Re-examination of the Yicheng Two-Child Program

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ABSTRACT

In discussing the main forces shaping rapid fertility decline, current studies take the Yicheng two-child program as an example showing that the role of the birth-control policy in China’s fall in fertility is not as strong as commonly thought. Based on a close examination of documentary evidence, this paper demonstrates that the Yicheng program is not vastly different from the national population-control effort with regard to the timing of marriage, the number of children and the childbearing interval. We argue that in Yicheng the two-child policy has done more to effect a demographic transition to low fertility than has socioeconomic development.

China’s demographic transition features a substantial drop in fertility, from 5.8 children per woman in 1950 to the very low level of 1.18 in 2010. This fall occurred within a compressed time period relative to many other countries in the world.1 The scale, scope and rapidity of fertility reduction are unprecedented in China’s long history. Scholars and concerned observers debate the extent to which this decline is a result of the birth control policy, as opposed to socioeconomic factors. Based on the experience of other countries, some analysts expect that fertility in China would continue to fall without the coercive birth-control policy.2 Given these considerations, the call for change (easing or eliminating fertility

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restrictions) is now at an all-time high. China has in fact recently announced that it will amend the current policy by allowing couples to have a second child provided one of the parents is an only child, although it is not clear exactly how, when or where this change will be implemented.

In recent years, the case of Yicheng (翼城) County in North China’s Shanxi Province (see Figure 1 for its location) has been used as an example to argue that China’s current low fertility is not simply a result of the birth-control policy and its various permutations. Yicheng is one of the locales where a state-designated experimental program allowing a two-child option for almost all couples has been in place for about 30 years. Both international and Chinese state journalists have been interpreting the Yicheng program as a novel, odd exception to the country’s draconian one-child policy. They also report the increasing prevalence of one-child families under the universal two-child policy, suggesting that changing socioeconomic conditions have provided couples with a strong incentive to limit their fertility.

Zhongguoren shi zenmu shaosheng de” (Why Are There 400 Million Fewer Births in China?), Zhongguo gaige (China Reform), No. 7 (1 July 2010), pp. 85–88.


6. For example, in a story about Yicheng LaFraniere mentioned a couple, Wang Hong and her husband, Zhang Jingfeng, who “are among those who were granted a second chance—and decided against it”. The report heralded the case as showing that “people don’t think they have the money for two children” (from an interview with a preschool director in Yicheng). See Sharon LaFraniere, “As China Ages, Birthrate Policy May Prove Difficult to Reverse”. Similar stories were carried in the China Daily. Duan and Juan reported that in Yicheng “8,430 households (about 12.5 per cent of those eligible) have waived their rights to a second chance.
Many Chinese academics assert that the birth control policy has had little impact on fertility rates. Such scholars see Yicheng as evidence that the birth control policy has not been effective. They argue that fertility is mainly shaped by socioeconomic considerations, not by state intervention.

Despite growing interest in the Yicheng experience, the program’s rationale, detailed policy design and demographic corollaries have not been seriously examined. Put another way, many note the story, but they provide few details on how the program developed, was put into practice, and affected population growth. Without having looked closely at the program’s nuances, current discussion pre-


Figure 1. The location of Yicheng County, Shanxi Province

Note: Yicheng County is located in southeastern part of Linfen Prefecture, Shanxi Province.
sumes Yicheng to be a permissive exception to the national birth-control order, a place where couples have much room for reproductive maneuver. Making this assumption allows the careless argument that much of China's decline in fertility can be traced to socioeconomic development, rather than to the birth-control policy.

The Yicheng program is a formalized set of government regulations and administrative means of altering procreative choices to achieve designated demographic objectives. Here we examine several essential, distinct but consequentially interconnected aspects of the Yicheng program: its mentality, rationale and detailed policy design, and the extent to which it contributes to achieving the demographic objectives.

Like other birth policy programs in China, the Yicheng program employs a variety of instruments that seek to shape personal behaviors according to specific visions or norms. It imposes a bureaucratic solution to perceived development challenges that define the country's future. From age at marriage to the timing of births, from the number of children to the size of the family, virtually every domain of reproduction is heavily regulated and bureaucratically managed by the norms and dictates of government policy. An understanding of the rationales, formation, operation and effects of this program demonstrates that it reflects only a different way for an authoritarian system to coercively enforce a restrictive birth policy, rather than being an attempt at promoting a more permissive policy in Yicheng than is found elsewhere.

For analytical purposes, the impacts of the program are captured by resorting to diverse sources of information, ranging from government-published data to feedback from interviews. Our analysis is based on close reading of documentary evidence and information from field research. Documentary evidence includes the archives of internal policy documents and published and unpublished local statistics. Field study and on-site interviews with key informants, notably past and present program-makers and enforcers at the local level, were conducted from 2010 to 2012.

THE NATIONAL CONTEXT OF THE YICHENG PROGRAM

Over the past six decades, the Chinese state has transformed a voluntary family planning program into a mandatory birth-control policy. Beginning in 1953, the early family planning initiative featured broadening access to contraceptive meth-
The first national family planning conference, held in March 1958, passed a resolution encouraging birth limitation among Han Chinese. However, it was not until the 1970s that policies were put in place. The policy of “later, longer and fewer,” which was piloted first in Shanghai Municipality in 1971, was promulgated nationwide in 1975 to encourage late marriage, a long interval between births and fewer children. Nonetheless, the state never extended its birth-limitation efforts to rural areas and set no numerical demographic targets at the national level until the late 1970s.

Beginning in the late 1970s, there was a remarkable shift in the state’s stance on family planning, away from its previously non-compulsory nature. This shift included the demand for the prevalence of one-child families; drastic control of population growth by setting up numerical targets; stipulation of citizens’ commitment to birth control in the newly amended constitution; and strengthening of birth-control implementation by establishing family planning bureaus in all localities down to the township level. The grand target delimiting a population total within 1.2 billion by the end of the 20th century was promulgated. Limiting each couple to only one child (known as the one-child policy) was considered an important measure to achieve that target. The introduction of the numerical demographic target was an official response to China’s ambitious stride toward the four modernizations (in industry, agriculture, science and technology, and national defense) and, more specifically, toward the aim to quadruple per capita GNP between 1980 and 2000. Effective since 1982, a birth-control norm for all

9. The interpretation of “later, longer and fewer” varied in different years and in different localities. In general, later marriage was interpreted as marriage at over age 25 for men and 23 for women. Longer spacing meant at least three years between first and subsequent children. The notion of fewer children referred to a limit of two children per couple. See State Council, Pizhuan guanyu quanguo weisheng gongzuo huiyi de baogao (A Circular on Approving the Minutes of the National Conference on Health Issues), issued in August 1975.

10. Assessment of the validity of the 1.2 billion population figure as a national demographic target is beyond the scope of this paper. We accept it as given and use it as the basis for our discussion. Liang and Greenhalgh, respectively, assembled information with painstaking detail on how the target number of 1.2 billion was worked out and how the one-child policy was associated with this target. See Liang Zhongtang, “Yitaifuhua chansheng de shidai beijing yanjiu” (An Analysis of the Contextual Background of the “One-Child” Policy), in Liang Zhongtang, Lun gaibian he gaige jihuashengyu zhidu (On Changing and Reforming the Family Planning System) (unpublished personal memo, 2007), pp. 105–212; Susan Greenhalgh, Just One Child, pp. 86–168.

11. In extenuating circumstances couples would be allowed to have a second child. See the speech of Chen Muhua, then Vice Premier and head of the State Council’s Leading Group for Birth Planning, at the conference of directors of regional birth-planning bureaus held on 18 December 1979, cited in Peng Peiyun (ed.), Zhongguo jihuashengyu quanshu (An Almanac of China’s Family Planning) (Beijing: Zhongguo Renkou Chubanshe, 1997), p. 160.


Zhongguo Renkou Chubanshe, 2007). We therefore provide only a brief review of major developments, omitting the finer details.
citizens was embraced in the constitution as a “basic state policy” (jiben guoce 基本国策). For the first time in history, all province-level regions expedited the task of legitimizing their birth-control rules. Accordingly, the couple-specific fertility limit was introduced in every locality. Economic and administrative measures were taken in favor of one-child couples and against those violating birth-control rules, initiating an historically unprecedented period of government control over procreation.

Admittedly, the one-child policy was difficult to enforce nationwide, particularly in rural areas, given that it created conflicts between state and individuals with regard to procreation. While much official effort went into arguing that uncontrollable population growth hampered the country’s modernization process, patrilineal values emphasize the importance of offspring for both family survival and prosperity, and the necessity of having at least one son. The one-child policy threatened the well-being of rural families by reducing household labor power, leaving elderly parents dependent on the survival and prosperity of a single child; it thus carried the political risk of losing support from the peasantry who bore most of the policy costs. Not surprisingly, resistance to the one-child policy at the grass-roots level has been strong since its implementation. Many births have occurred outside the one-child limit, and sex selection through prenatal ultrasound screening has been one of many forms of resistance.

Recognizing the disjunction between the one-child policy and village realities, scholars within and outside China voiced concerns about its enforceability, and suggested alternative methods of meeting national demographic targets. Liang Zhongtang (梁中堂) was one outspoken critic of the policy and, perhaps, the most active advocate for an alternative policy. He argued that seeing one child for all couples as the only way to meet the population-control target was not justified on sound scientific grounds. According to Liang, a two-child policy, if accompanied by certain restrictions, could be as effective as a one-child policy in achieving the target, but with fewer detrimental consequences for the Party, society and the economy.

Liang’s two-child proposal resembled the key features of the “later, longer and fewer” policy that had guided birth limitation during the early 1970s. The proposal demanded relatively late ages for marriage and the conception of the first child, as well as a significant gap between first and second children, with the

following specifics: (1) at least 30 per cent of couples should have one child only; (2) urban women should marry at 25 on average, and space births by eight years; (3) rural women should marry at 23, and wait ten years before having their second child; (4) third or higher-order births were not allowed. 16 Liang presented two scenarios which had slightly different assumptions on mortality and the proportion of one-child couples. Both scenarios envisaged that the total population by the year 2000 would not exceed the upper limit of 1.2 billion. Recognizing that ten-year-spacing would be extremely hard to enforce in rural China, several other two-child scenarios were suggested in his subsequent proposals, with modifications of the restrictions on age at marriage and birth spacing.

Though Liang’s conditional two-child proposal drew the attention of the central leadership, it was never made a formal policy as Liang had hoped. 17 The workability and effectiveness of the proposal was also discredited by other elite academics. 18

Those frustrating experiences did not discourage Liang from pursuing his proposal, which he believed to be a better choice for China’s population policy. To Liang, his policy initiatives would incur lower political and human costs in the attainment of the same population-control target. Liang solicited permission to implement his “two-child” alternative in one or two counties on a trial basis. 19 Liang was allowed to use Yicheng County as a pilot site. 20 Having received

16. Liang Zhongtang, “Dui woguo jinhou jishinian renkou fazhan zhanlüe de jidian yijian”.
17. According to Liang, Hu Yaobang (then CCP General Secretary) and Zhao Ziyang (then Premier), respectively, had given written comments on a proposal, which was essentially based on Liang’s study, from Ma Yingtong and Zhang Xiaotong (senior researchers of the State Family Planning Commission). Both Hu and Zhao called on the State Family Planning Commission to undertake further study of the proposal. Several senior officials of the State Family Planning Commission added comments to Liang’s several reports on “two-child” alternatives, including Wang Wei (then Minister of the Commission) and Li Honggui (then Director of the Department of Policy Planning of the Commission). Interview with Liang Zhongtang (September 2009).
19. The considerations of site selection included applicability, data availability, institutional environment and accessibility. First, the county should resemble general features of rural China, making its experience applicable to other rural areas. Second, the county should have relatively complete and accurate demographic records allowing in-depth analysis of population change. Third, the local government should have both the enthusiasm and the capacity to enforce the policy initiative. Last, the county should be accessed by good transportation so that frequent, effective field visits and supervision by upper-level family planning officials were possible. Interview with Liang Zhongtang (June 2010).
20. Two documents of the two-child proposal in the name of Shanxi Provincial Family Planning Commission were submitted for approval to the Shanxi Provincial Authority and the State Family Planning Commission (now renamed the National Health and Family Planning Commission of the PRC), respectively. See Shanxi Provincial Family Planning Committee, Guanyu zhubei zai Yicheng xian jinxing wanbun wayu jia jiange shengyu shidian de qingshi baogao (A Requesting Report on the Implementation of the “Late Marriage,
permission from the center, the Yicheng government launched its two-child pro-
gram in August 1985 by issuing detailed policy guidelines. The program has now
been in place for 28 years.

The Yicheng program was not an exception to China’s extraordinary state
control over procreation. It was an alternative way of implementing the policy
which widened slightly the diverse ways in which the policy has been imple-
mented at the local level. The objective and practice of the program are fully
consistent with those of a massive act of state intervention in population size
nationwide.

THE YICHENG PROGRAM AND POPULATION CONTROL

The Yicheng two-child program, codified in two policy documents,21 consists of
the following measures:

• All couples are encouraged to delay marriage, to postpone parenthood and to have
fewer children;
• The “one-child-per-couple” norm should be enthusiastically promoted;
• Rural one-child families will be offered economic incentives (financial rewards and
preferential access to education and health services);
• State employees and urban couples are limited to one child only, except under spe-
cial circumstances;
• Rural couples who fulfill the following requirements can have two children:

(1) they should marry three years later than the minimum age at marriage as
specified in The Law of Marriage (men at 25 or older and women at 23);
(2) the wife should have a first birth at 24 and have a second birth at 30 (the
requirement of birth spacing was adjusted from 6 years to 4 years in 2007);
(3) the wife should apply for a birth permit for her second birth and wait for a
quota;
(4) couples should take effective contraception after a first birth and must ac-
cept sterilization after a second birth;

21. The Meeting of the Expanded Members of Standing Panel of the County Party Committee, Yicheng
xian jihuashengyu shixing guiding (Provisional Regulations of Family Planning in Yicheng County), issued
on 23 July 1985; Yicheng Family Planning Committee, Yicheng xian jihuashengyu shixing guiding shishi size
(Implementation Details for the Provisional Regulations of Family Planning in Yicheng County), issued on
Births beyond the second child are prohibited without any exception;
Offenders are subject to financial and disciplinary sanctions.

The above regulations have remained intact since their first promulgation, except for the definition of special circumstances, the level of financial reward for couples with only one child, and the penalty for those violating the regulations.\footnote{22}

The Yicheng program does contrast with the one-child policy in one major way: rural couples are given a chance to produce two births. The program meets some couples’ felt need for more than one child (particularly for a son) and indicates less control over familial procreative choices.\footnote{23} It attempts to avoid some of the social detriments relating to the one-child policy. Allowing a second child could be expected to alleviate the sex ratio imbalance, an unintended consequence of the coercively enforced one-child rule. However, some observers mistakenly depict Yicheng as a deviant place which has implemented a relaxed, innovative policy inconsistent with the national policy for population control.\footnote{24}

Such a perspective is incorrect. First and foremost, the Yicheng program is centered on population control. The intention of the two-child alternative is to make the restrictive birth policy more socially acceptable while at the same time achieving the locality’s population target, which was set at 300,000 by the year 2000 in accordance with the national planned numerical total of 1.2 billion.\footnote{25} In the conference to launch the program, the county’s Party secretary emphasized...
that the two-child alternative was well in line with the principle that the enforcement of family planning was a national priority. It was highly compatible with the national population-control target. It was also consistent with the national practice that encouraged one-child families, controlled two-child families and prohibited high-order births. Based on Liang’s prognosis for the county’s timing-adjusted population growth, Yicheng would be able to meet its population-control target by allowing each couple to have two children under the restrictions noted earlier. This rationale was repeatedly reiterated in the county leadership’s justification of the program.

In reality, the Yicheng program offers couples very little room for reproductive maneuver. At both the village and household levels, it is provided with restrictive requirements to ensure that the population-control target is achieved. A certain percentage of one-child families must be secured and the presence of families with three or more children is not tolerated. Permission for a second child is granted only to couples with rural household registrations. A second birth is further subject to both eligibility and quota controls. The former defines the circumstances under which couples are entitled to two births, whereas the latter rations the opportunity available for eligible couples to have a second birth. In addition to requirements of late marriage and extended birth spacing, a couple’s eligibility for the second birth also includes that they promise to undergo sterilization after delivering the second child. Furthermore, the program pertains only to villages that have fulfilled all birth-control targets concerning compliance with birth planning, the organization of propaganda work and the level of contraceptive service provision. The program is also said to be suspended in villages where couples have more than two children. With elements of delayed childbearing plus spac-

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28. Liang Zhongtang, "Explanations of the "Late Marriage, Late Childbearing Plus Spacing" Birth Experiment", a speech at the plenary meeting of cadres on making arrangements for the implementation of the "late marriage and late childbearing plus spacing" birth experiment in Yicheng County, given on 25 July 1985; Cheng Fagui, "Summarizing Experience, Perfecting Regulations, and Making Efforts for the Implementation of the "Late Marriage, Late Childbearing Plus Spacing" Experiment", a speech at the workshop for training family planning staff, on 25 July 1985; Cheng Fagui, "Working Hard, Exploring Boldly and Taking the Chinese Route for Family Planning", a summary speech at the workshop for training family planning staff, on 28 July 1985.

29. The existence of unauthorized over-quota births shown in Table 3 indicates that enforcement of this requirement was lax. When asked to explain this, our interviewees cited public pressure. It was hard for
ing and with other prohibitive requirements, the Yicheng program could be viewed as a more stringent version of China’s “later, longer and fewer” birth-control approach adopted in the 1970s. It controls the entire procreative process from the timing of marriage to birth interval to the number of children. Current reports on the Yicheng program tend to emphasize its lenient aspect (allowing two births) but to overlook its inherent punitive and coercive elements.

Material incentives are accompanied by economic and disciplinary sanctions to ensure enforcement. However, financial rewards are modest, while monetary and administrative penalties are severe. Currently, a 50-yuan bonus is offered to a woman who marries after 23 years of age and 100 yuan to a woman who meets the requirement of late birth. For a one-child parent, a monthly bonus of 10 yuan is paid until the child reaches the age of 16. A one-time reward for a couple who are eligible for a second-child permit but commit to forgo eligibility is a maximum of 3,000 yuan. Elderly peasants with a single child or without offspring are entitled to an annual subsidy of 600 yuan. These rewards are rather small in relation to rising per capita living standards, and provide individuals with only a small incentive to adhere to birth-control regulations.

Conversely, large fines (called social compensation fees or SCF since 2002) are levied on policy violators. Table 1 shows selected economic sanctions for Shanxi Province, which are currently in effect in Yicheng. In general, the size of a fine can vary widely from a one-off charge of a few thousand yuan to multiples of the annual income of both spouses, depending on the case and the discretion of policy enforcers under the national framework for SCF regulations. Penalty fees keep pace with rising income over time. While one can always question the effectiveness of monetary penalties in deterring “unlawful” procreative behaviors, one cannot regard the amount as a small price to pay. Disciplinary measures and administrative punishments are enforced in addition to economic sanctions. Policy violators risk their careers by expulsion from the Party (membership of which is an unwritten prerequisite but a practical concern for certain jobs), demotion or job loss, and disqualification for the position of public servant for specified time periods.

In addition, Yicheng was not the only place which allowed two births under certain circumstances. Recognizing that it would be difficult to enforce the villagers to accept that they were obliged to take any responsibility for the repercussions caused by others’ “unlawful” behaviors.

30. The size of the “social compensation fee” reflects the conditions, procedures and standards of charge stipulated in Shehui fuyangfei zhengshou guanli banfa (Provisions for Levying and Managing the Social Compensation Fee), issued by the State Council on 2 August 2002. The exact magnitude of the SCF may differ from one locality to another, but the rules and formulas used to calculate it are essentially identical, if viewed nationally.

31. The time period specified for this sanction is 7 years for any violation of the second-birth rule and 14 years for cases of unauthorized third births.
the one-child policy in rural areas and minimizing the risk from over-quota births to achievement of the national population-control target, in 1982 the central government allowed rural couples to have a second child under certain conditions, while the one-child policy continued for urban couples. The conditional two-child regulations involved a combination of strictness and flexibility, and

Table 1. Details on collection of the Social Compensation Fee (SCF), Shanxi Province

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of offence</th>
<th>Standard charge</th>
<th>Calculation formula</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A second child who is legitimate but unauthorized</td>
<td>30% of both parents' disposable income from the previous year</td>
<td>One-time payment = ((A+B) \times 30%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An unpermitted second child</td>
<td>From twice up to six times the amount of both parents' income from the previous year</td>
<td>Minimum payment = ((A+B) \times 2), but not less than 7,000 yuan</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Maximum payment = ((A+B) \times 6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An unpermitted third child</td>
<td>From six times up to 18 times the amount of both parents' disposable income from the previous year</td>
<td>Minimum payment = ((A+B) \times 6), but not less than 30,000 yuan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Maximum payment = ((A+B) \times 18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A child born out of wedlock</td>
<td>6–8% of both parents' disposable income from the previous year</td>
<td>One-time minimum payment = ((A+B) \times 6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>One-time maximum payment = ((A+B) \times 8%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Information here is limited to cases of unauthorized births. This refers to a child who is "legal" under birth regulations but for whom there has been no application for an appropriate certificate. In the case that the amount of a parent's annual disposable income is uncertain, the local average per capita annual income in the previous year will be applied to determine the size of the fee. A and B are the father's and mother's disposable incomes from the previous year, respectively.

Source: Shanxi Provincial Government, Shanxi sheng shehua fuyangfei guanli banfa (Shanxi Provincial Stipulations for the Management of Social Compensation Fees), issued 19 August 2003 and effective 1 September 2003; Shanxi People's Congress, Shanxi sheng renkou he jihua shengyu tiaoli (Shanxi Provincial Regulations for Population and Family Planning), revised 28 November 2008 and effective 1 June 2009.
signaled the inception of “opening a small hole but closing a big one” in regulating the number of new births in the countryside (allowing certain rural couples to have a second child in order to reduce the number of unauthorized second or third births). The specific conditions were defined differently from one locale to another, but were originally set so prohibitively high that only 10 per cent of rural couples with one child would be eligible. Two years later, in the general guidelines set by the Party Central Committee’s Document No. 7/1984, all province-level units stipulated their conditions for permitting a second birth. Various specifics aside, those second-birth regulations can be categorized into three groups: one focusing on rural couples who had borne special hardships, one setting conditions relevant to about half of rural one-child families (those with a daughter), and one allowing all rural couples to have two children (regardless of the sex of the first child) under fixed requirements and in a planned manner. The multiple forms of two-child regulations have created differences in the total fertility rate of the policy ideal (the so-called policy TFR) across the country. Various two-child regulations were centrally endorsed in 45 county-level units on a trial basis in 1985. The list of trial counties was reduced to include only 13 localities in 1988 (Figure 2). Based upon information on trial counties released to the public, which for the time being is only available in excerpted and paraphrased form, it is hard to ascertain how the list was decided and to what extent changes in it at that time signaled a loosening or tightening of the one-child policy, as the relevant provinces were granted discretionary power to decide their own two-child regulations in those units. However, one can be certain that con-

34. Special hardship cases included: (1) either the husband or the wife was from a family which had had only one child for two or three generations; (2) only one child in a multiple-child family was fecund and the others were infertile; (3) a man was married uxorilocally to a woman who was an only child; (4) either the husband or wife was an only child; (5) an only child had married another only child; (6) both the husband and the wife were returned overseas Chinese; (7) a first child of the couple was disabled and unable to work; and (8) families living in remote mountainous areas or coastal fishing areas and suffering from extreme economic hardship. See The General Office of the Party Central Committee and the General Office of State Council, Zhuanfa quanguo jihuashengyu gongzuo jiyao (A Circular on the Summary Reports of National Family Planning Works), issued on 20 October 1982. Since 1982, special hardships have been defined variously across provinces. See Tian Xueyuan, Zhongguo renkou zhengce liushinian (Sixty Years of China’s Population Policy) (Beijing: Shehui Kexue Wenzian Chubanshe, 2009).
35. Li Honggui, “Jihuashengyu shiye”; Tian Xueyuan, Zhongguo renkou zhengce liushinian.
36. The policy TFR refers to the fertility level permitted by the birth regulations and can be estimated by combining all categories of officially permitted births per couple and by taking into account the proportion of couples in each category. Estimates of the policy TFR for prefecture-level units are available in Gu Baochang, Wang Feng, Guo Zhiquan and Zhang Erli, “China’s Local and National Fertility Policies at the End of the Twentieth Century”, Population and Development Review, Vol. 33, No. 1 (2007), pp. 129–47.
37. While many were removed from the list, four new counties were included. See State Family Planning Commission, Guanyu tiaozheng jihuashengyu gongzuo shidian de tongzhi (A Circular on Adjusting the List of the Units for the Family Planning Experiment), Document No. 31/1988, issued on 20 May 1988.
ditional second-child regulations for rural couples existed nationwide from 1982 onward. Currently, about 43 per cent of Chinese couples are qualified to have two children. Yicheng was one of many trials that localized the two-child policy on their own, as a practical alternative to the one-child policy.

Summing up, the intention of population control in China is enshrined in its national policy. Restrictive but diverse local fertility regulations are set to achieve the national population-control target. It appears that the Yicheng program, as a matter of practical enforcement, is a tacit, pragmatic alternative approach to implement the state’s plans for childbearing. Yicheng’s birth regulations retain highly coercive and intrusive elements in legislation and practice. The issue is not

whether the local government permits couples a second child, but rather whether the official limit on population size within the relevant period is maintained in order to meet the country’s population target. As elsewhere in China, by tacitly manipulating fertility through not only the number of children but also the timing of marriage and the period between births, the local government is able to orchestrate population growth in accordance with the national target. In what follows, we assess the effect of the program on the demographic dynamics, and the role of the two-child policy in fertility reduction.

THE DEMOGRAPHIC IMPACT OF THE YICHENG PROGRAM

The Yicheng program has met its population targets. Figure 3 shows a fertility trend measured by crude birth rates. The population size by the year 2000 was 303,000. After 2000, the annual population growth rate was also in line with the intended levels decided by the provincial family planning authority. This success may be attributed to the program’s effects of delayed marriage and childbearing.

A report notes that, in Yicheng, ages at first marriage and first childbearing ranged from 23.09 to 23.44 and 24.58 to 25.01, respectively, in the years when data were available. Such levels were more or less equivalent to the thresholds required by the program. The mean age at second childbearing was 27.42, younger than the target stipulated by the two-child policy. Contrary to the “normal” sex ratio maintained by the media reports, the sex ratio at birth in fact rose from 105.0 to 112.3 during the duration of the policy. While the current understanding underscores the role of the one-child policy in producing male-heavy infant sex ratios, it seems that the ratios do not necessarily improve with enforcement of the two-child policy.

Figure 3 shows that the onset of birth reduction happened before both the one-child policy and significant socioeconomic growth. The downward trend continued despite underdevelopment. Birth rates around the years of the one-child policy (1981–85) were substantially lower than those of former peak periods (1958–64). The rates reversed by a certain degree in the early days of the

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40. Li Jianxin, “Shanxi Yicheng xian ‘wanhun wanyu jia jiange’ zhengce shishi xiaoguo ji sikao”.
42. This was indeed parallel to the national trend. The availability of contraceptives and the improvement of the rural medical system were regarded as necessary conditions for this decline.
43. When the birth rate began to drop in the mid-1960s, the county had very poor socioeconomic indicators. Ninety-six per cent of the population was rural and per-capita GDP was only 87 yuan (approximately US$13). As of 2010, the rural annual per capita disposable income was about 74 per cent of the national average (4,761 yuan).
program implementation (1986–91) and fluctuated within a certain range afterwards. Though it was one of the poorest counties in Shanxi Province, Yicheng achieved lower birth rates compared to the provincial average before the year 2000. The gap was even larger under the voluntary family planning program (1950s to mid-1970s). After some time when the two-child policy replaced the one-child policy, Yicheng attained higher-than-provincial-average birth rates. Seemingly, the birth-rate pattern in Yicheng suggests that very low-level socioeconomic development can plausibly create changes which alter the costs and benefits of childbearing. The pattern also implies that the program played a critical role in recent fertility transition, as the two-birth limit per couple may lead to slightly higher periodic birth rates than those allowed by the one-birth limit. Notwithstanding these initial observations, a satisfactory explanation needs to specify whether, over the years, the drop in birth rates was attributable mainly to the program’s effect on fertility behavior or whether it tracked with standard socioeconomic factors (such as the improvement of women’s education and the rising living standards) implicated in lower fertility in other parts of the world.

More precise measures of the fertility level provide reference to the effects of the program on household fertility intentions at the aggregate level. Table 2

---

44. A possible explanation for lower birth rates in Yicheng is that, statistically, reported birth rates in Figure 3 are somewhat crude measures of fertility and influenced, in part, by the effect of differences in the age–sex composition of the populations being compared. Unfortunately, data necessary for full evaluation of this matter are unavailable.

45. Survey research on fertility intention relies on subjective rather than factual questions to solicit opinions that infer agreement or disagreement with the ideal number of children in the hypothetical absence
presents various fertility rates that relate births only to the women at risk of having them, which allows closer scrutiny of change in couples’ desire for fertility. No matter how fertility was measured, a strong message drawn from those rates was that couples wanted at least two children, or even more. Under both the one-child policy (1981–85) and the two-child policy (1985–), both total fertility rates and sums of parity progression ratios stubbornly remained stable and stood above 2.0 (Columns II–III of Table 2). This indicates that the one-child policy and the two-child policy may produce similar effects on the level of fertility: couples tended to have two to three births, regardless of their status in matters such as education and income. Also, the fertility observed was higher than that required by the policy, which should always be less than 2.0 in any estimates. This was another example where fertility intention was stronger than was allowed by the local policy. It seemed that in many ways second births had not been successfully checked by the one-child policy. Under the two-child policy, almost all eligible couples had their second child.

Parity progression ratios further underlined the universality of two children. After the implementation of the two-child program, the proportion of women who proceeded to a first marriage and to bearing at least one child was more or less equal to the proportion of women with one child and going to have another child (Columns IV–V of Table 2). The percentage of women who progressed from a first to a second birth was higher after 1985, as a result of modification of the one-child policy. By contrast, the proportion of women with a second child who progressed to a third child started to decrease after 1985 (Column VII). This indicates that a change in birth rates under the program was caused mainly by the reduction of higher-order births, and second births had only very marginal impact on such change. Table 2 also shows that, though unauthorized over-quota births were suppressed, they did not reach the zero level demanded by the program.

It should be noted that the above observations draw on the data from a costly countywide fertility survey, which only covered the 1980s period. Regrettably,
because of financial constraints, no repeated studies have been carried out since then in this poor county to provide the necessary follow-up information that would permit us to update PPR measurements in Table 2. Despite this difficulty, the observations based on the data of the earlier period could be extrapolated to recent years, assuming that there are no vicissitudes in birth regulations in Yicheng, and that fertility behaviors are deeply rooted in traditional patrilineal ideology, the transformation of which lags far behind economic transformation.49

The degree of non-compliance with the two-child policy clearly reflects some resistance to the program’s rules for reproductive behaviors. Non-compliance contains many kinds of offences, including early marriage, first births before having

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**Table 2. Various measures of fertility, Yicheng County**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>TFR</th>
<th>PPR</th>
<th>0→1</th>
<th>1→2</th>
<th>2→3</th>
<th>3→4</th>
<th>4→5+</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I</td>
<td>II</td>
<td>III</td>
<td>IV</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>VI</td>
<td>VII</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>2.08</td>
<td>2.24</td>
<td>0.99</td>
<td>0.76</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>2.36</td>
<td>2.39</td>
<td>0.99</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>2.34</td>
<td>2.35</td>
<td>0.99</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>0.42</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983</td>
<td>2.15</td>
<td>2.20</td>
<td>0.99</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>2.32</td>
<td>2.37</td>
<td>0.99</td>
<td>0.90</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>2.02</td>
<td>2.25</td>
<td>0.99</td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>1.91</td>
<td>2.08</td>
<td>0.99</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>2.27</td>
<td>2.28</td>
<td>0.99</td>
<td>0.98</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>2.21</td>
<td>2.18</td>
<td>0.99</td>
<td>0.97</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>2.27</td>
<td>2.25</td>
<td>0.99</td>
<td>0.99</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>2.22</td>
<td>2.23</td>
<td>0.99</td>
<td>0.99</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>2.20</td>
<td>2.21</td>
<td>0.99</td>
<td>0.98</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Total Fertility Rate (TFR): Xie Kang and Zhang Hongchang, "Yicheng xian wanhun wanyu jia jiangle shengyu banfa de renkou kongzhi xiaoguo", p. 20; Parity progression ratio (PPR): Xie Kang, "Cong shiqi haici dijinbi de bianhua kan Yicheng xian shixing wanhun wanyu jia jiangle de shengyu banfa de renkou kongzhi xiaoguo", p. 47.

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was conducted in May 1992 and the second in n 1994. For survey details, see Xie Kang and Zhang Hongchang, "Yicheng xian wanhun wanyu jia jiangle shengyu banfa de renkou kongzhi xiaoguo", pp. 18–19. 49 This point has been repeatedly emphasized by local cadres during our interviews.
reached 24 years of age, early births in disregard of a spacing rule for second children, and unauthorized over-quota births. While it is often said that most Yicheng residents support the program, the details of birth regulations and the means employed to enforce them have often been deliberately resisted. Table 3 shows official data on the distribution of various offences. Understandably, skepticism about these statistics is common, given that official information is often disseminated for the purpose of concealing problems rather than for factual documentation. Nevertheless, we are confident about the general validity of the figures in the Table that can help to gauge the degree of public acceptance or rejection of the program, because the figures are intended for use in overseeing the enforcement of the program rather than in hiding factual information. The offence statistics reveal a considerable discordance between the demands of the program and the expressed needs of individuals with regard to procreative matters, such as an ideal age for first marriage, the right time to give birth and the size of a proper family. While the cases of over-quota birth have very recently become trivial, this does not necessarily negate the importance of policy effect. In comparison with the penalties for other types of infringement such as not meeting requirements for the minimum age of giving birth and the limit of birth interval, the punishment for having three or more children is much more severe (see Table 1). One factor affecting these data is that couples must undergo sterilization after the second birth, as one requirement of the two-child policy.

The experience of other Asian countries suggests the intrinsic and intricate interaction of family planning programs with the effect of socioeconomic development on fertility decline. We use multivariate time-series regression analysis to compare the role of the birth-control policy and the effect of socioeconomic development on explaining declining fertility. Fertility transition in Yicheng over the long period (1949 to 2011) is divided into two “temporal” phases based on changes in the birth-control policy, and a sequential approach comprising three time-series models is employed to account for policy variations over time (Table 4). The approach helps in understanding the extent to which changes in the birth-control policy are pertinent to changes in fertility level. Taking note of necessary conditions of fertility decline discussed in the literature and taking into account the availability of necessary longitudinal data, four independent variables that may possibly affect fertility significantly are selected. These variables


Table 3. Selected indicators of policy offence, Yicheng County

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>% of early marriage (&lt;20)</th>
<th>% of early marriage (&lt;23)</th>
<th>% of unauthorized births over-quota births</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>7.59</td>
<td>75.85</td>
<td>27.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>6.73</td>
<td>71.45</td>
<td>39.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>7.15</td>
<td>69.20</td>
<td>27.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>5.47</td>
<td>66.35</td>
<td>44.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>6.23</td>
<td>64.74</td>
<td>43.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>6.32</td>
<td>63.50</td>
<td>42.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>4.99</td>
<td>63.37</td>
<td>42.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>4.78</td>
<td>64.89</td>
<td>40.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>4.01</td>
<td>63.10</td>
<td>40.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>4.41</td>
<td>60.99</td>
<td>38.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>3.81</td>
<td>61.14</td>
<td>35.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>4.17</td>
<td>61.28</td>
<td>36.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>60.32</td>
<td>36.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>5.67</td>
<td>60.47</td>
<td>35.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>5.65</td>
<td>63.25</td>
<td>33.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>5.86</td>
<td>64.55</td>
<td>28.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>6.28</td>
<td>67.93</td>
<td>29.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>5.63</td>
<td>69.33</td>
<td>29.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>6.26</td>
<td>68.21</td>
<td>27.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>5.40</td>
<td>70.56</td>
<td>7.27**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>5.80</td>
<td>68.77</td>
<td>6.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>5.34</td>
<td>70.94</td>
<td>6.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>4.83</td>
<td>73.50</td>
<td>5.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>4.64</td>
<td>72.79</td>
<td>4.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>4.27</td>
<td>74.75</td>
<td>3.68&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>3.72</td>
<td>69.21</td>
<td>1.28&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes:
Column 2: the proportion of women married before aged 20 (the minimum age at which a woman is able lawfully to marry under Chinese law) in the total number of women married during the year.
Column 3: the proportion of women married before aged 23 (the minimum age at which a woman is allowed to marry under the Yicheng program) in the total number of women married during the year.
Column 4: the proportion of births not meeting birth-control regulations (including violations in restrictions on number, age at birth, and birth interval) in the total births of the year.
Column 5: the proportion of unauthorized third or higher-order births in the total births of the year.
**: A sudden fall of the share of unauthorized births since 2004 largely reflects a definition change. After 2004, first births by women who have not reached the late-birth age of 24 years are no longer included in the category of unauthorized births.
Source: Yicheng County Population and Family Planning Bureau.
Table 4. Summary statistics of the ordinary least square regression models

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GDP per capita</td>
<td>–0.225</td>
<td>–0.003</td>
<td>0.029</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of non-agricultural population</td>
<td>–1.383***</td>
<td>0.306</td>
<td>–0.680*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of hospital beds per 10,000 people</td>
<td>3.210***</td>
<td>–0.159</td>
<td>0.054</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of secondary school students per 10,000 people</td>
<td>–1.695***</td>
<td>–0.396</td>
<td>–1.834</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>16.590***</td>
<td>16.098*</td>
<td>17.029***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: ***p<0.001; **p<0.01; *p<0.05.
Source: Data are provided by the Statistical Bureau of Yicheng County.

are GDP per capita, the percentage of non-agricultural population, the number of secondary-school students per 10,000 people, and the number of hospital beds per 10,000 people. These variables are taken as proxy measurements of socioeconomic realities, including economy, urbanization, education and health.

Table 4 reports the regression results, from which we infer the more prominent policy role in Yicheng’s fertility reduction in the time when restrictive fertility regulations are enforced. Model 1 shows that, during the time without a restrictive birth-control policy, socioeconomic variables (except for per capita GDP) were significantly correlated to fertility decline. They were able to explain approximately 72 per cent of the level of fertility drop. In the absence of child-bearing regulations, socioeconomic variables could be a strong predictor of falling reproductive desires, even though the level of socioeconomic development was not outstanding.

Model 2 indicates no significant correlation between the birth rates and selected socioeconomic variables and a rather weak explanatory power for the model (R = 0.16) throughout the time when the restrictive birth-control policy was involved in the reproduction process. A poor model fit is evidence against a socioeconomic explanation. These statistical results suggest that changes in socioeconomic variables during the post-1981 period were not a good guide to changes in fertility. As most changes in birth rates were not explained by socio-
economic variables, a substantial part of fertility decline was caused by the birth-control policy.

Model 3 covers both periods to capture some of the interaction between policy and socioeconomic factors. It shows the average effect of the socioeconomic variable of fertility change over both periods. Here the socioeconomic variables made a relatively insignificant contribution to the fertility dynamics of Yicheng. Though we cannot conclude that socioeconomic variables were totally irrelevant to observed birth rates over a long time period, both the insignificance of statistical parameters and the relatively unsound explanatory powers of Model 3 suggest that, in the case of Yicheng, policy was important and may have driven interactive effects. Particularly when one focuses on the period when restrictive birth regulations were enforced, it appears that the policy aimed at controlling fertility has affected the demographic process more than has socioeconomic development.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

If fertility decline is part of China’s demographic reality, how we understand it is critically important for policy. The aim of this paper is to revisit the prevailing understanding of the Yicheng program, which is perceived as an exception to the restrictive birth-control policy that demonstrates a significant role for socioeconomic development in China’s fertility decline.

Our interpretation contrasts with current views and tells a richer story. As we have seen, the program has been mistakenly interpreted. When reporting it as a unique case of a birth-control experiment, observers have focused more on its differences from the national one-child policy than on its adaptive continuity with that policy, and have tended mistakenly to trumpet the effect of socioeconomic development on the slow growth of population and low fertility. As a result, the importance of policy in Yicheng is neglected.

The Yicheng program creates another perspective from which to view China’s state control of procreation. We have demonstrated that the program cannot be treated as a natural, control-free experiment that reflects fertility responses to socioeconomic changes only. Control over population size is predominant in the design of the policy’s specific birth limits for couples. The program is an adjusted way of implementing the national birth-control process with regard to the timing of marriage, the number of children and the childbearing interval. Like the one-child policy, the program has prevented couples from having the number of children that they desire. The procreative processes of the population are still subject to the national demographic target and government oversight. Like two-child policies elsewhere in China, the Yicheng program has been characterized by the sacrifice of personal interests for the sake of the state’s modernization vision. Our empirical findings suggest the critical importance of the role of birth-control policy in fertility decline. When understanding the implications of the
program, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that the reproductive behaviors of the population have been regulated under a system of administrative and financial coercion.

Findings from the Yicheng experience cannot be scaled up to the entire country. Over the past three decades, China’s fertility decline has resulted from the interaction of birth-control policies and socioeconomic development. While it is generally accepted that both sets of factors have played a role, their relative significance has varied across localities. Furthermore, China’s birth-control policy has evolved with highly localized features to accommodate heterogeneous geographical and demographic conditions across regions.52 The Yicheng experience alone does not prove that all cases of fertility decline in rural China can be mainly attributed to the enforcement of the birth-control policy.53 However, we have definitely demonstrated that the Yicheng case cannot be taken as proving the policy to be unimportant with regard to fertility decline in China.

52. Gu Baochang, Wang Feng, Guo Zhigang and Zhang Erli, “China’s Local and National Fertility Policies at the End of the Twentieth Century”.