CHAPTER 2

Provincial Disparities in Changes in Fertility and Related Implications

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China has witnessed rapid changes in fertility since the 1970s. The national total fertility rate (TFR) declined from around 6 in the early 1970s to below-replacement levels by the mid-1990s. Two factors—strict birth control policies and rapid socioeconomic development—have been suggested as the predominant forces driving fertility decline in China. Since its implementation in the 1970s, birth control policy in China has proven to be the most successful family-planning policy in the world. Meanwhile, along with urbanization and modernization, China’s nearly four decades of rapid social and economic growth has contributed significantly to socio-cultural changes in marital and reproductive customs and practices. Couples in younger generations increasingly prefer to have smaller families.

Nevertheless, China is a highly heterogeneous society, and substantial fertility differences persist at regional levels in China both historically and at present. According to the 2000 Census, the TFR at provincial level in 2000 ranges from 0.67 (in Beijing) to 2.19 (in Guizhou) (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2003). This variation is partly attributable to the significant regional disparities in culture, socioeconomic development, and institutional arrangements (Cai, 2010; Chen, 2005; Chen, et al. 2010; Li, 2004; Zheng & Wu, 2005). For instance, provinces in China differ substantially in their detailed fertility regulations and the implementation of policy, even though these institutional arrangements are all included under the umbrella term of “family planning programs.” As such, in order to better understand historical and contemporary factors affecting China’s changing fertility rates, it is necessary to systematically investigate regional differences in fertility transition. This study uses published data on provincial fertility and existing socioeconomic statistics, specifically the provincial-level socioeconomic statistics and fertility rates from 1975 to 2000, to examine the process of fertility changes and to explore related socio-demographic impacts. The fertility rates are indirect estimates based on the period parity progression ratios, with data from the 1990 and 2000 Censuses (National Bureau of Statistics of China & East-West Center, 2007). The indirect fertility estimates are employed in order to remove the influence of short-term
fluctuations from overall period fertility rates, and make it possible to reflect genuine trends of over-time fertility decline more closely. By examining provincial fertility transition trajectories, this paper also investigates the contribution of different driving forces in bringing down fertility and its dynamics over time. Finally, the study explores important socio-demographic impacts resulting from different fertility transition processes.

1 An Overview of Changes in Provincial Fertility

The time series data of provincial TFRs show that provinces in China have been quite different in their onset timing and the progression of fertility changes, despite the fact that significant declines in fertility rates have been observed from the early 1970s at the national level. Big municipalities and more developed provinces started fertility decline earliest. Figure 2.1 displays the distribution of provinces as indicated by TFRs in 1975 and 1990. In the mid-1970s, Beijing and Shanghai were the only two areas which had already achieved below-replacement fertility rates. The TFRs in other relatively developed areas, such as Tianjin, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Shandong, Hebei, Liaoning, and Jilin, are around 3 in 1975. These provincial units are second only to Beijing and Shanghai for lowest fertility rates. By 1990, most of these provinces had reached a below-replacement fertility rate, and some of them reach a very low fertility. For instance, provinces such as Liaoning and Zhejiang have reached a TFR below 1.5, similar to the three municipalities, Beijing, Shanghai and Tianjin.

Table 2.1 presents the order by which all provinces achieved a replacement-level or lower fertility. As mentioned above, Shanghai and Beijing achieved a below replacement fertility before 1975, and they rank the first two (provincial units) throughout the country in completing fertility transition. Following these two municipalities, relatively more developed and urbanized areas achieved a replacement fertility rate no later than early 1980s, despite the fact that these provincial units employed quite different fertility regulations. For instance, according to the birth control policy, rural couples in Liaoning, Jilin, Heilongjiang, and Zhejiang are allowed to have a second birth if their first child is female, which is to say, rural areas in these provinces apply “one-and-a-half-birth” policies. In contrast, the other two provincial units of the same tier, Tianjin and Jiangsu, apply a strict one-child policy. In light of these policy differences, the temporal coincidence of fertility transition in these relatively developed areas suggests that socioeconomic factors have played a significant role in driving fertility transition net of, and possibly independent of, the strict birth control policy even in early stages of national fertility transition.