
The Choice to Have a Second Child and the Practice of Motherhood in China



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Summary

This study focuses on women from a middle size city in Liaoning province who gave birth to a second child after the transformation of the family planning policy in China. I conducted ten interviews to investigate the decision-making processes of having another child and the practice of motherhood. The result shows that women in the sample of this study made reproduction choices out of negotiations with family members and personal choice. Some women think having two children is ideal in a family. Additionally, family members' fertility desire and their preference for the gender of the child affect the reproductive choice of women. Financial aid and unpaid work provision from the older generation are significant for their offspring to have two children. Furthermore, most of the women also believe mothering is a reserved job for women. This study focuses on women who live in small cities and enriches the understanding of their perceptions of motherhood and reproductive choices.

Foreword

First, I want to thank my supervisor, Vladimir Tikhonov, who has been supportive at all times. He spent much time and energy helping me completing my thesis even during the time I was depressed and so was not making any progress on proceeding. Without him, my writing couldn't be as smooth as how it had been. I never felt confused or helpless in finishing my thesis under his supervises. Second, I also very much appreciate Kate, who helped me with my English a lot. Also, Cuiming Pang, who is my boss at the part-time job I started since the first lock-down because of Covid-19, spent time reading my draft and gave me advice. In the end, I appreciate all my friends, family, and my therapist, who were my source of energy and made me feel loved. I would also love to thank myself for fighting hard with depression and anxiety, being positive, and accomplishing things within tears but also happiness.

Introduction

After more than three decades of the one-child policy, in 2016 China lifted the ban on having more than one child and released a family plan allowing all households to have up to two children. This policy change aims to adjust the structure of the aging population by enhancing the fertility rate, which has been below replacement level for almost two decades. However, there has been only a marginal increase in the number of new births following the implementation of the two-child policy, and official national statistics in fact reveal that the newly-born population has decreased since 2017¹. It is obvious that, at present, the state's family-planning policy is no longer a decisive factor in the reproductive decision-making of families. Numerous studies have researched the reasons for the consistently low birth rate in China, especially after the switch to the two-child policy, both theoretically (Wu, 2015; Zhao, 2016) and empirically (Cao & Sui, 2019; Jin & et al., 2016; Ma, 2018; Li, 2017; Chen, 2017). High childrearing costs and a lack of access to childcare are the most prominent reported reasons that people refrain from acting on their fertility intentions. A greater degree of marketization in China and subsequent lack of public social services accelerates the commercialization of care labor. Families have become the basic unit for providing welfare to individuals and mitigating social risks. Moreover, within the family women are expected to do most of the domestic work, especially childcare, while at the same time also participating in the labor market (Chen, 2017).

As such a situation is not friendly to families and children, why do some families and women still choose to have a second child, and how does the reproductive decision-making process work? What are women's motivations for having a second child, and are their decisions influenced by external pressures from either society or other family members? Comparing to women's childbirth intentions and behaviors, there has been little research into the process of women making fertility decisions. Thus, this study aims to answer the above-mentioned questions and fill a gap in the existing research on reproductive decision making. By trying to figure out what factors make families decide to have a second child

¹ Numbers of newly-born population are published by the Chinese government in each year's 'Statistical Communiqué of the People's Republic of China on the National Economic and Social Development'

under a certain social context, I hope to provide some new insights for demographic studies on fertility in China. Furthermore, in Chinese feminist studies, well-educated women who live in first-tier cities and rural women have attracted the most attention, while middle- and lower-class women in smaller cities have been underrepresented. Therefore, I have chosen to represent the motherhood stories which are often rendered unseen because they are perceived as ‘simply very normal’ and thus unworthy of further exploration.

In-depth interviews were conducted with 10 participants in a city in Liaoning province to reach my research goals. Because of the global Covid-19 pandemic, the interviews were conducted digitally instead of face-to-face and all the interviewees were anonymized out of the consideration of privacy. In the first section of this study I provide a short history of feminist discussions and critiques on motherhood and look into how motherhood has been constructed in China. Next, given China’s changing social structure, the second section focuses on how mothering is practiced in Chinese families. This is followed by a concrete explanation of my methods and data collection. Finally, I list the findings I have gained through data analysis and provide some discussion and conclusions.

The construction of motherhood

Mothering in feminist history

Before the mid-twentieth century, the traditional view of motherhood as a woman’s primary purpose in life and the importance of a mother nurturing her children was never challenged even among early feminists (Tsai, 2009). For example, Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1799) supported women’s right to an education so that women might look after their children well; philosophers John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) and Harriet Taylor (1807-1858) went a step further and argued that women should be given more economic opportunities, equal with men, but that they should also have to take care of their families, too (Tong, 2018).

Mothering is considered to be a constructed social ideology that includes the work of nurturing and caring for children (Glenn et al., 1990). Social beliefs about gender are one of the most important contextual conditions for this construction process. Also, the definition of

mothering is never unchangeable or fixed but historical and contextual; the question that remains is how the connection between women's supposed ability to nurture and the assertion that women's primary role is to be a mother has been made (Arendell, 2000). At the same time, women themselves have also dedicated themselves to motherhood. However, feminists have a relatively short history of discussing and reflecting on the topic of compulsory motherhood. Moreover, early feminists held various opinions on this topic and their reflections on the institution of motherhood were, unsurprisingly, very shallow at first (Snitow, 1992).

First, in 1949 Beauvoir presented her thoughts on motherhood in *The Second Sex*; although she was sharply critical of the negative impacts that being a mother could have on women, her thoughts are ultimately quite inconclusive (Stone, 2017). According to Beauvoir, motherhood is one of the most important mechanisms men use to control women; therefore, women are not able to become themselves in a patriarchal culture². Therefore, Beauvoir was supportive of women participating in paid work (Stone, 2017). But instead of rejecting motherhood, Beauvoir rejected the way mothering was organized at the time and tried to reveal the varied experiences and complexities of motherhood, which was highly influential for second-wave feminists' reflections on this topic (Stone, 2017). From the 1960s to 1970s, feminist thinkers published some critical explorations of motherhood that were ground-breaking but also undertheorized. For example, Firestone's and Friedan's works, published in 1970 and 1963 respectively, analyzed this issue. However, at the same time, most feminists thought that motherhood was an important part of their female identity. Not only was the very act of giving birth itself seen as feminine, but women's capacity for caring and the emotional connection between mothers and children was considered to be significant to women.

Snitow (1992) identifies a second period of feminist discourse on motherhood from 1976 to 1979; during this time, more feminists started to question the taken for granted rationality of motherhood. Nancy Chodorow's work, *The Reproduction of Mothering*, has been the most influential work from this period. Chodorow argued that women's identification with motherhood and caretaking is influenced by their interactions with their own mothers. On the

² See Tsai's review on motherhood discussion in *The Second Sex*, 2009.

contrary, by separating from their mothers, men are encouraged to develop the sense of self to be independent (1978). Chodorow also argues that mothers tend to consider daughters more like their successors than sons. Therefore, this process enables women to continually intensify their identity of being a caretaker rather than gaining an independent identification (1978).

With numerous feminists trying to depict women as independent individuals rather than subscribing to the notion that being a mother is women's only and most essential role, the limitation of works during this period is that few thinkers questioned the universality of women as mothers. Moreover, this means that mothering or care work are continued to be seen as a woman's job (Snitow, 1992), which means that the topic of whether women can choose to be or not to be a mother has not been significantly challenged. One of the most important works from both the 1980s and the whole history of feminist discussion on mothering is Sara Ruddick's 'Maternal thinking' (1980). Ruddick tries to explain why mothers are so concerned with nurturing their children despite the costs of motherhood. First, she argues that motherhood contains philosophical thoughts which are opposed to instinct. She also argues that the reason women take care of children is that they are 'doing mothering,' or what she calls engaging in 'maternal practice' or 'maternal thinking'. It cannot be denied that children need to be nurtured and cared for, but maternal thinking and practice rationalize this need as something to be fulfilled exclusively by mothers (Ruddick, 1994). Her argument implies that anyone who is in the position of being a mother would have the same concerns. Thus, she calls for more male involvement in the caring and nurturing of children.

Later, in accordance with Ruddick's work, Norwegian political scientist Helga Hernes proposed the idea of 'woman-friendliness' in the late 1980s (1987). In a woman-friendly state, women would be able to have a natural relationship with their children, a job, and a public life; or in other words, it is possible for women to have children but also achieve other life goals (Hernes, 1987). Scandinavian countries are the most radical pioneers in this area. They promote active fatherhood by adopting what is known as a 'daddy quota'. This is a policy which allocates a set amount of parental leave for both fathers and mothers³.

Last but not least, feminists have taken various approaches regarding the issue of mothering (Glenn, 2016). Some have argued that reproduction results in women's

3 For a concrete review, see Borchorst & Siim, 2008

subordinated status. For example, Firestone has argued that women have been limited to the domestic sphere in the division of labor, and are therefore economically and politically disadvantaged (2003, p17). Sherry Ortner (1972) argues that reproduction has been closely related to nature, which is understood to be inferior to culture (men's domain), and that this connection has led to women's subordination. In contrast, other feminists see motherhood as a special power women hold, one which gives them the ability to make unique connections with their children and gain the central position within the kinship group emotionally (Glenn, 2016). As Rich said, this is the maternal power that men tend to limit and control (1995, p11). These diverse arguments and the complex emotions towards motherhood articulated by feminists represent their dilemma between claiming that women have a special maternal power and admitting that women are essentially different from men.

Social construction of mothering

There is a long history of association between female identity and fertility and life-giving. Originally, religions played an important role in constructing notions of womanhood (Gillespie, 2000). How mothering has been constructed has had a close connection to the ideology that shapes society's understanding of motherhood. Ann Oakley (1974, p18) describes the patriarchal ideology regarding motherhood as the belief 'that all women need to be mothers, that all mothers need their children and that all children need their mothers'.

In the political domain, conservatives and neo-liberals have consistently tried to strengthen supposedly 'traditional' family values and the presumed natural roles of women and men within nuclear families (Gillespie, 2000). Moreover, it is not rare to see religious beliefs exerting influences as well. Through the lens of pre-existing beliefs about motherhood, modern science is selectively utilized in accordance with these beliefs and further buttresses and authenticates traditional understandings of motherhood (Glenn, 2016). For example, in the 1920s and 1930s, psychoanalytic theory stated that 'normal' women want children and that femininity is closely connected to fertility. According to Freud's theory, the genital difference between men and women constitutes the basic pre-condition which results in gender differences (Glenn, 2016). Therefore, normal femininity cannot be separated from

motherhood. This narrative rationalized further belief in the idea that there is a maternal bond between mothers and infants (Eyer, 1994). This claim has been used to argue that biological mothers are the best persons to take care of infants if the latter are to grow up psychologically healthy (Glenn, 2016).

Consequently, women have felt obliged to give birth to be considered normal, and have been pressured to regard themselves as happy when taking care of children; otherwise, they may be seen selfish or not feminine enough. This is how, Firestone argues, motherhood keeps women outside of real power, which must be gained through social activities in the public sphere, economically or politically (2003). Moreover, modern medicine has also proved a powerful instrument to reinforce the importance of motherhood. For instance, reproductive medicine has been to the domain of only a small group of mainly male experts for a long time (Ehrenreich & English, 1979). This is very representative of how medical culture produces a strong socialization system in which ideas and discourses shape people's values, and which has been used to uphold patriarchy (Martin, 2001).

Ultimately, as Barbara Kats Rothman (1994) argues, the ideology of mothering does not exist on its own but consistently interacts with other dominant ideologies, patriarchy, capitalism, and technology. Patriarchal ideology defines paternity as the giving of seeds, which is considered more important than the maternal relationship and is represented as such in legal rulings (Rothman, 1994). Marxist feminists argue that capitalist discourse emphasizes the necessity of maternal care to new generations so that the work in the private sphere is performed inside families rather than subsidized by capitalists; at the same time, women take on the most responsibility for the societal reproduction of laborers and consumers. Technology and its discourse lead women to be seen as containers for new babies and machines for raising children; their primary role has nothing to do with themselves and is simply to give a better life to their children.

Contextual meaning of motherhood

Oppressive gender ideology and Confucian family norms have been around for thousands of years and are deeply embedded in Chinese history. The choice to be or not to be a mother

has seldom been made independently by women but has instead been the result of complex and dynamic interactions with society and the nation; China's historical background is highly relevant here Confucian culture, which has a long history in China, set clear expectations for women, such as the 'Three Obedience' principle⁴; specifically, Confucianism considers reproduction as a necessary task for women that must be done for the benefit of the family and state. While all the males submitted to the emperor, women had to be submissive to their male patriarch out of the power authorized by the emperor to men (Xing et al., 2005). Similar to as was the case in pre-modern Western culture⁵, patriarchy played the key role in men controlling women's bodies; under the Confucian principle of hierarchy, the males of each family are in charge of domestic issues which includes the reproductive decision making of women (Cao, 2015). Thus, not surprisingly, although China underwent a period of radical socialist transformation and modernization later on, patriarchy is still the underlying ideology behind gender norms in China. When analyzing how motherhood has been constructed in the Chinese context, especially in the post-1978 period which is the focus of this study, its patriarchal nature cannot be neglected. Sociologist Ji and her colleagues (2017), who study the Chinese family, see the ideological transformation of communist China from 1949 until now as 'the waning of Marxist egalitarian ideology and a rejuvenation of Confucianism in conjunction with newly adopted neoliberalism' (p.766).

Unlike in Western feminist theory, the construction of motherhood in contemporary China is not solely an issue of the private sphere but is heavily embedded in how the structure of the public sphere has changed (Song, 2011b, 2012). During the socialist construction period, reproductive tasks were solidly embedded into the social production system and the boundary between private and public was therefore blurred. The boundary between private and public has been blurred in the Chinese context. In Zuo and Jiang's work (2009), they consider this as the construction of both state and family. Therefore, when exploring how mothering has gained its meaning and narrative, the notable thing is that this process is simultaneously interacting with and being highly influenced by social changes in the public sphere (Ji et al., 2017).

⁴ The principle refers to a virtuous women are supposed to obey her father before marriage, obey her husband during married life and her eldest son if became a widow (Wang, 2010).

⁵ See Pavla Miller's work in 1998.

Gender norms and their role in society have changed in accordance with the structural transformation of China. Even when the principle of Marxist egalitarianism was introduced into China with the implementation of the *danwei*⁶ system, which to some degree eased women's burden of domestic work, the gendered division of labor was never challenged. The labor participation rate was particularly high at the time but working women suffered from a double burden of both paid and unpaid work (Zuo & Jiang, 2009). The starting point of the state was never to substantially alter the patriarchal system or traditional family norms but to achieve socialist construction. Moreover, during the socialist period, a pro-natalist discourse was also propagated to increase the population following a long period of war and famine (Cao, 2015).

Not only did it deliberately retain the patriarchal tradition, after marketization in post-reform China, the nation became a field for the emphasis of *gender essentialism*, which further depicted women as inferior laborers because of the biological differences between men and women (Song, 2011b, 2012). Changes brought by market reform in the late 1970s significantly switched the previous Marxist egalitarian gender ideology to a market-oriented discourse regarding women's new role in society. The importance of women's primary role, mothering, has been underlined continuously since then (Ji et al., 2017). Market reform successfully reinforced the sexualization of women's bodies. Aside from the renewed connection between women and fertility, there was a re-emergence of prostitution after the reforms (Jeffreys, 2012). Women were, in a way, put back in the roles of either maternal care providers or sexual 'service' providers. Lawmakers and politicians debated whether women should 'return' home since domestic and care work were no longer done by any public institution but became private issues (Song, 2011a). At the same time, the gendered division of labor resulted in a disadvantaged status for women in the labor market.

Following marketization in the late 1970s, motherhood has not been constructed as an extraordinary role over other forms of nurturing in mass media, making the existence of the legacy of officially-promoted Marxist egalitarian gender ideology during the period of socialist construction obvious (Tao, 2016). In Tao's discourse analysis research on the first

⁶ Work unit of state-owned enterprises and it provides service and place of dining halls, childcare, laundries, and health care (Song et al., 2017).

parenting magazine after the reform era, *Fumubidu* (父母必读), she found that the depicted agents of nurturing were not only mothers but also fathers in the 1980s. The magazine stressed the quality of parents themselves (for example, their physical and mental health, independence, and open-mindedness), so that parents may be good role models for the next generation. The presumed role of women to a large degree still lies in their contribution to society and the nation by their participation in the labor market and ability to balance work and caring (ibid).

There was a significant change in how *Fumubidu* has narrated nurturing since the 1990s. Science has become more and more important in the discourse that advocates women's primary responsibility be the nurturing of their children. Lots of Western experiences have been introduced into Chinese society. For example, in the UK, the NHS project 'Start4Life' has been promoting breastfeeding because it benefits both mothers and children according to various scientific studies. Accordingly, by quoting research into child psychology, *Fumubidu* further emphasized that mothers are vital for the early development of children because the healthy attachment between mothers and young children allows children to gain a sense of security (Tao, 2016). Therefore, women were encouraged to take care of their children themselves rather than letting other family members do the job or sending children to kindergarten at an early age. According to the magazine, breast feeding is also very important for the mental and physical health of infants (ibid.). Additionally, all issues of the magazine stressed the importance of following suggestions given by various specialists (Tao, 2018). In addition to *Fumubidu*, Chen and her colleague (2019) analyzed another parenting magazine established by the ACWF⁷ of Shanghai in 1982, *Weile Haizi* (为了孩子), and found that the word 'mother' was mentioned in almost all articles from 2000 to 2018, and more than two times more frequently than the terms 'father' or 'parents'. 'Breast feeding', 'nurturing', 'attachment', and 'security' were also terms frequently related to the word 'mother' due to the popularity of scientific mothering. To conclude, after the 1980s, mass media and official discourse started to adjust and regulate nurturing habits by transferring the responsibility for care work to women through a set of scientific narratives.

In the 21st century, constructions of motherhood have involved much more than simply

⁷ All-China Women's Federation

saying that the role of women is to be a good mother who puts most of her energy into accompanying her children and successfully balancing her work and her family. Neo-liberal society and the market offer more ideal images for women to follow. What has been consistent since the 1990s is that women are considered the primary caretakers of children and providers of other sources of nurturing; for example, kindergartens and grandparents are considered to be inadequate substitutes which cannot replace a mother's care and which are not in the best interest of children (Tao, 2016). Moreover, the diversity in the depictions of an ideal mother is reflected in the emphasis on independent mothers in *Fumubidu*. The image of an independent mother, on the one hand, has been influenced by liberal thought that endorses personal choice and the belief that becoming a working mother or a housewife should depend exclusively on women's own preferences. On the other hand, 'independent mothers' are furthermore associated with a particular lifestyle which emphasizes the development of one's personal interests, self-improvement, and maintenance of a healthy and attractive appearance⁸. All these images are articulated in a highly consumerist way (Tao, 2016).

The prevalence of 'Parentocracy', which reflects the dominance of capitalist competition, triggers another form of idealization and construction of motherhood. Mothers are believed to be responsible for their children's educational achievements while fathers are seemingly absent in this particular competition; on the other hand, compared to mothers' emotional and intellectual labor, fathers are expected to provide capital support behind the scenes (Jin & Yang, 2015). In this context, mothers are no longer caretakers but 'education agents' who search for relevant information on, for example, educational products and schools, and who manage the resources and time of their children (Yang, 2018). Mothers are also expected to stand up to new social risks by being 'super moms'⁹ who have to work and take care of children at the same time because the social welfare system no longer assists with childcare and the old one breadwinner pattern cannot satisfy the needs of a typical family anymore (Zhong & Guo, 2018).

To sum up, the construction of motherhood in the Chinese context is deeply embedded in

⁸ See Shen (2016)'s work on 'Hot moms' constructions, motherhood and feminist consciousness: Super-Hot Moms: Motherhood and Womens' Rights in the Individualization Era.

⁹ 'Super moms' is a global phenomenon, especially in neoliberal ages, see DeMes & Perkins (1996) and Lavee (2016) for examples.

changes in the social structure when viewed from a historical perspective. The construction of motherhood has been partly influenced by Marxist egalitarianism until quite recently, since the state has been encouraging women to do paid work as men for a long time, even though its underlying aim was not to dismantle the patriarchy. A double burden of both caring and working was imposed on women as the social welfare system experienced huge changes after marketization in the late 1970s. Under neoliberalism, women are considered to be the ideal caretakers to a greater degree, and a dualistic and gendered division of labor has been reinforced. While expectations towards women are more dynamic and diverse, they are at the same time still essentially gendered and this results in women's disadvantaged socio-economic status.

Motherhood under family structure transition

Motherhood expenses in China

Marketization significantly changed the cultural ideal of motherhood as well as brought about socio-economic side-effects. Many women's outcomes in the labor market suffered because of their increasing responsibility in the domestic sphere, although in general at the macro level, marketization brought more job and educational opportunities for women as the country entered a speedy trajectory of development. While the 'motherhood penalty' is a well-discussed topic in the West, a small number of Chinese studies have also noticed how motherhood brings negative economic results for employed women due to conflicts between family and work (Ji et al., 2017).

Generally speaking, from an economic perspective, motherhood negatively affects women's competitiveness in the labor market. Giving birth results in necessary career derails and restricts women's amount of available working time while also devaluing women's human capital (Joshi et al., 1999). On the one hand, markets (the market economy?) expect women to invest all of their time and energy in producing value for the company. On the other hand, society cultivates an ideal image of women as mothers who devote their time and energy to their families and children. Given the lack of social care institutions and relevant

services¹⁰, most women have to give up new opportunities at work or struggle to balance work and family. Chen's work (2018) utilized in-depth interviews with middle-class mothers in Shanghai to vividly depict how traditional family values, which puts pressure on women to be the key caretaker in a family, and the societal ideal of the educated and independent women produce a conflictual situation for these mothers. They want to take on the responsibilities of being a good mother and at the same time pursue personal achievements. Thus, not surprisingly, women have been suffering from more labor market discrimination since the market reform in the late 1970s because of the growing amount of unpaid domestic work they perform. Moreover, the female employment rate has been decreasing in China since the late 1970s despite staying relatively high in other East Asian countries (Maurer-Fazio & Hughes, 2002; Ji et al., 2020).

In China, employment and pay gaps between men and women are mostly due to women's marriages and mothering, to a very small extent these gaps are due to the fact that they have less social capital than men (Zhang et al., 2008). Mothers tend to sacrifice their careers or job stability in order to have more flexibility to take care of young children; thus, mothers with small children are the group that is most likely to exit the labor market (Du & Dong, 2013). Tao and Feng's case study (2020) presented a customer service company whose human resources staff came up with a 'mom's part-time' working system, which allows full-time mothers to freely decide their work schedule so that the job will not clash with their childcare responsibilities.

Specifically, according to Yu and Xie's 2014 study, one additional child for each woman leads to a 7% decrease in their hourly wage. This penalty can be worse when mothers live with their parents-in-law since they tend to spend more time on unpaid work (Yu & Xie, 2018). Furthermore, working in the private sector is more disadvantageous for mothers because the state sector provides more social services which relieves the burden on working mothers to a certain degree (Zhang & Hannum, 2015). Nevertheless, due to the gender ideology setting up during the Maoist age, dual-earner family is still the norm in urban China

¹⁰ See Chen's empirical work in 2017 which explored why women cannot have a second baby due to the deficiency of social welfare related to childrearing and workplace discrimination to women.

considering the relative high female labor force participation rate¹¹. Because of the commercialization and privatization of care work, the family became the basic unit responsible for both elders and children and within households. As the traditional patriarchal structure has never been fundamentally challenged, the gendered specialization of labor continues in dual-earner families, and the unpaid work performed in the private sphere has turned out to be women's work, thus intensifying their family-work conflicts (Ji et al., 2017).

Meanwhile, the cost of raising a child in China continues to increase. A pregnancy means that dual-earner families face losing one person's income because most working women have no access to paid maternity leave (Connelly et al., 2018). The state has retreated from providing public childcare services, and from 2001 to 2010 the percentage of kindergartens that were publicly owned dropped from approximately 75% to 40%, and as a result, the number of less affordable private kindergartens has increased (Zhang & Maclean, 2012). Most families seek childcare from private kindergartens or grandparents (Connelly et al., 2018). Ma (2018) estimated the monetary expense of raising children in China by using data from the Chinese Family Survey in 2014; the study showed that each child (from 0-17 years old) needs 191, 000 Yuan on average, with children living in urban areas needing 273, 200 and those from rural areas 143, 400. However, those numbers were estimated according to the cost of one child from infancy to age five. Assuming that the cost of educating a child will continue to increase, the actual cost, especially for urban children, will be much higher (Ma, 2018).

Intensifying motherhood and Mosaic Familism

Changes in the practice of motherhood in recent decades in China can be seen as one effect of changes in the social structure; families have become the basic units of society and the main source of welfare benefits and amelioration of new social risks. Individuals are becoming heavily dependent on their families economically due to the privatization of housing, the marketization of health care and education, and rapidly increasing living expenses (Ji, 2017; 2020).

Intensive and scientific mothering is developing as a result of the intensifying educational

¹¹ According to World Bank (2020), female labor participation rate in China is 59.8% after a continuous drop but still at a high level and is similar to Northwestern Europe.

competition in neoliberal society. In the East Asian context, even with external help for childcare, mothers are still expected to make key decisions and be in charge of managing children's lives—not only their physical development but also, and more importantly, their education and mental development (Chae, 2015). Mothering no longer refers only to raising healthy babies but has instead become a multifunctional and all-inclusive role. As mentioned in the last chapter, mothers are expected to be educational managers, designing the route of their children's personal development and devoting significant time to helping their children with their studies (Yang, 2018; Jin & Yang, 2015).

This, furthermore, has shown that in a highly competitive society, families have less children and tend to invest much more in their only offspring to avoid downward social mobility. At the micro level, mothering also means arranging and managing a family's day to day life. As mentioned in Zhong and Guo's research in 2018, because intergenerational interactions are necessary for many Chinese families (i.e. helping with childcare and domestic work), mothers need to plan living spaces for grandparents to provide help by either living together with them or close by. Mothers also assign childcare tasks to other family members and schedule their unpaid domestic labor (Zhong & Guo, 2018). By researching urban women's ideal motherhood narratives, Chen (2018) concludes that the present pattern of raising children in urban China is neither the "intensive" nor "extensive" motherhood as these concepts are understood in the Western context. Raising children involves cooperative team work, with the mother being the main character who provides intensive knowledge and emotional support while grandparents or professional careworkers undertake traditional physical care work. She terms this pattern 'knowledge and emotion intensive motherhood (知识与情感密集母职)'.

Changes in Chinese mothering are embedded in a bilateral, intergenerational, and symbiotic family structure within which members are heavily dependent on each other and tend to stick together (Ji, 2017; 2020). In addition to investing in their education, it is very normal for parents to generously aid their children as young adults by buying them apartments or other property; in return, they expect support (financial and emotional) from their children later on, especially when they have lost their capacity to work or have become sick (Zhong & He, 2014). Due to urbanization and individualization, marriage is becoming more of a

romantic relationship in China, in comparison to the old arranged marriages. However, most marriages are still a far cry from what Anthony Giddens terms a ‘pure relationship’ because individuals have close ties with their parents and other family members and marriage entails building social relationships and dependence between two families (Ji, 2020). Family networks are becoming bigger at present, which means nuclear families are able to find more potential caregivers to alleviate their care burden.

This financial and emotional interdependence between parents and adult children is referred to as ‘mosaic familism’ by Yingchun Ji¹²; another characteristic of this family model is the coexistence of modern practice and traditional patriarchal norms; they mutually overlap, and clash at the same time (Ji, 2020). Ji further emphasizes that traditional gender ideology has been reinforced in this intergeneration, symbiotic family structure. Since the state has withdrawn from supplying workplace collectives with child and elder care, specialization of paid and unpaid work within the close-knit family network is economically more efficient. Older women are undertaking most of the physical labor of the household while younger women are expected to complete the task of reproduction, giving birth to children and raising them scientifically by focusing on emotion and knowledge-related work.

Fertility decision making and women’s autonomy

Reproductive decision making in China has a history of being not an individual choice but one that is highly influenced and even controlled by the state, especially the well-known one-child policy (Feng et al., 2013). Announced in 2015, and implemented on January 1, 2016, the universal two-child policy started to give Chinese families a little more space for making their own decisions about how many children they would have. However, this policy change did not stop the fertility rate from declining in 2018 and 2019. Thus, in addition to paying more attention to the micro factors that affect women’s fertility intentions, demographers have also focused more on women’s intentions regarding their fertility and the birth of a second child (Ji et al., 2020).

At the macro level, it is well documented that decreasing fertility rates and low

¹² See her article “A Mosaic Temporality” published in 2017.

reproductive intentions among women are results of the increasing economic expenses of childrearing, lack of childcare services, and work pressures (Liang, 2018; Chen, 2017). Furthermore, in addition to the accessibility of intergenerational childcare, which greatly influences the intention to have a second child (Zhao & Ji, 2019), women's fertility intentions have been investigated from various perspectives. For instance, when their first child is a girl, Chinese families are more likely to plan for a second child (Mu & Yuan, 2018). However, as Ji and her colleagues (2020) have noted, very few scholars have focused on how women's own motivations for having another child are formed and how family dynamics shape their fertility intentions. Family decisions on whether and when to have one or more children is often the focus of demographic studies in China. At the same time, women's own views on childbirth and how their opinions and desires interact with those of their family members have been neglected by previous studies.

Exploring women's views on having a second child and their decision making processes through a family dynamic approach, Peng (2020), one of the few researchers to have done so, shows that family members have negotiated with each other about whether or not have to another child under the new policy. She demonstrates how the decision-making process is not an isolated family event but a continuous process of bargaining and communication; family members weigh the costs and benefits and make a collective decision under the framework of these negotiations, with individual preferences displaced by family interests. Mothers are more likely than other family members to refuse and be reluctant to have another child while family members use various strategies to achieve their fertility desires or influence others in the decision-making process. For example, older people will offer financial support, align with in-laws, and repetitively lobby while their adult children will resort to direct resistance or passive avoidance in reaction to such lobbying efforts (Peng, 2020). This fits the patterns identified from previous research on primary reproductive decision-making in other social contexts. Husbands impose pressure on their wives through daily interactions to achieve their reproductive desires, and in patriarchal cultures in particular, husbands tend to be the dominant decision makers and are the most influential in shaping families' reproductive decisions (Beckman, 1983). Thus, not surprisingly, since Chinese society, deeply influenced

by Confucian culture, has long viewed the continuation of the family line as one of the most important tasks of female family members, Slote and DeVos (1998) argue that women are very likely to face conjugal and intergenerational pressures concerning reproduction which may not coincide with their own preferences.

In line with the above observations gained through in-depth interviews, Jin and Qian's quantitative study on women's fertility autonomy found concrete results indicating that women with lower marital power¹³ (i.e. education, income) are less able to resist childbearing pressure imposed by their husbands and their fertility intentions are more likely to deviate from their desires. Regarding this result, Jin and Qian have pointed out that women's disadvantaged status in the public and private spheres mutually reinforce each other. Gender inequalities in the labor market reduce women's access to economic and symbolic resources, which leaves them with lower bargaining power inside the family compared to their husbands; furthermore, women with less power to negotiate the division of unpaid work in the home have to spend more energy on childcare and housework, and therefore they also tend to be seen less favorably at the workplace (Ji et al., 2017).

Methods and data

Research setting

The research setting in this study was chosen to be M city in Liaoning Province with a population of slightly over 1.3 million urban residents and 0.4 million rural ones. Liaoning is the northernmost coastal province in the country and is part of the Bohai Economic Rim¹⁴. In terms of economic development, it is one of the earliest industrialized areas in the country and has a long history of benefiting from its advanced heavy industries, especially during the era of socialist economic planning. The most important of these is steel manufacturing, with the region's two giant state-owned steel enterprises, Anshan Steel Group and Benxi Steel Group, named after two of its cities. The local economy, education system, and public health system also benefited from Japanese colonization during the Manchukuo period (Mattingly, 2017).

¹³ Refers to one's ability to influence spouse' behavior or to make family decisions (i.e. budgeting, children's education, managing financial investments) (Safilios-Rothschild, 1970).

¹⁴ For more information, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bohai_Economic_Rim.

Nevertheless, this resource-based economy has encountered an inevitable depression due to resource depletion and a lack of investment in recent decades. Liaoning also has high agricultural productivity but its GDP per capita has dropped below the national average and to less than half of that of first-tier cities (i.e. Beijing and Shanghai)¹⁵. Therefore, although residents' average years of schooling is quite high and medical care and transportation are quite good due to early modernization and urbanization, the job loss and population decline brought by the economic depression are serious issues that have been attracting attention in China. As a prefecture-level city, M is one of many cities sharing this pattern in Liaoning. A large proportion of the urban population works in the public sector, which includes state-owned enterprises, which means these people are entitled to better social welfare benefits (pension and maternity leave, for example). At the same time, career mobility is low, which means that people who do not work in the public sector face a rather unstable and insecure occupational situation, especially when all their family members work in the private sector. To sum up, M city demonstrates many of the characteristics of a planned economic system and is currently struggling to transform itself economically.

The most distinctive reason why a city in Liaoning was chosen to explore the reasons why women decide to have a second child is that at the provincial level, the one-child policy had been implemented very strictly. Currently, Liaoning has an extremely low TFR. It was only 0.74 according to the 2010 Chinese census, the lowest in the country except for Beijing and Shanghai¹⁶. Therefore, the decision-making process of those few women who choose to have a second child in Liaoning is intriguing and should be investigated. Understanding what factors might lead to actual reproduction despite unfavorable external conditions might give demographers fresh perspectives about what really accelerates reproduction. A second reason that a smaller city was chosen is that M has a smaller population size and much lower economic competitive power than many cities in Liaoning, not to mention the biggest first-tier cities in China. Thus, without many occupational and promotion opportunities, women in M city are not even believed to be facing a big conflict between family and work, in contrast to

¹⁵ Data from Statista, retrieved from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1093666/china-per-capita-gross-domestic-product-gdp-by-province/> on 17/10/2020.

¹⁶ Data from National Bureau of Statistics, retrieved from <http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/pcsj/rkpc/6rp/html/B0604a.htm> 14/11/2020.

their counterparts who live in big cities. These women's life stories and their experiences of being mothers are less visible than the narrative of gender inequality faced by well-educated and professional women who live in first-tier cities. Meanwhile, they have less power and opportunities to resist the natalist tradition and patriarchal gender norms. I would therefore like to inquire how much autonomy women who live in small cities have in regard to reproduction decision making and to gain an understanding of their life stories.

My research setting in many ways epitomizes the small cities in the downfallen old heavy industry area, an area which is underrepresented in the sociological research of China. Meanwhile, despite the fact that they are very representative of urban life outside big cities in Northern China, the experiences of the large proportion of the lower and middle class population, especially women, is often neglected by scholars in Chinese studies. Additionally, the author's personal experiences living in M city provided access to a social network utilized to recruit respondents.

Sampling and data

One of the biggest problems in finding mothers who had given birth to a second child is their availability. This is particularly true when their children are very young, since taking care of small children is very time and energy-consuming work. Therefore, although I had a number of personal connections that fit the target demographic, many refused or were reluctant to be interviewed. In the end, I interviewed 10 participants, making use of snowball sampling (Noy, 2008). Community bias was a concern but with the exception of the first intermediary who introduced three interviewees, other interviewees were all linked through different sources.

Due to the unique circumstances surrounding the Covid-19 pandemic, international travel was hardly practical. As a result, instead of face-to-face interviews, I conducted in-depth interviews through WeChat by utilizing its voice-call function, except for one participant who asked for a video call since she was an acquaintance of the author. Compared to meeting face-to-face, interviewing online without seeing each other's face inevitably has a negative impact on the building of trust between participants and interviewers, which further limits the information that participants would give. At the same time, I benefited from having lived in

the same area as the interviewees and from sharing the same local culture; this made it possible to create an atmosphere of mutual trust conducive to conducting conversations (Yang & Sun, 2005). The interviews consisted of a mixture of personal life-history narration and semi-structured interview. I tried to let the interviewees tell about their life experiences as much as possible so as to gain a contextual understanding of their family relationships, motivations, and perceptions regarding having a second child. Widdershoven (1993) suggests that only by putting story telling into the context of interviewees' daily-lives can the hidden meanings of one's narrative be made explicit. On average, each interview lasted 60 minutes. All of them were tape-recorded after gaining participants' permission and transcribed in Chinese later on. Interviews were conducted in the local dialect of Chinese and translated into English for the purpose of quoting them in this thesis. Regarding participants' demographic characteristics, their ages range from 28 to 44. With the exception of two who are housewives, all other mothers worked at the time of the interviews. It can be difficult to recognize which social class the interviewees belong to. Two of them have a bachelor's degree and by occupation, four out of 10 work in the public sector, one owns a small business (a private kindergarten), and two are private company employees. Regarding this, there will be more interpretation in the findings part below. Two of 10 live in rural areas and the others live in urban areas. By convention, each participant was given a pseudonym.

Findings

In contrast to Shen and Jiang (2020)'s research, in which most of the highly educated women in their sample initiated having a second child, among mothers in M city that I interviewed, less than half of indicated that they had wanted or planned to have a second child themselves and only one participant explicitly said that she likes children. Others were persuaded by family members or felt themselves pressed to have a second child due to their first child's gender. Yet unlike in the Western context where decisions about whether to have and when to have a first child require conjugal negotiation (Alvarez, 2018), almost all the participants in my study think it is normal to have at least one child, as is the case with their well-educated counterparts in Shanghai who also have two children (Sheng & Jiang, 2020). The decision

making process involved concerns other than normality only when considering giving birth to a second child. The mothers I interviewed had various reasons for intending or not intending to have a second child. Meanwhile, some presumed reasons for their fertility decisions (such as their socio-economic status and the accessibility of intergenerational assistance) were implied although not directly stated during the interviews.

Mothers' reproductive motivation and inter-family negotiation

Motivations for a second-child

Most mothers who expressed an intention to have a second child mentioned the idea of providing their first child with a companion; they also suggested that they would feel more secure having two children for the benefit of both themselves and their children. In Charlotte (32)'s case, the reasoning seems very understandable. As a sales officer at an insurance company, she first narrated this choice by saying that 'seeing others having another kid, I also wanted to do so', but then explained her reasoning more concretely:

I think I should have another child as two of them can accompany each other. And my mom said that because she has been frequently sick, if something happened, having only one child (like her) would be not enough (to take care of her and deal with daily life). So I also thought that I should have two children later on.

Linnea (33) is a housewife with a similar narrative, but she also emphasized the fact that all of her cousins have siblings. She always envied her cousins for this, and therefore wants to have two children, too. Yasmin (32) said that she really likes children, so she chose to study preschool education at a vocational school and later worked as a teacher in a kindergarten before running her own. Moreover, she mentioned that most people in her generation are only children; she was lonely growing up and thus wants to make sure her child has close family relationships even after she and her husband are no longer alive.

On the other hand, in regard to attitudes toward children, an English teacher at the same elementary school as Charlotte, Jacqueline (36), said that she does not like children.

Jacqueline says she thought her first child was 'ugly' and says that 'I had no emotional

connection with him after giving birth'. She expressed a complicated change of mind:

It's like when we were in our later twenties, life was more about enjoyment. This child was like, I am married so I should have a kid, and then he came and so we had him and took the responsibility. But deep in my heart, I am not a person who really likes children, I can only say that I like him because he is my child, I have to like him but not because I like children in general so I like him. When it came to the second one, maybe because I was getting older, I like children more and more. I really like children so I wanted him, my mind has changed.

It is easy to see that although Jacqueline briefly thought about not having even one child, the dominant natalist culture of China, which emphasizes the continuation of one's family lineage, did not give her much space to reflect and make a choice freely (Tang, 1995). Jacqueline also recalled that she spent more than three months agonizing about whether to keep the second child until it was too late to have an abortion, she had to induce abortion if she would not have it.

The reproductive decision-making process and familial negotiation

Both theoretical and empirical evidence supports the statement that fertility decision making is never solely the decision of a woman and that the role of the husband should not be overlooked (i.e. Elder, 1998; Miller et al., 2004). Women's reproductive behavior involves family-level interactions and negotiation. Women are reluctant to have another child due to a series of reasons. For example, at first, Laila (44), who works as an administrative staff member in an elementary school, did not want to have a second child because the natural birth of her first child was extremely painful. She was also concerned about how energy-consuming pregnancy is and frequently worried about that. But after a few years, Laila was eventually persuaded by her husband to have a second child. He had consistently tried to change Laila's mind, and used the argument, which Laila found reasonable, that it would be nice for her first child to have a sister and for the family not to have to worry about *Shidu* (失独), losing their only child, even though Laila said that 'I had made the decision that I would never have another kid, never give birth to another one'.

Hannah was similarly persuaded by her husband in regard to having a second child. What is special in her case is that both Hannah herself and her first child were both premature infants—her first baby lived in the hospital’s incubator for over two months. Not to mention the economic cost, Hannah emphasized how heartbroken she was during that time that and her worries about whether her child would be able to survive. At the same time, Hannah described her husband as somebody who loves children and who had been very patient. When Hannah found out about her unplanned pregnancy, ‘He insisted that we should have this baby, no matter what’. When Hannah expressed her worries about their second child also being born premature, her husband countered that they could just spend the money and send the baby to Shenyang, where there are many hospitals skilled at saving premature infants. Hannah said her husband indeed spent most of his spare time with their children, as long as he is not working.

A sales assistant in the education industry, Rachel (32)’s decision to have a second child was a result of persuasion. She agreed with the majority of her family members that it is better to have two children, although she did not want to due to the pain of giving birth. She described how much pain and discomfort she felt when she gave birth the first time in great detail. She planned for a natural birth at first but suffered complications (the baby was stuck in the wrong position despite adjustments). After a day’s worth of effort and pain, she was transferred to the caesarean delivery room. When explaining that having a second baby was like ‘once on shore one prays no more’, Rachel said she forgot the pain of giving birth after a while. She added that ‘I have always been aware of my husband wanting a second child, even though he doesn’t suggest it directly’, and ‘he really wanted a new baby and my mom also thought that we should have a second child, so I agreed’.

Jacqueline explicitly detailed how her parents-in-law repeatedly lobbied her to have a second child ever since her first child was two or three years old. At the time she refused, but then they began to pressure her husband. Although her situation was not quite as dire as Hannah’s, whose babies who were on the edge of survival when they were born, Jacqueline worried about having a second baby in part due to her child’s health. Her first child had allergies and asthma and had to go to the hospital very often; the couple needed to buy special infant formula, which was very expensive, and his health was not good. Jacqueline recalled

that:

I was mentally exhausted. When he had a fever which lasted for over two to three days I could barely sleep at the time; I couldn't and I didn't dare sleep. The most serious situation was once he had a febrile seizure, and he passed out. So every time he had a fever, I was afraid he would have a seizure or convulsion. (I) Couldn't sleep, what if he passed out, if you are sleeping and he passes out you won't know.

Second-child and son-preference

Nicola (34), who is from another city in Liaoning, moved to M city because of her marriage. Since graduating from middle school, she has been working at different factories and is now living in a village in M city. She works part-time for a restaurant as a kitchen helper currently and does most of the housework. Her experience illustrates some of the traditional norms of son preference in China's Confucian culture. She described to me her family's reactions when her first baby was a girl and her extreme guilt and sorrow about letting them down:

My husband was a bit unhappy. I also felt a bit...I cried right in the delivery room. I wanted it to be a boy because in my husband's family, they have had only a single boy in a few generations. This is not like we are traditional people having those thoughts of only liking boys but I just felt after generations I am the one stopping the family from continuing. So I was a bit unhappy. I had the caesarean and after hearing the baby crying I asked is it a girl or a boy, the anesthetist asked which one do you prefer then. I was very straight forward, saying my husband's family had only one boy for generations and the anesthetist was very implicitly, said, it's alright, you can have more (babies) if you want. As soon as I heard this I couldn't help crying.

I asked Nicola whether her family had asked her to have a second child afterwards. She told me that her mother-in-law has mentioned it a few times in passing, saying that when the first child is a bit more grown up, she would take care of the baby if the couple has another child. Nicola acknowledged that she realized that she might need to give birth to another child even though the family has not expressed their wish for this directly. She thinks this is

understandable, because in Nicola's narratives, all of her family members are very nice to her, especially her mother-in-law, who has been doing all the housework and took care of her very carefully during her pregnancy and afterwards, when she tried to make different food every day to help Nicola recover quickly. Her husband is also a considerate person. When she was pregnant the second time, her relatives even comforted her by telling her not to worry, that no matter if the baby is a boy or a girl, it is a new family member and they just hope it is healthy. However, Nicola also mentioned in a relaxed tone that when she was giving birth the second time, the people waiting outside the delivery room, including her husband and mother-in-law, left Nicola for the new baby as soon as they knew it was a boy.

Cecilia (28) is from a wealthy family and lives a life of relatively more freedom. She got pregnant when she was in her second year of university. It made her give up her 5-year bachelor-master's degree in business administration and start a life as a housewife. When I asked whether she likes children, even in general, most people like their own, Cecilia was very straightforward when she told me that she does not like them as much as people who are a bit older. After having her first baby, she did not plan on having a second one at all. Talking about her mindset at the time unlike other mothers who considered having their second child to accompany their first one, Cecilia said, 'I didn't care about whether she was lonely or not, I hadn't thought about having another kid anyway'. She portrayed the process of deciding to have another baby as a whim, as if she had this thought all of a sudden. In terms of the gender of the new baby, Cecilia said she felt pressured before getting pregnant to have a son. She mentioned a few times during our conversation that even though her family-in-law did not say anything, they certainly wanted her to have a boy. When she was pregnant, Cecilia said was very relaxed, often having fun and hanging out with her friends, and she did not worry about the gender of the baby. Cecilia recalled how she once forgot to go to one of her prenatal check-ups, so she sought a 'back door' appointment¹⁷. Although checking the gender of a fetus is banned in China, Cecilia decided to do so at the 'back door' check-up, given that she had already had to pay more money for the prenatal appointment. Cecilia said her mother-in-law was 'very delighted'.

To sum up, relatively few mothers chose to have two children on their own initiative,

¹⁷ Back door refers to a way of dealing with stuff outside of the normal, approved channels.

unlike their well-educated counterparts who live in big cities and have professional careers (Shen & Jiang, 2020). Furthermore, a small number of them had to deal with obvious son-preference in their families. Although none of them had someone forcing them to give birth to a boy, unspoken pressure indeed existed. Although there is a well-known phenomenon of sex-selective abortion in China, the families of women in this sample did not push for such extreme measures (Jiang et al., 2015). Mothers expressed clearly that no matter what sex the baby was, they would love them. Meanwhile, their narratives about the unspoken pressure they were under and the dynamics within their families is representative of how gender ideology and familial pressure impacts the reproductive decision-making process.

Intergenerational symbiosis and motherhood reconstruction

Not a uniquely Chinese phenomenon, intergenerational symbiosis is common in societies with weak social childcare services¹⁸. As Ji (2017, 2020) has emphasized, Chinese families share a prominent pattern of intergenerational interdependency and one of the most common functions of this pattern is the exchange of care and domestic labor. Older generations support their offspring economically and provide free labor in the form of care and other domestic work. Various forms of external support from the older generation are particularly important for the so-called nuclear family. Different generations are interdependent to a great degree and almost every family in my family represents this pattern. Additional economic and labor support is the most significant factor for families that consider having a second child. Several participants stated explicitly that they would never have had a second child if their parents or parents-in-law did not help with childcare. In this context, while the physical labor of childcare can be outsourced to the older generation to some extent, the meaning and responsibility of motherhood has been refocused to center on emotion and knowledge-related work (Chen, 2018). According to my data, over half of the mothers interviewed also reflect this new trend and they express a belief that mothering is distinctly feminine, instinctive, and natural. It is a great responsibility that can be borne exclusively by them and which in return provides them with a special connection to their children. However, this does not mean

¹⁸ See Johar and Maruyama's work in 2010 for an example of Indonesia and Nosaka's work in 2012 which described well-educated women tend to live close with their mothers for childcare help.

women do only emotional and knowledge-related work. They still suffer from a gendered division of labor division and imposed mothering, both mentally and physically.

Economic support and outsourced domestic work

Facilitated gendered labor division

Intergenerational symbiosis, especially the assistance given from the older to the younger generation, is one of the most prominent characteristics of families in the sample of this study. All the participants mentioned the external help they received from either their parents or parents-in-law in regard to childcare. Three of my interviewees live together with the older generation. In this case, most of the unpaid work is outsourced to the elder family members and participants' mothers or mothers-in-law undertake most of the day-to-day domestic work.

Yasmin runs a private kindergarten with almost 20 employees. It is apparently quite profitable since, as she told me, her initial investment has been almost recouped three or four years later. The startup money was given to her by her mother. Yasmin did not mention whether it was her mother's own money or if her mother borrowed it from other sources, but she said her parents have been very supportive and that she is totally in charge of the kindergarten. Yasmin's family lives with her parents and the labor division within the family is very clear. She said they chose to live together because 'It's convenient (for gaining childcare/housework assistance)'. Since Yasmin's mother has retired she does the housework and takes care of Yasmin's small child, who is two years old, during the day. Yasmin's father gets off work early in the afternoon so he cooks dinner for the family. Yasmin said she and her husband come back home late because they have to take the older child to various classes in the evening. When I asked if she finds her living situation crowded she resolutely denied this:

'I think it's normal. Actually marriage is like maybe you need space before having kids, but after that, your mind and attention are all on your kids so you don't need much time. Also, my husband attaches much importance to the family. He is not like others who like to hang out with friends after work, he barely does that, his main focus is family'.

Yasmin said she does very little housework and a limited amount of childcare. She spends

most of her time on her business at the kindergarten; however, when I asked whether she discusses with her husband things such as where to send their first child to school, Yasmin acknowledged that in fact most of the decisions concerning the children are made in accordance with her wishes. Moreover, when she had the second child she only took one month off from work and her mom took care of the newborn baby during the day. In general, as a woman, Yasmin's experience is quite different from other mothers who focus most of their energy on their children or families, or who sacrifice their personal lives or careers. Yasmin sounded assertive and stern during the interview and when talking to her children, yet, what is notable is that the intergenerational symbiosis pattern frees the young couple from unpaid domestic work and gives Yasmin the time to run her kindergarten.

Yasmin's good friend, Rachel (32), who assists her husband's business in the pre-school education industry and does sales for the company, also lives with her parents. The pattern is similar to that in Yasmin's family. Rachel's parents basically take over all the housework, which includes childcare. She only spends time with the children in the evenings, Rachel told me. Except for buying daily ingredients for the family meals, Rachel receives no financial assistance from her parents.

Another participant living together with the older generation is Nicola. After marrying her husband 13 years ago, Nicola lived with her parents-in-law until four years ago, when the young couple moved to be closer to their local elementary school. When they lived together, in addition to helping Nicola take care her babies when they were very small, Nicola's mother-in-law also did all the housework, including Nicola's laundry. Nicola told me that because she married young, at age 21, she did not even know how to cook before she moved out. She further added that, 'my mother-in-law told me to just take good care of the two kids, don't let them get hurt by accident'.

Both Nicola and her mother-in-law work at a restaurant in the city and they prepare food early in the morning, from 7 o'clock to 12:30. Nicola thinks this job is good as far as her work schedule is concerned, as it allows her to go home before the school day ends and there is still time for her to do housework. Her mother-in-law also does some farm work every year to earn extra money and Nicola helps her every fall. Speaking about her family's strategy, Nicola said that no one cares much about money in her family and they are just try to work together to

live a good life.

Other participants do not live together with the older generation but still have received a great deal of help both economically and in regard to domestic labor. Jacqueline spoke of being under significant financial pressure from raising two children. Because her first child was often sick when he was small, he needed special infant formula and had frequent hospital stays. During those two to three years, the couple had to use different credit cards to afford their various expenses and therefore her parents-in-law provided financial assistance to help the family pull through. Also, because Jacqueline's parents are older, they could not take care of her children and her, so it was mostly her mother-in-law who helped her with the housework. She explained that having two adults at home made things much easier:

'(If there are) two people it will be much more convenient for you, you can hold the child and the other person does something like cooking so at least, no one needs to be starving. Also, the small baby (second child) is growing up so you have to make him baby food, (at the same time) he will be crawling around here and there'.

Thus, Jacqueline sends the baby to her parents-in-law on the days that she is working. She also interpreted the advantage of having two adults dealing with the baby in the following way: when there is someone staying nearby, the baby sleeps longer and this allows the other person to do the housework. So her mother-in-law accompanies one child while Jacqueline takes care of the other. In addition, in Jacqueline's family, her husband can do the laundry and cooking when she is taking care of her two children in the evening. But she also admitted that 'Guys are just like that' and 'you can't set your standards too high, our home is messy'.

To sum up, with the exception of Yasmin, who is able to focus on her job, the intergenerational symbiosis pattern greatly impacts my informants' lives; the women from both generations collaborate on unpaid work while also making money to support the family. Furthermore, the gendered division of labor is strengthened in this interdependent family model, with older women taking on more unpaid labor to support their adult children's families.

Labor or money? Do the best.

In contrast to the intergenerational sharing of labor in the less well-off families, affluent parents intend to assist their children financially. Charlotte receives economic aid from both her mother and from her parents-in-law. When I asked which set of parents help them more financially, she told me that it was her mother. Charlotte's mother is a wealthy business woman who resides in Beijing, she further explained:

'My mom doesn't live here so she definitely can't come back to help me take care the babies. My dad is not here, either, because they divorced when I was a kid. Neither of them is around, so my mom might think that she can't take care of my children, so she gives me more money instead. Maybe this is one of the reasons'.

Charlotte said her mother would give her a couple of thousand Yuan each month. Although Charlotte is not highly educated, her family's income is well above average. When I asked more questions about this, Charlotte explained that the financial aid she receives from her mother is because 'she can't help me take care of the children at all' and 'if something happens she can't help me either actually because she is not here'. It is very obvious that Charlotte expects both sets of parents to help the couple with childcare. Charlotte's parents-in-law both work in the public sector and have a monthly income of around 6,000 to 7,000 Yuan (by Charlotte's estimates). Her parents-in-law only look after the children on weekends and instead give the couple 2,000 Yuan per month for the care of the children, which is one third of their wages.

Diane did not say how much money exactly her family gets from their parents, only saying that parents from both sides help them a lot and have decent financial situations, 'otherwise we couldn't afford to have another child'. She said the family's income is only eight to nine thousand Yuan a month, which is not enough to raise two children as they both take many classes outside of school. Specifically, Diane told me that she spends five to six thousand Yuan a month only on her first child, who is eight years old and thus takes more classes than the younger one. When the second child begins elementary school in a few years, the cost for the two children will go up. Moreover, Diane's mother bought an apartment close

to the kindergarten in order to help the family pick up the younger child.

Except for taking care of Diane's babies when they were small, i.e. before they were sent to kindergarten at two years old, currently the two grandmothers only need to talk with each other every afternoon to decide who will pick up the youngest from kindergarten; thus, there is not much physical assistance from the older generation.

Like Yasmin, who mostly focuses on her business, Hannah is not only an English teacher at a rural elementary school but also operates her own English tutorial class and earns quite a bit of money. She was very blunt about there being no economic pressure in the household. Building on her own personal experiences, Hannah has been doing English tutorial work to make and save money since she was still in college¹⁹. Her family was too poor for her to go to high school so she attended a 5-year specialized college of professional pedagogy after middle school. After completing her courses, she studied for two more years and eventually passed the exam which gives college graduates a bachelor's degree at the university level. Hannah told me she did this because she wanted to get into a master's program but failed to do so because she had to pay off one of her father's debts, which depleted all of the money she had saved from tutoring, approximately 100,000 Yuan. Hannah said they receive no financial aid from either sets of parents, although her parents-in-law have the economic ability to support them when they are in need. Now they only help by taking care of the children.

Linnea's mother-in-law's attitude and behavior regarding Linnea's second child is particularly interesting. Linnea's family also resides in a rural area and Linnea's first child is in the same class as Nicola's. Unlike Nicola's mother-in-law, Linnea's mother-in-law had reservations about the couple having a second child although Linnea and her husband wanted to do so. She said her mother-in-law thought it was too much work to look after their first baby, that it was in fact exhausting, and that it was enough to have only one child. After getting married, Linnea's mother-in-law questioned her in an intimidating tone, 'Are you sure? You are going to have another baby?' However, after the baby was born, Linnea's mother-in-law liked the baby very much and still helped her with childcare.

In conclusion, the older generation's assistance, in terms of both time and money, are

¹⁹ Hannah gained her bachelor degree at the university level by taking two-year's education more and passed a test after finishing her college. There is a system in China enabling college graduates obtain a university degree through a test which is called TOP-UP Program (专升本, short name of 普通高等教育专科升本科考试).

fundamental for young couples who want a second child. Some families choose to have three generations living together so that the young adults can better balance both work and childcare, especially as the children grow older and need more time spent on their education. Meanwhile, nuclear families are also closely connected to the older generation because they need childcare and financial aid. Not all parents are able to support their offspring economically but all of them try to help the younger generation with childcare. As Ji (2017; 2020) suggests, essentially, generational interdependence is a way for Chinese people to try and avoid risks; the family functions as the basic unit that provides them with social security.

Whether the economic status of a family has a significant influence on reproductive intention and behavior is a well-discussed question²⁰. However, there are understandably mixed results on this issue. Economic cost cannot be ignored when analyzing people's fertility behavior but it is certainly not the only or most decisive factor that leads to reproduction. The participants in this study also support this statement. All the mothers and their spouses live in urban areas, have stable jobs, and most (along with their husbands) work in the public sector, which guarantees them above-average remuneration²¹ and social security services. This does not mean that they face zero financial pressure in raising two children or that this is the reason their parents provide financial support. In comparison to these urban residents, Linnea and Nicola live in a small town in the rural area of M city, but they are certainly not like Diane to select many education products for her children. Living expenses in the small town are also much lower than they are in the city, as Linnea mentioned. She also told me that her husband earns approximately seven thousand yuan a month and that his income is quite stable. Nicola has experienced working a low paid job but her husband earns five thousand Yuan a month and seems like that the couple probably is getting extra aid from her parents-in-law. Even though both Linnea and Nicola plan to buy apartments in the city eventually, Linnea also believes that an adequate number of students from the town's local high school get into a

²⁰ See Jin et al., 2016 and Mao & Luo, 2013 as examples.

Research on this topic is abundant, both quantitative and qualitative studies. It would be fair to say that economic status would give some impact but not to a great degree. Since the issue is not a main focus of this study no detailed review will be addressed here.

²¹ The average disposable income of Liaoning in 2019 is 31819.75 Yuan, 39777.20 Yuan of urban citizen and 16108.29 of rural citizen (National Bureau of Statistics. Retrieved from <https://data.stats.gov.cn/easyquery.htm?cn=E0103> on 31.10.2020).

good university, which means she does not fret about her children's education in the same way Diane does. Laila also claimed that there are always solutions and different ways to raise children, depending on how wealthy the parents are. Thus, all the participants have an economic status better than average; this is a significant factor that allows them to have another child. But when it comes to how they narrated their motivations for doing so, their considerations went well beyond the financial dimension.

Motherhood expenses and maternal practices

Although few mothers interviewed in this study showed strong ambitions regarding their jobs and careers, they at the same time demonstrated patterns of conflict between work and family. Many examples they gave also reflected the cost of motherhood, in terms of health, mental wellbeing, and finances. Nevertheless, quite a few mothers in our sample nonetheless believe that motherhood gives them a special connection with their children and voluntarily engage in maternal practices through which they try to fulfill the ideal mother expectations.

Diane and Jacqueline mentioned the extent to which motherhood responsibilities stop them from pursuing occupational promotions in their respective industries (education and healthcare). Diane used her boss, the head nurse, as an example when I asked whether she wants a promotion:

'So, like our current head nurse, she is similar in age with me basically. She has two children and her second one is the same age as my second one. (The two children are in the) Same school and same grade. Her first kid has started high school this year. I feel like she has more work to do, (at least) not less than people under her supervision and she also has to take care of more things. So she has no time to take care of her own kids. The first kid has to focus on school themselves and the second kid is looked after by her parents all the time. She almost hasn't paid attention to the second one for many years'.

Thus, Diane told me frankly that when she was young she had the thought of obtaining a promotion such as becoming a head nurse in mind. There is a big income gap between nurses and head nurses, but after giving birth to her first child Diane was preoccupied with taking

care of her. Diane spends a significant amount of time on her children's educations and mentioned as well which of her children's abilities would be enhanced by taking various outside courses. To some degree, she conforms to the patterns of 'knowledge and emotion intensive motherhood' that is gaining popularity in China as Chen (2018) suggests.

Jacqueline's explanations revealed a similar pattern. She took one year off from work because of giving birth. When I inquired about whether she felt this affected her work, Jacqueline told me frankly about her experience:

'It affected (my work). From my pregnancy, that was 10 months. We can say that the time was longer than just that (10 months' influence on work). Then it was three years [during which you are also impacted by having a baby]: the first year after you give birth to a baby you will have much less energy for other stuff. Further lactation lasts 18 months. So that means in two and a half years, you can only do what you are assigned to do. For example, there are some activities or open classes at other schools. You won't take part in these'.

Similarly, Charlotte mentioned that the reason she chose to work as a sales assistant at an insurance company was 'because this work is flexible as long as your work schedule is concerned, I can take care of the family and children. If it is like other jobs, from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. then it's difficult to do that... I wouldn't and can't do those kinds of jobs, because if the kids are sick or something I have to look after them'. Laila's experience was a little bit complex. She and her husband did not live together after getting married because her husband works in his hometown, which is another city in the same province. Laila's first child moved to her husband's hometown when she was five years old. The separation from her family is a source of constant worry for Laila, and she told me that 'I basically have no expectations concerning my work, my main focus is the family. After all I don't live together with them so I am always thinking about the kid. Then the work was just like that, I wasn't very...I worry about family more'. Laila has been taking sick leave since 2008 and her wages have been reduced, although she did not mention by how much.

According to Jacqueline, activities related to the school and teaching would allow her to gain various certificates which will be her 'capital' for the 'occupational title (职称,)

evaluation²². Meanwhile, Jacqueline believes in the deep natal connection between children and mothers. For example, Jacqueline mentioned how her mother-in-law had told her that every time Jacqueline would leave the apartment to go to work, her second child would wake up before she had even left the building; Jacqueline used this story to emphasize how important her presence is for her children to feel secure. When Jacqueline and I were talking about why her husband cannot handle the children alone she denied my assumption that mothers are more experienced in looking after children by saying, ‘think about it, being in a mother’s uterus for ten months he is familiar with (his) mother’. She used a metaphor to explain that ‘when a child is small, a mother is its world/sky (天). All his trouble and discomfort can only be expressed in one way and that is [through] mom, mom’s embrace’.

Even Yasmin, who is quite ambitious and focused on her business, shared Jacqueline’s thoughts on the special natal connection between mothers and children. She explained that her second son refused to eat from the feeding-bottle with her breast milk because bottles do not have a mother’s smell and small babies identify their mothers by smell. She recalled that when her first child was just born she did not produce breast milk for the first week, so in the evening, the baby slept with Yasmin’s mother-in-law. During the night, the baby woke up and kept crying and ‘only when my mother-in-law took him to my door, he stopped crying’.

In addition to the physical risk women have to take on account of giving birth, motherhood brings a number of costs ; however, women still struggle to resist motherhood because it has been culturally constructed as an instinctive and symbolically quite meaningful kind of labor, one that is reserved for women only. Motherhood has also been considered the major signifier of adequate, authentic femininity and the success or failure of motherhood practices therefore is one of the most significant elements in evaluating women’s femininity. Therefore, mothers tend to practice and ‘do’ mothering (Ruddick, 1994). Between work and children, most participants in my sample chose to prioritize their children’s interests.

This study intended to summarize the reproductive decision-making process of participants and further understand the underlying mechanisms observed. First, women’s own fertility intentions influence their behavior; for instance, some participants did express their

²² There is a title system at primary and middle schools in China. Teachers’ salary varies according to their title (that is, professional rank).

willingness to have more than one child for personal reasons, (i.e. they are fond of children). At the same time, most of their decision-making processes involved other family members who presumably influence women's choices. Among family members, husbands' reproductive desires are generally the most influential. Unspoken family preferences for boys rather than girls also puts pressure on women and therefore might alter women's original fertility intentions.

Second, assistance from the older generation means a lot for families who want a second child. Financial aid is very common and is highly instrumental in relieving the economic pressure of raising two children. Almost every participant claimed they had people helping them take care of their small children. In most cases, their parents or parents-in-law do this unpaid care labor. Some families even choose to live together with their parents or parents-in-law, further increasing the degree of interdependence among family members. Thus, external assistance and aid are very significant factors which enable families to make reproductive decisions with more freedom.

Last but not least, regardless of whether women initiated the decision to have a second child or whether it was driven by the desires of family members, the mothers in my sample tend to be perceived as the special and significant persons meant to take on the bulk of the responsibility of caring for the children. This job is reserved for the women in most cases. The costs of motherhood are real and women's jobs, careers, and personal lives are never their first priority unless there is a husband willing to do care labor and unpaid domestic work. Among interviewees in this study, only Hannah's husband took on lots of parenting responsibilities and spent most of his spare time with the children while Hannah made extra money working a second job.

Conclusion and Discussion

Instead of focusing exclusively on either women's reproductive intentions or behaviors under the universal two-child policy, this thesis aimed to explore the dynamic development from reproductive intentions to actual childbirth behavior, with a focus on the decision-making processes involved in having a second child. In this study I found that middle and lower class

women who live in the small provincial city selected for my research chose to have more than one child on the basis of several economic and social factors. Even though most of my informants acknowledged that having two children brings the family happiness, very few of them were the ones who initially suggested having a second child. In these few cases, the process itself was quick and occurred without hesitation. These women at the same time demonstrated their assertiveness in regard to making decisions. They either have relatively strong bargaining power in their families or their families are run in an egalitarian fashion already. In contrast, in most other cases, childbirth was a result of familial negotiations which demonstrates the dynamic relationships among family members. Women's fertility desires are likely to change if they contradict the wishes of other family members. Conversely, other family members often push forward the decision-making process for the second pregnancy, persuading the would-be mother to make a decision in favor of having a second child. When women hold more traditional views on the link between motherhood and femininity and strong family values, they tend to be more easily persuaded to have a second child by other family members.

Regardless of whether women's reproductive behaviors were the result of their own wills or not, at the macro level, social structural limitations further influence the decision-making process of having a second child. Thus, due to socio-economic factors, women do not make their own decisions either. One of the most significant preconditions enabling families to have a second child is the accessibility of childcare as the expectation for women to perform both outside and domestic labor persists from the pre-1978 Socialist Construction period. Women's double burden of both paid and unpaid work was regarded as problematic by scholars after the marketization of China²³. Due to the lack of social support, the niches in childcare schedules have to be filled by extended family. Young couples have expectations that their parents will provide free childcare before their children attend elementary school. Later, intense educational competition gives mothers a new mission, which is to provide knowledge and emotional support to their teenage children.

The deficiency of state-provided social services results in a greater importance of the

²³ Shaopeng Song is one of the important sociologists who addressed this issue in several papers. See Song, 2011a, 2011b, 2012.

familial network and interdependence between the younger and older generations. Families are transformed into the basic units that provide welfare and support in ameliorating social risks. This further results in a greater gendered labor division and the promotion of traditional gender norms. In most cases, the older woman takes on most of the unpaid physical labor and the younger woman is expected to provide emotional support while working full time. This pattern intersects with the romanticized motherhood discourse which portrays mothers as the most important people in their children's lives and reinforces the belief that mothering is instinctive and a significant part of femininity. Women, especially those like my informants who live in small cities and have limited occupational opportunities, prioritize their children and family's needs and barely have a chance to 'balance' work and family, in comparison to the few well-educated women in first-tier cities or in Euro-American societies.

This study attempted to fill a gap in the existing research. So far, only a few studies have paid attention to women's childbirth choices and related decision-making processes in the Chinese context. This may contribute to a more complete picture of mothers' reasons behind having a second child. Moreover, while feminist studies on/ in China have focused mainly on either well-educated urbanites or rural women, the stories of women who live in small urban areas have been neglected. I attempted to examine the inner mechanisms of fertility decision-making in a small provincial town. The motherhood stories from this town can be described as either exciting or depressing. In whichever case, they are dynamic and reflect a complicated social and cultural structure. These women were not directly forced to give birth. However, they are ideologically imbued with the belief that women are supposed to contribute to the family by having children and doing all the care labor. Nevertheless, at the same time, a small number of women and their husbands exhibit an egalitarian division of labor. Women in these families are ambitious and enjoy taking on the role of 'breadwinner'. This research sheds light on the factors involved in the construction of motherhood and the gendered division of labor and should be further explored. It raises the question of which individual-level factors or personal experiences are responsible for the more unconventional characteristics of the practice of gender in everyday life. This requires psychological and personality development perspectives to give insights in the field of family sociology research. For example, additional research is needed to investigate how one's interactions and

experiences with one's parents (indirect influence) or parents' unpaid labor (direct influence) may all shape one's understanding and conception of gender.

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Appendices

Figure 1. Information about interviewees.

Name	Age	Age of first child	Age of second child	Occupation
Hannah	40	11	5	Teacher at elementary school
Yasmin	32	6	2	Owner of a kindergarten
Jacqueline	36	10	1	Teacher at elementary school
Charlotte	32	10	6	Clerk at an insurance company
Laila	44	21	8	Administrative staff at elementary school
Cecilia	28	6	4	Housewife
Linnea	33	12	7	Housewife
Nicola	34	12	8	Part-time in a restaurant's kitchen
Diane	38	8	5	Nurse
Rachel	32	6	2	Sales