvard Asia Quarterly*, Vol. 7, No. 1, pp. 21–25; Gu Baochang, Zhang Erli and Xie Zhengming, "Toward a quality of care approach: reorientation of the family planning programme in China," in Jay Satia, Patricia Mathews and Aun Ting Lim (eds.), *Institutionalizing Reproductive Programs, Innovations: Innovative Approaches to Population Program Management* (ICOMP, 1999), pp. 39–52.

11 Greenhalgh and Winckler, *Governing China's Population*, p. 217.

gradual convergence of state and village fertility norms” and reduced tensions over birth planning.

Empirical studies at the village level have shown that contrary to the general belief that they were traditional-oriented and always wanted more sons, Chinese farmers were actively modifying their fertility preferences and behaviour in response to changing social and economic environments. In her study of Shaanxi villages in the late 1980s and the early 1990s, Greenhalgh found that 91 per cent of the family heads she surveyed rejected outright the old saying “more sons, more happiness” (*duozi duofu* 多子多福), and more than 88 per cent of the village women who married between 1979 to 1987 named a one-son-one-daughter family as the ideal.<sup>12</sup> Although pointing out that the villagers’ responses might reflect their internalization of the government birth control policy, Greenhalgh argued that they could also be “genuinely held views” facilitated by new economic and social structures of village life.<sup>13</sup> In his study of a Helongjiang village in north-east China, Yan observed that while resistance was certainly a part of their strategy in coping with a powerful state, by the end of the 1990s, Xiajia villagers have also established “a new fertility culture” characterized by a large number of young couples’ voluntary decision to raise an only child – an only daughter in some cases.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, Yan urges that it is time “to pay closer attention the villagers’ capability to transcend older values and norms (and to a certain extent even themselves) in human reproduction.”<sup>15</sup>

The present study explores new forces that are reshaping fertility trends and norms among rural families in a Hubei village in the past three decades. In a way, this study provides first-hand empirical evidence to echo what Greenhalgh and Winckler have identified as the new shift of power over life “from ‘state disciplines’ to ‘medical disciplines’ to ‘market disciplines’ of child economics, consumer desire and consumption fantasy.”<sup>16</sup> The data for this study were based on four field trips to Zhongshan village from 1993 to 2004.<sup>17</sup> Located in Zhongxiang county (钟祥县) of Hubei province in central China, Zhongshan village is an average size multi-surname farm community.<sup>18</sup> In 2003, it had a population of 1,237 registered in 321 households. Zhongshan is also an average village in terms of its income level; the per capita income was 2,740 yuan in 2003, slightly higher than both the provincial average of 2,567 yuan and the national

12 Susan Greenhalgh, “The peasantization of population policy in Shaanxi,” in Deborah Davis and Stevan Harrell (eds.), *Chinese Families in the Post-Mao Era* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 219–50.

13 *Ibid.* p. 231; Greenhalgh, Zhu and Li, “Restraining population growth in three Chinese villages, 1988–1993,” *Population and Development Review*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (1994), pp. 379–82.

14 Yunxiang Yan, *Private Life under Socialism: Love, Intimacy, and Family Change in a Chinese Village, 1949–1999* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 205.

15 *Ibid.* p. 214.

16 Greenhalgh and Winckler, *Governing China’s Population*, p. 30.

17 I spent 14 months from 1993 to 1994 in Zhongshan village for my first fieldwork research. I revisited the village on three short research trips in 2002, 2003 and 2004.

18 Zhongshan village is under the administrative jurisdiction of Zhongxiang. Zhongxiang was the county seat until 1992 when it became a county-level city. Throughout this article, I refer to Zhongxiang county instead of Zhongxiang city.

average of 2,622 yuan for the same year.<sup>19</sup> Family life and marriages in this locality follow the general Chinese pattern of patrilineality where sons are more valued for their role in providing family continuity, labour and parental support. However, uxori-local marriages in which a daughter stays at home and her husband marries into her natal family also existed as a local tradition both before and after 1949.<sup>20</sup> Although still considered less desirable and practised mostly under special family circumstances – lack of a son or sons – the local uxori-local tradition does generate a strong belief among the villagers that a daughter can perform the role of a son in continuing the family line and supporting her parents in old age. It is possible that daughters in Zhongshan are more favourably valued by their parents than their counterparts in other rural communities where uxori-local marriages occur rarely or carry low prestige. But this can be true only to a certain degree. It is also important to remember that the practice of uxori-local marriage does not necessarily negate the importance of sons in Zhongshan village. On the contrary, it may even heighten their importance because it is only where there is no son that a family resorts to a daughter's uxori-local marriage.

This study is divided into two sections. The first section documents the fertility outcomes in Zhongshan village from 1970 to 2000, and explores local-level interactions between the enforcement of the state birth policy and the emergence of new reproductive behaviours and norms concerning family size and gender composition at the village level. The second section discusses new demographic structures, changing family dynamics, and newly emerging social and economic factors responsible for the new fertility trends observed in Zhongshan towards the late 1990s and early 2000s.

### **Fertility Outcomes and Trends in Zhongshan Village from 1970 to 2000**

In December 1973, the Chinese government formally announced the national birth policy of *wan xi shao* and increased nationwide efforts to bring down high fertility rates which had averaged six children per woman since 1962. By the end of the decade, China's total fertility rate was drastically reduced from 5.81 in 1970 to 2.75 in 1979.<sup>21</sup> The fertility data from Zhongshan village mirror the national trends of high fertility rates in the early 1970s, a dramatic decline in high-order births in the mid-1970s and a sharp increase in low-order births by the end of the 1970s. Zhongshan had a total of 275 births from 1970 to 1979. To

19 See "Statistical communiqué of 2003 Hubei province economy and social development," available online, <http://www.stats.gov.cn/was40/reldetail.jsp?docid=141647>. National Statistics Bureau of China, "Statistical communiqué on national economy and social development in 2003," available online, [http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjgb/ndtjgb/qgndtjgb/t20040226\\_402131958.htm](http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjgb/ndtjgb/qgndtjgb/t20040226_402131958.htm).

20 Hong Zhang, "Social transformations, family life and uxori-local marriages in a Hubei village, 1870–1994," unpublished dissertation (Columbia University, 1998).

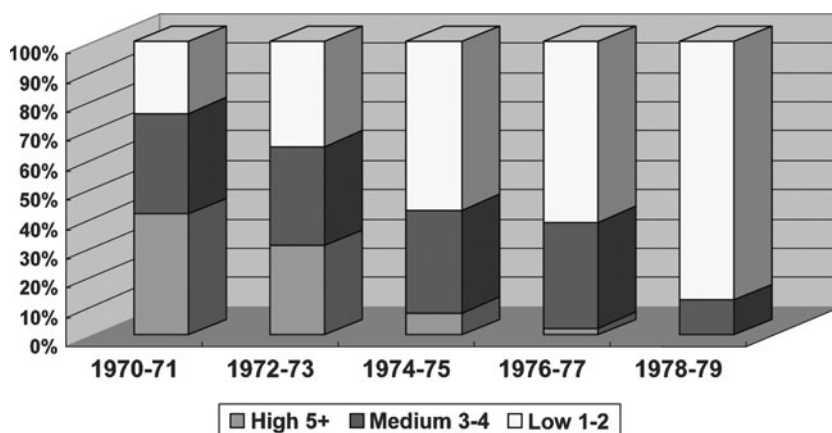
21 Using the information from *China Statistical Yearbook 2002*, Greenhalgh and Winckler's *Governing China's Population* has provided a complete set of demographic data for the PRC from 1949 to 2001. See pp. 17–18.

show the dramatic decline in high-order births, I divide these births into three categories based on birth orders: high (fifth or higher), median (third or fourth), and low (first or second) (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 shows that in 1970–71, on the eve of China’s initial birth control programmes, Zhongshan’s birth rates were high, with median and high-order births making up more than 75 per cent of all births. By 1974–75, their combined proportion dropped sharply to less than 50 per cent. By 1978–79, low-order births became predominant with high-order births completely eliminated and median-order births further reduced to less than 10 per cent.

In 1978, under the new leadership of Deng Xiaoping, population policy was sharply tightened up when the national priority was shifted to economic development. Convinced that China’s new economic goals for the year 2000 would be in jeopardy unless extreme measures were taken to curb the population growth momentum, the central government launched the ambitious one-child policy in 1980. Unlike the birth programmes in the mid-1970s which were largely based on persuasion and voluntary participation, the enforcement of the one-child policy during the early 1980s was carried out with coercion and aggressive campaigns backed up by economic incentives for compliance, and fines and penalties for violation. In 1983, in a desperate attempt to prevent the “extra births” (third or higher-order births), the state carried out nationwide campaigns, demanding abortion for unauthorized pregnancies and sterilization for childbearing-age couples with two or more children.<sup>22</sup> The compulsory abortion and sterilization campaigns, resorting largely to coercion, sparked a

Figure 1: **Change in Parity Structure of Births in Zhongshan Village, 1970–1979**



22 Aid, *Slaughter of The Innocents*, esp. pp. 32–34. Susan Greenhalgh, “Shifts in China’s population policy, 1984–86: views from the central, provincial, and local level,” *Population and Development Review*, Vol. 12, No. 13 (1986), pp. 491–515.

widespread peasant backlash and severely strained cadre–peasant relations. Faced with strong resistance from peasant families and political constraints at the local level, in the mid-1980s the government scaled back the intensity of the one-child rule and allowed provincial governments to devise enforcement measures in accordance with local situations to allow more conditions for peasant families to have a second child.<sup>23</sup> Towards the end of the 1980s, most provinces allowed rural couples to have a second birth if their first child was a girl, but at the same time birth control measures were also strengthened by closing up loopholes for local implementation and supervision.<sup>24</sup> This reinforcement of birth control has lasted since then.

In order to understand how China's population control policy over the past three decades affected family size and gender composition in Zhongshan village, and what fertility trends have emerged, I obtained fertility data of all Zhongshan couples who married between 1970 and 2000 and divided them into four groups to correspond with the scale and intensity of China's birth control policy: the moderate period (1970–76), the draconian period (1977–83), the adjusting period (1984–90) and the stabilizing and accepting period (1991–2000). Couples who married in the early 1970s experienced the shift from a moderate birth policy to its tightening up. Couples who married in the late 1970s and early 1980s encountered the most stringent birth control measures. Couples who married in the mid-1980s and throughout the 1990s witnessed birth control firmly established as a state policy. Table 1 shows the fertility outcomes of Zhongshan couples who married between 1970 and 2000.

**Table 1: Family Size and Gender Composition of Zhongshan Couples Who Married between 1970 and 2000**

Family Size	1970–76	1977–83	1984–90	1991–2000
	No. (%)	No. (%)	No. (%)	No. (%)
One-child households	1 (1.9)	14 (13.08)	40 (38.1)	78 (97.5)
One son	1	12	32	42
One daughter	0	2	8	36
Two-child households	38 (71.7)	92 (85.98)	65 (65.9)	2 (2.5)
Son-son	11	22	6	0
Son-daughter	11	22	5	0
Daughter-daughter	9	17	20	1
Daughter-son	7	31	34	1
Three-child households	14 (26.4)	1 (.94)	0	0
Three sons	4	0		
Three daughters	3	0		
Mixed-gender	7	1		
Total=345	53	107	105	80

23 Greenhalgh, "Shifts in China's population policy," pp. 491–515. Tyrene White, "Two kinds of production: the evolution of China's family planning policy in the 1980s," *Population and Development Review*, No. 20, supplement (1994), pp. 137–58.

24 Thomas Scharping, *Birth Control in China 1949–2000* (London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), esp. pp. 63–80.



The major features for each marriage cohort can be summarized as follows. First, for couples who married between 1970 and 1976, two-to-three children households were the norm (98.1 per cent). Secondly, for couples who married between 1977 and 1983, two-child households became predominant with a noticeable increase of one-child households, while three-child households were basically prevented.<sup>25</sup> What is also revealing about the couples in the 1978–83 marriage cohorts is that the majority of them whose first child was a boy went on to have a second birth (44 out of 56), and only 14 couples adhered to the one-child limit. However, 19 couples (17.75 per cent) in this marriage cohort never had a son and belonged to the daughter-only households.

Thirdly, for couples who married between 1984 and 1990, one-child households emerged to become viable with two-child households. The sharp increase in one-child households in the 1984–90 marriage cohort was facilitated by the majority of the couples whose first child was a son ending childbearing (32 out of 43 or 74.4 per cent). This can be seen as a consequence of new adjustments to China's birth policy since the mid-1980s. By this time, the one-child policy was modified to allow a second birth for rural couples whose first child was a girl, but was tightened up at the same time to forbid a second birth if a couple's first child was a healthy boy. However, it is important to note that in Zhongshan eight couples in the 1984 and 1990 marriage cohorts were raising a single daughter and did not have a second child as allowed by the birth policy. My further field investigation reveals that of these single-daughter households, only one was involuntary,<sup>26</sup> while the remaining seven had chosen to raise a single daughter.<sup>27</sup>

Finally, couples married between 1991 and 2000 show a most dramatic turn towards the one-child norm in Zhongshan. The high rate of one-child households for these couples was affected by two factors: the complete elimination of a second birth for couples whose first child was a boy, and a sharp increase in the number of couples whose first child was a daughter and who did not proceed to have a second birth. Admittedly, some of these 36 couples were still early in their marriage and could have a second birth a few years later. However, at least 15 couples decided to raise a single daughter voluntarily because they had already obtained the one-child certificate by

25 The only case of a three-child household among couples married between 1978 and 1983 in Zhongshan was described to me as "an accident." It occurred to a couple who had already had a boy in 1980 and a daughter in 1982. Soon after having her second child, the wife used IUD as a temporary contraceptive method before undergoing sterilization a few months later. She was sterilized as required, only later discovering she was already pregnant probably due to the failure of IUD. She was allowed to carry the child to term and gave birth to a third child – a son – in 1983.

26 In this case, the couple had a daughter in 1986, but the wife committed suicide in 1990 after some marital disputes. The husband did not remarry and was raising his only daughter by himself as of 2004.

27 It is possible some of these couples with a single daughter may decide to have another child in the future, but they had not done so by 2004. The village cadres told me it was unlikely they would have a second birth because by 2004, most of them had already raised a single daughter for more than a decade, and some were in their late 30s and early 40s, and were considered "very old" to have another child.

2004.<sup>28</sup> Of the remaining 21 couples, five had only recently had a child (between 2000 and 2002) and were not eligible for a second by the time of my latest fieldwork in 2004.<sup>29</sup> But the other 16 had their first child between 1991 and 1999, and thus were qualified for a second birth but had not done so by 2004. The village birth-planning cadre told me that raising a single daughter has become more and more acceptable among young parents these days and that she would not be surprised if these 16 couples opted not to have a second birth.

Clearly by the late 1990s, it is not only all couples whose first child was a healthy boy who complied with the one-child rule. Even couples who qualified for a second birth increasingly took the reproductive decision into their own hands and decided either to delay or to give up their second birth altogether and raise a single daughter instead. These new fertility trends show that the one-child norm and a gender-neutral preference have gradually taken hold in Zhongshan village. How do we account for these new fertility trends? Why do young couples in the late 1990s seem so receptive to the one-child rule? What has changed in the past decade that has made them seem so different from their parents in the early 1980s who so desperately resisted and defied the one-child limit?

### **Changing Socioeconomic Realities and the New Forces Reshaping Fertility Norms**

There is no doubt that the enforcement of a stringent birth policy has played a major role in the sharp decline in China's overall fertility rates in the past three decades.<sup>30</sup> However, as eloquently argued by Greenhalgh and Winckler, larger market-led social transformations and the government's new shifts to enhance population quality in the birth programmes have also emerged as forces reshaping fertility norms among rural families, and leading to a convergence between the state's demand for birth limits and society's growing desire for fewer, better-raised children. This section discusses four emerging socio-economic and demographic factors that help facilitate new fertility trends and behaviour as witnessed in Zhongshan: new attitudes towards child-rearing as a means of securing old age support; changing meaning and practice of filial piety; new standards of good parenthood; and rethinking the perceived link between fertility behaviour and poverty.

28 The one-child certificate was first issued in this local region in 1994. Couples would receive 100 yuan as a one-time economic incentive for obtaining the certificate no matter whether their only child was a son or a daughter. As of 2004, 58 couples were one-child certificate holders, among whom 41 were couples with an only son and 17 were couples with an only daughter (the latter figure includes two couples who were married between 1984 and 1990).

29 According to the local birth policy in the 1990s, a couple whose first child was a daughter must wait at least three years before they could be given a second birth quota.

30 Isabelle Attane, "China's family planning policy: an overview of its past and future," *Studies in Family Planning*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (2002), pp. 103–13. Griffith Feeney and Wang Feng, "Parity progress and birth intervals in China: the influence of policy in hastening fertility decline," *Population and Development Review*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (1993), pp. 61–101. Arthur Wolf, "The preeminent role of government intervention in China's family revolution," *Population and Development Review*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (1986), pp. 101–06.

*New attitudes towards child-rearing as a means of securing old age support*

Recent ethnographies from rural China have amply demonstrated that the rural elderly increasingly have to depend on themselves for care even when they have raised numerous sons.<sup>31</sup> However, most of these studies have so far focused on the impact of new family dynamics and declining filial practice upon the livelihood and living arrangements of elderly parents; few have asked whether weakening filial practice and declining fertility have made villagers think twice about the tradition of child-rearing as a means against old age.

In my observation of Zhongshan village in the early 2000s, I found that while still hoping that they have raised a filial son or filial daughter or both, many young and middle-aged parents no longer regard child-rearing as the surest guarantee of future old age support.<sup>32</sup> "Self-reliance" (*kao ziji* 靠自己), they claimed, was a more realistic future. Essentially three emerging factors of family dynamics and economic activities have contributed to this growing belief in self-reliance for old age support: the trend towards intergenerational independence facilitated by rural-to-urban migration of the rural young, the trend toward separate living arrangements between the generations, and the paradoxical effect of China's birth control policy on securing old age support through child-rearing.

When I conducted my first fieldwork in Zhongshan in 1993–94, there was very little outmigration among young people. But when I revisited the village in 2002–04, there were hardly any young men and women left in Zhongshan. Of the 243 Zhongshan youths in the 16–24 age cohort in 2004, only 42 (19.2 per cent) stayed in Zhongshan while 195 (79.8 per cent) left either to study or work in cities and towns. Although at this point it is hard to tell when and how many of them will eventually return to Zhongshan to get married and set up a family, some recent trends suggest that a growing number might eventually settle in cities. In recent years some young Zhongshan men and women have married and set up their marital home in towns and cities where they can continue to have wage labour. Table 2 shows the post-marital residences for Zhongshan men and women who married between 2001 and 2004.

31 Melvyn Goldstein, Yachun Ku and Charlotte Ikels, "Household composition of the elderly in two rural villages in the People's Republic of China," *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (1990), pp. 119–30. Eric Miller, "Filial daughters, filial sons: comparisons from rural north China," in Charlotte Ikels (ed.), *Filial Piety: Practice and Discourse in Contemporary East Asia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), pp. 34–52. Lihua Pang, Alan de Brauw and Scott Rozelle, "Working until you drop: the elderly of rural China," *The China Journal*, No. 52 (2004), pp. 73–84. Danyu Wang, "Ritualistic coresidence and the weakening of filial practice in rural China," in Ikels, *Filial Piety*, pp. 16–33. Yunxiang Yan, *Private Life under Socialism*, pp. 162–89. Hong Zhang, "'Living alone' and the rural elderly," in Ikels, *Filial Piety*, pp. 63–87.

32 Hong Zhang, "Bracing for an uncertain future," pp. 71–75. In her study of Shaanxi villages, Greenhalgh also found that her younger informants were more likely to express doubt about filial support. Only one-third of the 131 younger household heads in her survey indicated they considered "children the optimal means of support." Susan Greenhalgh, "Peasant household in transition from socialism: state intervention and its consequences in China," in Elizabeth M. Brumfiel (ed.), *The Economic Anthropology of the State* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America), pp. 43–64.

Table 2: **Post-Marital Residence of Zhongshan Men and Women, 2001–2004**

	Zhongshan marriages No. (%)	Male No. (%)	Female No. (%)
Rural residence	24 (52.17)	14 (58.3)	10 (41.6)
In Zhongshan	14	11	3
In other rural villages	10	3	7
Urban residence	22 (47.83)	9 (40.9)	13 (59.1)
Township seat	4	4	
County seat	7	4	3
Cities in Hubei	4	1	3
Cross-province cities	7	4	3

Close to half (47.83 per cent) of all Zhongshan men and women who married between 2001 and 2004 continued to earn cash income and live away from Zhongshan village, and women had a slightly higher rate of urban post-marital residence. Even among young couples who lived in Zhongshan, some live separately from their parents and control their own household budget and economic activities. In 1994, about 23 per cent of elderly parents over 60 years old lived separately from their adult children. But by 2002, more than 54 per cent of Zhongshan's elderly were living alone.<sup>33</sup> The consequence of China's birth control policy has also weakened the traditional means of securing old age support through child-rearing, and heightened the importance of self-reliance and self-sufficiency.

In my interviews with young parents in Zhongshan, it was not difficult to find that they viewed the strategy of child-rearing for old age support as out-dated and out of sync with the changing times. When I asked them if they still considered the old saying "raising sons against old age" valid, most gave me a look of disbelief and replied flatly, "depending on your children is not reliable." I am not suggesting that young rural parents no longer believe in raising children with a long-term view of counting on their filial support. In fact, many young parents are highly involved in attending to the well-being of their child(ren) and consider it extremely important to develop good relationships and strong emotional bonds with them. The purpose of this is to establish a reciprocal relationship with their children that would oblige them to provide parental support when the time comes.<sup>34</sup> But what has emerged as a new social norm is that young parents now realize that their own ability and resources for self-reliance and self-sufficiency are more reliable and important than the goodwill and filial acts of their children. I believe that it is because of this new shift towards self-reliance for old age security that younger rural parents are not only more willing to comply with the one-child norm but also more neutral as to the gender of their only child. That is perhaps why towards the late 1990s a growing

33 Hong Zhang, "'Living alone' and the rural elderly," pp. 63–87.

34 See Hong Zhang, "Bracing for an uncertain future." Also see Yunxiang Yan, *Private Life under Socialism*, esp. pp. 178–82.

number of young Zhongshan couples chose to forego their second birth and just raise a single daughter.

### *Changing meaning and practice of filial piety*

When Dongmei, quoted at the beginning of this article, said, “what is wrong with having only a daughter? A daughter can be just as good as a son. She can also support her parents,” she was not merely voicing the propaganda used by birth-control cadres. These statements represent a new reality in Zhongshan that has redefined intergenerational relations, family economy, and the relative value of sons and daughters during the past two decades.<sup>35</sup> The new demographic and economic realities resulting from the strict birth policy and market reforms have altered the meaning and practice of “filial piety” drastically. In Zhongshan village, and in other rural communities, the majority of parents under China’s birth control policy were raising no more than two children, often a son and a daughter. In this family composition, a daughter becomes more valued and less dispensable. As a Zhongshan mother put it simply, “when you just have a son and a daughter, they are both your ‘treasures’ (*baobei* 宝贝). They are both important.” Also as a consequence of the birth control policy, some parents only have one or two daughters and never have a son, and for them, their daughters’ filial role becomes even more critical. Thus, when a whole generation of parents are raising no more than two children, the importance of a daughter’s filial role rises, and with it so does the value of a daughter to her parents.

While small family size highlights the importance of a daughter’s filial role, the new economic opportunities in reform-era China have enabled rural daughters more than ever to be in a better position to be economically valuable and “filial” to their parents. Table 3 shows what Zhongshan young men and women were doing in 2004, and reveals that Zhongshan’s young women were more likely to find urban employment than their male counterparts.

One possible reason for this male “lag” is that the urban jobs open to the rural young tend to favour females.<sup>36</sup> Urban employment situations for the rural young in reform-era China are complicated by two factors that might give women a comparative advantage. One is a result of development strategies involving setting up export factories in the coastal areas and developing service sectors. Many newly created manufacturing and service-sector jobs employ

35 See Hong Zhang, “China’s new rural daughters coming of age: downsizing the family and firing up cash earning power,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Society and Culture*, Vol. 32, No. 3 (2007), pp. 671–98.

36 For a more detailed discussion on this gendered migration pattern among Zhongshan’s young people, see *ibid.* Other studies have also shown that among the younger age cohorts, rural women were as likely to migrate for wage labour as their male counterparts, if not more. See Linxiu Zhang, Alan de Brauw and Scott Rozelle, “China’s rural labor market development and its gender implications,” *China Economic Review*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (2004), pp. 230–47. In the 1 in 1000 microdata based on the 2000 census, Zheng Zhenzhen and Rachel Connelly found that the ratio for female migrants in the 16–24 age cohorts was .456 in Beijing, .489 in Shanghai, .62 in Dongguan and .63 in Shenzhen. In other words, in the economic boomtowns which export industries dominate, young female migrants were more employable than young male migrants. I thank Rachel Connelly for providing me with this information.

Table 3: Zhongshan Youth in the 16–24 Age Cohorts, 2004

Social mobility	Zhongshan youth No. (%)	Men No. (%)	Women No. (%)
Farming and local employment	42 (19.2)	27 (21.6)	15 (12.71)
Attending self-paid schools	40 (19.5)	24 (19.2)	16 (13.56)
Having an urban job	161 (61.3)	74 (59.2)	87 (73.73)
Total=243	243	125	118

young rural women, whereas urban employment for rural young men is more limited and often belongs to the so-called “3D jobs”: “dirty, dangerous and difficult.” Through my field interviews in 2002–04, I found that some Zhongshan young men simply returned home after their brief stint of urban employment either because they could not find a steady job or because they did not want to do the hard manual labour available for them in cities.

The other factor concerns the segmented labour market because of the bifurcating household registration (*hukou* 户口) system which divides China’s population into rural and urban, and serves as a means of state control over population movement. In Mao’s era, the *hukou* system forbade any voluntary rural–urban migration. In the post-Mao reform era, rural residents are allowed to migrate to cities for wage labour but are still denied urban residence status.<sup>37</sup> As a result they can only work in certain sectors of industry and at lower wages. Although this segregated labour market it is biased against all rural migrants, both men and women, young rural female migrants had a comparative edge because most of the new jobs are in the informal service sector or export industries, both of which tend to employ female workers. While this advantage for working daughters may not necessarily diminish male superiority and son preference, it does enhance the economic value of daughters and let rural parents see for the first time that a working daughter can earn as much cash income as a son.

By the early 2000s, with the majority of Zhongshan young men and women earning cash income in cities, a new cultural norm has emerged concerning how children may be “useful” or “filial” to their parents. It is no longer how much farming help they can offer but how much money they can make from an urban job and how much they can or *are willing to* send home. Zhongshan parents told me that while remittances were sent from both unmarried sons and daughters, daughters were often more generous and more consistent in sending money home. In this new economic environment, many Zhongshan parents have come to realize that a daughter who can earn cash income and send remittances home is indeed no less important than a son. This new realization may in turn foster a new belief among younger parents, like Dongmei, that raising a daughter is just as good an investment as a son.

37 See Dorothy Solinger, *Contesting Citizenship in Urban China: Peasant Migrants, the State, and the Logic of the Market* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

*New standards of good parenthood*

In 1994, I asked a Zhongshan father what his hope was for his two young children, a daughter born in 1980 and a son in 1989. Without hesitation, he said, "I hope they will not end up a farmer like me. That is my biggest hope. I will do all I can to get them out of the countryside. To be a farmer is utterly meaningless." I was not surprised by his disgust for the countryside, but was struck by his strong determination and even optimism for envisaging a different future for his children. This father's hope and determination is shared by many parents of his generation who were born in the 1950s and 1960s and whose life chance was severely compromised by the rigid household registration system and the de-urbanization policy under the three decades of command economy. In the post-Mao reform era, new market forces and relaxation on rural-to-urban migration have opened new paths of social and labour mobility for the generation of children who were born under China's birth policy and grew up in the reform era. However, because China's reform strategy prioritizes export-led industrialization and development in urban centres and along coastal regions, it further widens the rural-urban divide and creates a heightened urgency for the rural young to leave the villages to seek better life alternatives. At the same time, as the college entrance examination has been resumed since the late 1970s and other vocational schools set up, pressure has also increased on rural parents to take on the responsibility of investing in their children's education and preparing them to leave the countryside and rural life for good.

This is an example of what Greenhalgh and Winckler have identified as emerging "neoliberal forces," reshaping cultural norms and parent-child relations from the bottom up. First, as pointed out by Greenhalgh and Winckler, as China has adopted pro-market reform to step up urbanization and modernization in the hope of catching up with the advanced world, it has all but abandoned rural China as backward, poor and futureless. And China's new developmental orientation has led to a deepened rural crisis that only fuels a massive exodus of rural young to pursuit their "urban dreams."<sup>38</sup> Secondly, as the government's new population project has shifted to enhance the quality of China's people for participation in a modern globalized economy, it taps into the increasing parental aspiration to nurture a new generation of "superior" children equipped to compete in the modern world."<sup>39</sup> Rachel Murphy's research in rural Jiangxi also shows how the state's new emphasis on population

38 Greenhalgh and Winckler, *Governing China's Population*, esp. pp. 245–50. See also Hairong Yan, "Neoliberal governmentality and neohumanism: organizing suzhi/value flow through labor recruitment networks," *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (2003), pp. 493–523; "Spectralization of the rural: reinterpreting the labor mobility of rural young women in post-Mao China," *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 30, No. 4 (2003), pp. 576–94.

39 Greenhalgh and Winckler *Governing China's Population*, p. 44. See also Ann Anagnost, "Children and national transcendence in China," in Kenneth G. Lieberthal, Shuen-fu Lin and Ernest Young (eds.), *Constructing China: The Interaction of Culture and Economics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), pp. 195–222. Vanessa Fong, *Only Hope: Coming of Age under China's One-Child Policy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).

“quality” (*suzhi* 素质) works to transform “peasants into modern Chinese citizens,” and in so doing both legitimizes the state’s intervention in regulating fertility and shifts the responsibility of improving *suzhi* on to the local communities and individual families.<sup>40</sup> Murphy points out that the pressure to provide high-quality education has led to the re-structuring of rural primary education in the Rivertown county of Jiangxi province at a high cost to rural families, but most rural parents feel they have to invest in the “*suzhi* of their children” in the hope that their children can “avoid farming because of its association with hardship and low *suzhi*.”<sup>41</sup>

In Zhongshan village as well, there is an intensified parental effort to invest in their children’s education at all costs. Table 4 shows the educational levels of Zhongshan children born between 1978 and 1987. It is clear that an overwhelming 98.5 per cent of Zhongshan children growing under China’s birth policy received education at junior high and beyond.<sup>42</sup> One Zhongshan village teacher told me in 2003 that since the majority of parents now had just one or two children, they would make sure the children finished the nine-year compulsory education even if it meant repeat school for some. Other villagers in Zhongshan confirmed the teacher’s statement by saying that nowadays most parents wanted their children to have at least a junior high education so that “they can read and understand labour laws and contracts when they seek wage labour in cities.” Clearly, education was highly prized as it was seen as the only way to improve the *suzhi* of rural children and hopefully pave the way for them to become modern urban workers and citizens.

Although Table 4 shows that boys were slightly favoured in terms of obtaining higher-level education, as many as 39 Zhongshan girls did receive

Table 4: Education Levels of Zhongshan Young Men and Women, 2004

Education levels	No. (%)	Male No. (%)	Female No. (%)
Compulsory education			
Elementary	4 (1.5 )	1 (0.71)	3 (2.24)
Junior high	164 (59.9)	72 (51.43)	92 (68.66)
Self-paying education	39 (14.2)	26 (18.57)	13 (9.7)
Vocational schools	33 (12.0)	21 (15)	12 (8.95)
High school <sup>a</sup>	34 (12.4)	20 (14.29)	14 (10.45)
College <sup>b</sup>			
Total=274	274		

Notes:

<sup>a</sup>This number includes those who are currently enrolled as well as those who had high school as terminal education.

<sup>b</sup>This number includes both those who were still enrolled in college by 2004 and those who graduated from college by 2004.

40 Rachel Murphy, “Turning peasants into modern Chinese citizens: ‘population quality’ discourse, demographic transition and primary education,” *The China Quarterly*, No. 177 (2004), pp. 1–20.

41 *Ibid.* p. 16.

42 This information was gathered from Zhongshan village’s household registration and school records. It is possible that this number was inflated and included those who dropped out after only one or two years of junior high school education.



education beyond the compulsory level, including 14 who had or are currently receiving college education. Although Zhongshan village is not in dire poverty, many parents are severely constrained by skyrocketing educational costs. The cost of vocational training or high school education ranges between 4,000 and 6,000 yuan a year while college education costs 10,000 yuan a year. And yet in 2003, the per capita income was 2,740 yuan in Zhongshan. This means that most Zhongshan parents are caught in a conundrum with regard to investing in their children's education: they can either go heavily into debt or let the opportunity for education slip away. For instance, in 2002, a Zhongshan father told me that his two sons both passed the test into high school in the mid-1990s. But he decided to discontinue his elder son's education because he could not afford the fees for both and the elder son's grades were not as strong as his younger brother. Another couple had to withdraw their very promising daughter from her second year in high school in 2002 because they simply could not continue to pay her tuition and boarding fees.<sup>43</sup> When telling me this story, villagers showed both disapproval and pity for this couple: they felt the parents were to blame as they had "failed" in their duty to help their promising daughter pursue higher education, while at the same time they were sympathetic to the couple and understood their predicament.

Here we can clearly see how the government's new emphasis on enhancing the *suzhi* of China's population in the global economy on the one hand, and its market reform and development strategy that continues to widen the rural-urban divide on the other, has unduly burdened and sharply stratified rural families. The transition to a market economy has opened a small window of upward mobility for rural young and especially for those who have higher-level education and better vocational skills. But it has also set new standards for good parenthood in rural China. "Good parents" are the ones who make sure their children can concentrate on their school work and be spared from household chores or farm labour. Even more importantly they are the ones who can save or raise enough money to pay for the soaring cost of education. "Bad parents," in contrast, are the ones who failed to ensure that their children were successful academically, or who could not afford to give them a better education. The life chance of their children was thus limited to either farming in the countryside or working as low-paying migrant labourers in cities.

43 Because of limited educational resources in rural areas, rural students have to pass a very competitive entrance exam in order to get into high school. In this locality, the rate of junior high graduates who could go on to high school was about 25% in the late 1990s. Moreover, as high schools are mostly located in the county seat and a few townships, attendance thus means room and board fees in addition to tuition. Rachel Murphy notes that in the educational restructuring for cost-cutting and quality-enhancing, rural villages in Jiangxi have started to implement this "enclosed method of schooling" (*guanbi shi*) for primary schoolers, ("Turning peasants into modern Chinese citizens," pp. 10–12). In this locality as well, beginning in the early 2000s, young school-age children from the age of eight have to go to a "boarding" school about five miles away which takes children from five surrounding villages. Lack of teaching resources and the drop in the number of school-age children were given to me as the reasons for this consolidation.

Even though those parents whose children went on to college were under strenuous financial constraints and heavily in debt, they were seen as exemplary parents who helped their children achieve their lifetime dream of shedding the rural life for good. These parents also serve as role models for parents of younger children to emulate. I believe that it is because of this newly constructed parental responsibility to provide and pay for the best education for their child(ren), and because of the fear of being labelled “bad parents,” that the younger generation of Zhongshan parents are now more willing to comply with the one-child limit. Both the widened urban–rural divide and escalating educational costs have made these parents realize that raising one child and investing in his or her future is all they can afford. This would explain the recent trend among young Zhongshan parents who were qualified for a second birth and yet decided to opt out. Their desire to become good parents and to concentrate family resources to raise one daughter well outweighs their desire to have another child, even a potential son. In this sense, the high rate of one-child families witnessed in Zhongshan has been achieved at the expense of rural parents sacrificing or suppressing their fertility desire in order to live up to the new standards of good parenthood.

*Rethinking the link between fertility behaviour and poverty levels*

It is generally assumed that education, urbanization/industrialization and income levels are strong indicators of fertility behaviour. The fertility rate is lower among the better educated, more urbanized and higher income population than among the less educated, more rural and subsistence level population. This generalization has been used to explain the differences in fertility rates between developed and developing countries,<sup>44</sup> and, in China, between urban and rural areas.<sup>45</sup> However, because of the strong state intervention in fertility control in the past two decades, China’s overall total fertility rate reached a new low of 1.22 for urban areas and 1.98 for rural areas. Although still higher than that of urban China, the rural fertility rate matches the fertility level of many developed countries. When the fertility rates remain so low in both urban and rural China, the link between fertility behaviour and indexes of education, urbanization and income can become blurred. Other factors may be relevant in accounting for fertility behaviour and differences.

In 2002, I asked Zhongxiang county birth control officials whether they now had any work to do since the compliance with the one-child rule was high among couples whose first child was a healthy boy and a growing number of young couples even decided to raise a single daughter and forego their second birth

44 John C. Caldwell, *Theory of Fertility Decline* (London: Academic Press, 1986). Ansley J. Coale and Susan Cotts Watkins (eds.), *The Decline of Fertility in Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

45 Elisabeth Croll, Delia Davin and Penny Kane (eds.), *China’s One-Child Family Policy* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1985). William G. Skinner, Mark Henderson and Yuan Jianhua, “China’s fertility transition through regional space,” *Social Science History*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (2000), pp. 613–52. William Lavelly and Ronald Freedman, “The origins of the Chinese fertility decline,” *Demography*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (1990), pp. 357–67.

quota altogether. While acknowledging that birth control work had become much easier by the early 2000s, they emphasized that violations of birth policy were still occurring in the locality. I was then told that “newly rich and private business-owners” were the “culprits” this time because they had the resources to pay fines or bribes.<sup>46</sup> It was the poor and average income farmers who tended to have only one child due to cost concerns.<sup>47</sup> Clearly, under both market forces and a stringent birth policy, a reversal pattern may occur in which a certain segment of high income population may have a higher fertility rate than the lower income population.

This reversal pattern is by no means unique to this locality. In his study of the fertility patterns in four counties of Hebei province, Zhenchao Qian noticed that the progression to a boy as a second birth was faster for women who had received senior high education than for women with only primary school education. According to Qian, “educated women have a son more rapidly than less educated women as they will be better informed on ultrasound, have more connections to people in power, and easier access to ultrasound techniques. They will also have more money to pay the penalty imposed for transgressing the one-child policy.”<sup>48</sup> It has also been reported that in economically developed coastal areas such as Zhejiang, Fujian and Guangdong, wealthy private entrepreneurs often have multiple births. One Zhejiang private entrepreneur reportedly paid 400,000 yuan as “social compensation fees” (*shehui buchang fei* 社会补偿费) for going over the birth limit in order to have a son.<sup>49</sup> Even in urban centres such as Beijing and Shanghai where the one-child norm has been almost universal for the past two decades, having multiple children has now been described as “a new fad among the wealthy and famous” who would either pay high fees or go abroad in order to have multiple births.<sup>50</sup> The title of an article carried in *International Herald Leader* (*Guoji xianqu daobao* 国际先驱导报) on 24 August 2005 poignantly sums up this new trend: “Having a second birth has now become a privilege for the wealthy. Reproductive opportunities differentiate social classes.”<sup>51</sup> Public criticism of the newly rich who can use their money to

46 The fines for birth violation in this locality are determined by multiplying five times the local per capita income of the year when the violation occurs.

47 The county officials would not tell me how frequently such over-quota births occurred per year. But they seem to be individual cases and perhaps happen in more prosperous townships or the county seat where private businesses are located. In average villages such as Zhongshan where the main source of income still comes from farming, there are no wealthy upstarts. And in 2004, Zhongshan cadres told me that Zhongshan had not had a single over-quota birth since 1990.

48 Zhenchao Qian, “Progression to second birth in China: a study of four rural counties,” *Population Studies*, Vol. 51, No. 2 (1997), p. 226.

49 Gou Xiaofeng and Li Yuyu, “Chaosheng tiaozhan zhongguo 16 yi renkou shangxian, mingren duoqi qinqi guanzhu” (“Over-quota births challenge the upper limit of 1.6 billion in China, the rich and famous having more children arouses public attention”), *Jingji cankao bao* (*Economy Information Daily*), 7 September 2004, available at [http://www.cpirc.org.cn/news/rkxw\\_gn\\_detail.asp?id=3082](http://www.cpirc.org.cn/news/rkxw_gn_detail.asp?id=3082).

50 Yang Chun, “Furen jiecen tieshang ‘chaosheng xingui’ biaoqian” (“The wealthy class has a new label – new privileged class of over-quota births”), *Qingnian shixun* (*Youth Times*), 17 November 2005. Available online at [http://qnsx.cyol.com/gb/qnsx/2005-11/17/content\\_93042.htm](http://qnsx.cyol.com/gb/qnsx/2005-11/17/content_93042.htm).

51 “Shengyu di’ertai cheng furen tequan, shengyu jihui qufen jiecheng.” This article is available at <http://edu.people.com.cn/GB/1055/3642105.html>.

buy birth rights have recently become so open and frequent that on 25 April 2006, the Chinese government's flagship newspaper *People's Daily* carried an editorial entitled "The rich have no special privilege of having over-quota births."<sup>52</sup> The editorial acknowledges the seriousness of the increasing trend of the wealthy to have multiple births by saying that "some rich people think that with money they can have over-quota births and with money they can go above the law." It goes on to warn that this trend "disturbs the current birth policy implementation, violates the legal system and breaches social justice," and calls for stepping up legal measures to curb the trend.

Clearly, increased social stratification resulting from China's market economy is having a direct impact on fertility behaviour. Those with money, power and resources can have over-quota births if they want to, whereas poor and average-income people struggle financially to raise just one child. In 2003, I asked young Zhongshan couples why so many of them went with the one-child norm. Almost all indicated "unable to afford the childrearing cost" (*yangbuqi* 养不起) as the main reason. It is therefore not villagers' acceptance of the government's policy but rather the fact that they have no choice that causes the convergence of their fertility behaviour with the government's one-child limit.

## Conclusion

Zhongshan villagers have come a long way from actively resisting the one-child limit in the early 1980s to the new fertility trends of complying with it by the late 1990s. There is even a growing tendency among young couples to decide voluntarily to forego the second birth quota and raise a single daughter instead. Apart from the state birth control policy, emerging social, economic and demographic factors, and changing family dynamics have also influenced the new fertility desires and behaviour witnessed in Zhongshan in recent years. Child-rearing, once upheld as the cultural norm of insurance against old age, is no longer regarded as the only means to ensure old age support; there is now a new emphasis on self-reliance and intergenerational independence as well as mutual obligation. Smaller family size, coupled with new economic opportunities and social mobility for rural young, both men and women, has increased the value of daughters in rural families and heightened their filial roles. There is a greater parental interest in investing in a daughter's future as well as a son's not only because some parents never have a son but also because new cash-earning opportunities for rural daughters have put them in a better position to be economically valuable to their parents.

New standards of parenthood have also developed among rural families. The widening rural–urban divide, together with the state's new emphasis on enhancing China's population quality, has brought new pressures and strains

52 Bai Jianfeng, *People's Daily* editorial, "Furen meiyou shengyu tequan," 25 April 2006. Available online at <http://opinion.people.com.cn/GB/40604/4326285.html>.

to rural parents. Education is now recognized as the best way to guarantee a more successful future for children, and yet the skyrocketing educational cost, a consequence of China’s market reform, severely constrains rural parents’ ability to afford the best education. Because of the mounting burden and pressure of raising “high-quality” children and of living up to the new standards of good parenthood, more and more young Zhongshan parents choose to raise only one child.

In their critique of the state’s new shift from limiting the quantity to promoting the quality of China’s population, Greenhalgh and Winckler point out that China’s population control is now governed by an expanding range of state and non-state actors from “state bureaucracies to professional institutions, capitalist corporations, and the public at large” to “the cultivation by individuals themselves of their capacity to regulate their own [reproductive] behavior.”<sup>53</sup> Similarly, Rachel Murphy’s empirical study of rural Jiangxi shows how the “all-embracing discourse of population quality” both legitimates the state modernization project through improving population quality on the one hand, and shifts the responsibility of this task to individuals and families on the other. As Murphy notes, “policy intervention articulated through *suzhi* discourse and realized through schools encourage individuals to *regulate their conduct in ways compatible with the state-sanctioned teleology of modernization*” (italics added).<sup>54</sup> In this regard, the seeming convergence of Zhongshan’s recent fertility trends with the state’s one-child limit may indicate that the younger generation of rural parents is adopting new and modern reproductive norms. But at the same time, it must also be realized that these new fertility norms are underscored by intensified structural inequalities of the urban–rural divide brought about by China’s market reform, and the unfair burdens placed on peasant families to produce “high-quality” children for the nation’s modernization project.

53 Greenhalgh and Winckler, *Governing China’s Population*, pp. 2, 4.

54 Murphy, “Turning peasants into modern Chinese citizens,” p. 19.