CHAPTER 3

Intergenerational Effects on Fertility and Intended Family Size: Implications for Future Fertility Change in China

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1 Background

China's fertility rate has been below replacement level since the early 1990s, and China entered the list of low-fertility countries in the 21st century. The fertility transition of over three decades in China has been a result of the combined effect of family planning programs, birth policy, and socioeconomic development. While China's birth policy largely changed childbearing behavior nationwide, the sustained and rapid social development and economic growth since China's reform and opening-up (改革开放) facilitated the diffusion of new concepts of marriage and childbearing, and changed both macro- and micro-circumstances of family decision making regarding childbearing.

The demographic consequences of long-lasting low fertility will be advanced population aging, a reduction in population size after reaching a peak, and negative growth momentum. Due to the ever-decreasing number of women of reproductive age, the amount of newborns will further decrease. Given the shrinking number of women who are able to reproduce, the number of newborns would not increase easily even if there were a rebound in fertility. There is a lack of awareness of possible challenges brought about by the demographic situation. Although there have been quite a few researches into and discussion on fertility change in China in the last decade as well as on possible causes, different judgments and estimates still vary; some even believe that the low fertility rate will be difficult to maintain. A careful review and discussion of the historical trajectory of fertility rates in China would help in the evaluation of stable low fertility rates and their future trend.

Studies have found different intergenerational effects on childbearing preferences and behavior. For example, a regional study in Europe found that older generations' childbearing behavior has a strong influence on the fertility preferences of young people aged 20–39 (Testa and Grilli, 2006); another study found that individuals' childbearing preference is influenced by the childbearing behavior and preferences of family members. The mother's influence is
most significant, with the next most important influence coming from siblings (Axinn, Clarkberg, and Thornton, 1994), nevertheless, this influence may be altered by different events in one’s life course (Régnier-Loilier, 2006). A study utilizing the Jiangsu Fertility Intention and Behavior Study (JFIBS) data found that parental preferences, if women are willing to seriously consider older generations’ advice, can play a role in raising fertility intentions (Chen, et al., 2011).

This paper intends to analyze the intergenerational effect on fertility and intended family size in China from the macro- and micro-level, to infer fertility changes in China over the next decade, and to discuss the policy implication. Provincial fertility since 1975 will be used to analyze fertility level correlation of different time periods in different regions, and the JFIBS 2010 follow-up survey will be used to analyze intergenerational effects on fertility intentions at the individual level.

2 A Study on Provincial Fertility over Time

The national average fertility level in China has decreased since the 1970s, but with different paces in different regions. Three municipalities (Beijing, Shanghai, and Tianjin), three east coastal provinces (Jiangsu, Zhejiang, and Shandong), and three north-eastern provinces (Liaoning, Jilin, and Heilongjiang) were the first to drop to below-replacement level, followed by Sichuan and Inner-Mongolia. Provincial fertility converged in the 21st century, and variances continue to decline (Chen, 2011). The narrowed provincial gaps in fertility are largely due to the reductions in developmental differences among provinces. A multi-factor analysis on Provincial total fertility rates in 2000 found that, in addition to birth control policies, the GDP per capita and Human Development Index (HDI) are significant variables related to total fertility, and the effect of birth control policies is largely reduced after controlling for development variables (Chen, et al., 2009).

Assuming a generational interval of 25–30 years, a correlation test between two sets of fertility rates at two time points is able to represent the intergenerational relationship of provincial fertility. Figure 3.1 shows the relationship between 1975 and 2000 provincial fertility rates, using period parity progression total fertility rates estimated from 1990 and 2000 population census data by the National Bureau of Statistics of China and the East-West Center (2007). The two groups show a positive linear correlation, with a Pearson correlate of 0.78. The figure also shows that as a result of simple linear regression, the provincial fertility of 1975 explains 60% of the variation in 2000. Furthermore, the fertilities of almost all provinces were steadily decreasing during this period.