

## *Young Women's Fertility Intentions and the Emerging Bilateral Family System under China's Two-Child Family Planning Policy\**

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### *Abstract*

China's total fertility rate (TFR) has been below replacement level since the 1990s and below 1.5 since the 2000s. To address the issue of low fertility and rapid aging, the Chinese government replaced the strict one-child family planning policy with the selective two-child family planning policy in 2013 and then the comprehensive two-child family planning policy in 2015. However, a strong baby boom did not ensue, and births hit a record low in 2018. It is thus vital to understand fertility motivation among younger generations of women. Collecting

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qualitative data in a small city in the Yangtze Delta, we found that the high costs of current practices of child raising and education are prominent factors in women's mind-sets, and that bilateral family support, including but not limited to help with finances and care, is the cornerstone of this expensive, modern child raising model. A complex, bilateral family model has gradually grown out of the patriarchal system. Grandparents on both sides collaborate with the mother at different times of the day and in different stages of children's development. A familial relay race of child care reduces the mother's work-family conflicts. The sustainability of mosaic familism, the gendered intergenerational collaboration following bilateral family lines, is questionable, particularly when raising children comes into conflict with caring for the elderly. We suggest that future policies pay sufficient attention to the needs of women who are embedded in the bilateral extended family.

Three years after China's comprehensive two-child family planning policy, scholars, policy makers, and lay people are curious about the policy effects and future trend of fertility, considering that long-term below-replacement-level fertility and rapid aging are occurring at the same time in China. Figures from the National Statistics Bureau are not exciting. More babies were born in both 2016 and 2017 than in any of the previous five years. However, in 2017, slightly more than half of the births were second births. Moreover, in 2018, newborns slid by about five million compared to the previous two years and hit a record low. This implies a relatively gloomy picture of the future fertility trajectory. So what are the motivations of women of different generations regarding having a second baby, especially younger women who were born in 1980s and 1990s?

Even during the strict one-child family planning policy era, rural areas and regions influenced by more pro-fertility traditions already had higher fertility levels than other places.<sup>1</sup> And during the policy relaxation era, it is also these areas that have witnessed a higher fertility increase. But these revivals are not yet sufficient to lead China's total fertility rate (TFR) above the replacement level. Further, the fertility situation is exactly the opposite in big cities, such as Shanghai and Beijing. So what about small cities that have had a strict one-child family planning policy for a long time? Do these areas have potential to help boost China's TFR in the future?

During China's transition to a market economy, the old *danwei* (單位) system has been discontinued and public and private spheres have