

## **Exploring Women's Decisions about Childbearing after the Lifting of the One-Child Policy**

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## **Abstract**

In 2016, China officially ended the “one-child” policy permitting all couples to have two children for the first time since 1979. While the policy was relaxed due to demographic concerns, it has simultaneously given many women a new reproductive opportunity. The goal of this study was to qualitatively understand the childbearing decision process in the new era of the two-child policy. We conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 45 postpartum women at two hospitals in Zhejiang Province, China. The interviews explored women’s views on the two-child policy and reproductive decisions and how they decided to have their first or second child. Most women approved of the lifting of the one-child policy; however, many were hesitant or uncertain about their own decisions to have second children. Many felt pressured to have two children for the good of, or as an obligation to, the family. However, they also felt that caring for two children was burdensome, and that they would have to sacrifice a lot in terms of freedom, energy and money. Their responses to the new reproductive opportunity highlights the complexity of childbearing decision-making in modern Chinese society, against a background of persisting traditional values.

**Keywords:** China; two-child policy; childbearing; family planning; decision-making

## Introduction

As a response to rapid population growth during the 1950s and 1960s, the Chinese government imposed a restrictive family planning policy in 1979, limiting urban Han couples to one child, and rural Han couples with a first-born daughter to two children (members of minority ethnic groups were allowed to have two or more children). Population control was seen as a necessity for improving the state's economic prospects after nearly 30 years of Mao Zedong's leadership. The campaign, through easy access to contraception and abortion, as well as penalties for exceeding allowed births, resulted in a decrease in total fertility rate from 2.8 in 1979 to around 1.5 in 2009 (Morgan, Zhigang and Hayford 2009). However, the policy had unintended demographic consequences including: population ageing, sex imbalance from sex-selective abortion, and a labour shortage (Guo and Gu 2014; Zhao and Chen 2011; Wang 2011). For its critics, it has also violated the reproductive rights of individuals and families, and has caused undue burden on only-child couples who must care for one child and four parents, referred to in China as the 4:2:1 phenomenon (Wang, Cai and Gu 2013; Hesketh, Lu and Xing 2005).

Largely because of the demographic consequences, the government has gradually relaxed the policy. In 2007, all provinces began to permit couples who were both only children to have two children, in 2013 if at least one of the parents was an only child, and finally in 2016 for all couples (Hesketh, Lu and Xing 2005; Zeng and Hesketh 2016). There are no longer social and economic privileges for one-child couples, and contraception is a matter of choice, dissociating it from family planning policy. Women are now being offered procedures to remove intrauterine devices or reverse tubal ligation, to enable them to have a second child (Attané 2016). These measures demonstrate how the Chinese government has shifted from a restrictive reproductive stance to one that encourages couples to have two children.

Scholars have long been pushing for the relaxation of the one-child policy (Wang 2005; Hesketh, Lu and Xing 2005). China already has far below replacement fertility rates, which now can be largely attributed to socioeconomic development rather than government intervention (Cai 2010; Guo and Gu 2014; Wang, Cai and Gu 2013). After the earlier relaxation of regulations, fewer eligible couples than expected opted for a second child (Basten and Jiang 2015; Attané 2016). In line with other developed nations, studies have shown that higher educational attainment and delayed childbearing, costs associated with childrearing, increasing investment in fewer children, and social norms have all contributed to couples' choice not to have second children (Zheng et al. 2009; Merli and Morgan 2011; Eklund 2016; Attané 2016).

However, current rhetoric on this issue mainly centres on demographic issues, the sex ratio, population ageing and the economy. Moreover, most of the fertility literature is either non-empirical, or quantitative research that uses survey data or focuses on fertility outcomes. There has been very little qualitative exploration of the childbearing decision process, particularly from the perspectives of women, after the implementation of the two-child policy. Therefore, in this paper we intend to contextualise childbearing and reproduction in terms of individual decisions and family histories, and to describe the structural circumstances that may constrain those decisions. Our aim is to explore how women make decisions about childbearing, with their new reproductive choices since the lifting of the one-child policy.

## Methods

### *Setting and Population*

This study was part of a larger project examining the effects of the two-child policy on reproductive and delivery decision-making. Our study took place in two cities, Jiangshan and Hangzhou, in Zhejiang province. Zhejiang is one of the most urbanised and developed provinces in China, where educational attainment of women is relatively high and the fertility rate is relatively low, around 1.35 in 2010 (Cai 2010; Wang 2014; Peng 2011). Jiangshan is a county-level city and consists largely of a rural population, while Hangzhou is the capital and most populous city in the province, consisting of a largely urban population.

We interviewed postpartum women and providers at a county-level hospital in Jiangshan and a provincial-level hospital in Hangzhou between November 2016 and April 2017. The maternity hospital in Jiangshan is a 72-bed, secondary-level hospital serving a largely rural population. The maternity hospital in Hangzhou is a 500-bed tertiary referral hospital, serving a largely urban population. Because we conducted this research in the year after the two-child policy was universalised, a substantial proportion of our interviewees were older mothers, over the age of 35, giving birth to their second child immediately in response to the policy change. Interviewing these two populations in this unusual timeframe enabled us to compare urban versus rural experiences, as well as understand women's attitudes towards the two-child policy.

### *Study design*

We conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 45 postpartum women, 24 from Hangzhou and 21 from Jiangshan, and 7 service providers which allowed us to reach saturation of themes. Nurses and physicians non-randomly identified women who were two to five days postpartum and who were of different parities and birth outcomes. We approached the women, explained the purpose of the study and asked for their consent to be interviewed and tape-recorded. The interviews explored women's views on the two-child policy, their birth experience, delivery decisions and reproductive decisions, namely how they decided to have their first or second child, or, if primiparous, whether they anticipated having a second child. We also interviewed four nurse-midwives and three obstetricians about their personal and professional views of the delivery decision-making process.

### *Sociodemographic Characteristics*

The sociodemographic characteristics of the women interviewed are summarised in Table 1. The average age of the interviewees was around 32 in both Hangzhou and Jiangshan, although there was a wider range of maternal age in Jiangshan. We also note that there was a relatively large number of women 35 years or older, which in China is considered advanced maternal age; this reflects the temporary increase in older women giving birth immediately after the two-child policy was implemented. In fact, of the multiparous women interviewed, the mean age of their first child was 7 and 8, in Hangzhou and Jiangshan respectively, with a range from 2 to 21. In addition, the level of education of women in the Hangzhou hospital was much higher than in Jiangshan, with more than 87% having attained some form of higher education, compared to

43%. Similarly, the majority of women in Hangzhou held a job at the time of childbirth, while many women in Jiangshan did not, or had quit their temporary jobs for pregnancy and childrearing.

### *Analysis*

Interviews were translated and transcribed into English. We followed a grounded theory approach to organise the data (Strauss and Corbin 1998). We inductively developed conceptual codes from the interviews, and then extracted and organised responses by code. Memos were created for each code, and then the data were analysed for patterns and organised into larger themes. In our final analysis, we have selected and integrated stories of women with current frameworks on intergenerational and gender relations to illustrate how large-scale policy changes affect on-the-ground practices and negotiations in fertility. The names in this paper are pseudonyms, to protect the identity of the participants. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Zhejiang University.

### **Findings**

#### ***After the Lifting of the One-Child Policy: The Decision to Have a Second Child***

Most women approved of the lifting of the one-child policy, perceiving it as a decision that was good for the country, while also expanding reproductive choice. However, as we will describe below, the new possibility complicated personal childbearing decision-making. Some women felt pressured to have two children for the future of the family, but, on the other hand, felt constrained by limited time, energy and money to care for a second child.

#### ***The Value of Children: Managing Intra- and Intergenerational Relations***

*“One child is too solitary”*

For many women, the decision to have a second child was not based on personal fulfilment, but on the consideration of the future of the family, as well as pressures from their parents and in-laws. Many noted that they needed to have a second child because one child was too *gu dan* or solitary. They explained the need for more than one child in two, related ways. First, women viewed the role of children as being able to stay close and take care of them when they became old or infirm. With more children, it was more likely that this would be the case. Lin immediately decided to give birth to her second child after the policy change. She emphasised the role of family:

“Money is secondary. Medical care can be reimbursed with health insurance. What’s more important is having someone to look after you. If you have kids, you can call them over if you’re sick. If no one is around, who will take you to the hospital?” (39 years old, Jiangshan, vocational college, small shop owner)

Second, women thought about the well-being of and burden on their children in the future. They emphasised that children with siblings could have a companion to discuss and share family matters with. One nurse-midwife, Peijing, expressed similar views to Lin:

“One child is too lonely. My husband has an older sister, and if their father gets sick, then they can discuss it together. If you’re dealing with this by yourself, of course you would feel lonely or helpless.” (35 years old, Hangzhou, vocational college, nurse-midwife)

As Chinese society revolves around family, multiple generations are bound in an contract of obligations and expectations between generations (Croll 2006; Göransson 2013). Built on a Confucian sense of filial obligation, adult children in China are expected to provide for their parents in old age as a reciprocation for the resources they spent in raising them, a legal responsibility enshrined in the constitution of the People’s Republic of China (Göransson 2013; Eklund and Göransson 2016; Bartlett and Phillips 1997). An only child with his or her partner has to take care of four parents, increasing their intergenerational burden—the so-called “4-2-1” phenomenon. Many interviewees referred to this, describing the need to provide siblings to share obligations. Moreover, some women reflected on the difficulty of being only children themselves and therefore perceived value in having siblings for their own children (Eklund 2016), such as Jia who said:

“As I grow older as an only child, I feel like I can’t go far from home—even if I want to do something I want—because my parents are here. If you have siblings, everyone can share the tasks [of taking care of elderly parents].” (33 years old, Hangzhou, bachelor’s degree, temporarily unemployed)

### *Generational pressures*

Even as women were thinking ahead for the next generation’s sake, some also expressed how their decision to have two children was influenced by pressure from their parents or in-laws. Hualing had just given birth to her first child and was already thinking how hard it would be to consider another. She said:

“Chinese people think *duo zi duo fu* (“the more children, the more happiness”). It’s not like we actually want to [have another child], but our parents compel us to. They say, ‘Oh, when are you having another? Look at how cute this child is! Having two is great!’ They think, if you had a child for one side [of the family] you need to have another child for the other side.” (26 years old, Hangzhou, bachelor’s degree, temporarily unemployed)

Some parents encouraged grown daughters to have two children because they themselves were not given that choice when they were of age. Jinghua, a 23-year-old from Jiangshan, had just given birth to her first child. While she did not particularly want to have another child, given her financial circumstances, she already felt pressured to:

“For my mother-in-law’s generation... they all had one child. And if both parents were only children, then how can you have only one child? The older generation thinks that it’s better to have more children to enliven the family atmosphere.” (23 years old, Jiangshan, high school, supermarket supervisor)

From our interviews, we found that children are not only of value to parents, but to grandparents, who themselves grew up with siblings and large extended families (Eklund and Göransson 2016). As Hualing noted, one grandchild may be seen as too few to be “shared” among four grandparents; at the very least, both the maternal and paternal grandparents should have one. Having children, therefore, is not a matter of individual considerations, but is deeply embedded in generational obligations and relationships.

This generational pressure extended beyond personal relationships. For example, Meilin was a 32-year-old woman who had just given birth to her second son in Jiangshan. Her pregnancy was unintended, and she had planned on having an abortion. The family business was not doing too well, and the prospect of raising two children was financially daunting. However, her decision changed when she went to the OB/GYN clinic:

“I saw a young woman who tried everything to have a child but couldn’t. Now with the two-child policy, I also saw 40, 50-year-old women, who wanted to get pregnant but also couldn’t. The doctor told me: ‘Look at all these women, they want to have a child, yet they cannot. Look at your own child, so healthy. Why don’t you want it?’ So, then my husband said *ji lai zhi, ze an zhi* (‘since this is so, we should accept it’).” (32 years old, Jiangshan, high school, shop owner)

Meilin, in the end, did not regret her decision to have a second child. However, it is remarkable that her decision, in part, relied on the argument that children are a privilege that certain women of the previous generation could not repossess, demonstrating the influence of historical regret.

### *Pressure from children*

Given that we were interviewing women at an unusual time in China’s demographic history, where women in their late 30s and 40s unexpectedly had the opportunity to have more than one child, many mothers had first children who were old enough to be a part of the second-child decision-making process. Sometimes the first child urged their parents to have another, so they could have company. Others, typically older children, rejected the idea of more siblings for fear of dividing their parents’ love and attention. Huiqing, the oldest woman interviewed at the age of 45, told us her 17-year-old daughter did not want her to have a second child after the policy was relaxed:

“[Our daughter] was an only child, so she was always spoiled. For us as parents, we consider the family as a whole [when making these decisions]. Maybe she thought that she would have to share everything with him. She’s a modern, independent person. I told her: ‘if you had a little brother or sister, then when mom and dad are old, it might relieve

your burden of taking care of us.’ She told me, ‘it doesn’t matter, I can take care of you myself.’” (45 years old, Jiangshan, middle school, homemaker)

While some children were reluctant, others would outright refuse to have another sibling. For example, Lihua told the story of her neighbour whose 16-year-old son refused to let her continue her pregnancy:

“[My neighbour] was two-months pregnant when she told her son [about the pregnancy]. Her son refused to eat for three days and three nights. He wouldn’t go to school or anything else. She couldn’t do anything else but have an abortion. She had to give it up.” (44 years old, Hangzhou, middle school)

Lihua repeatedly discussed how there were many cases of older children who would refuse to have a sibling. She speculated: “I wonder if children these days are just too selfish. They just think of themselves.”

Whether pregnancies were intended or unintended, women with children older than five often felt they had to consider their child’s opinion in the childbearing decision process. Children who did not want a sibling complicated the second-child decision, and women who went against their child’s wishes had to figure out how to manage these relationships within the family. Some women attributed this self-centeredness to the fact that they were only children, a characteristic that women who could choose their birth spacing wanted to avoid. Ju, a 26-year-old from Hangzhou, spaced her births three years apart. She wanted to have them close in age, so as to avoid the “only child” personality. She commented that ever since the one-child policy, children “are pretty selfish. They’ve been *jiaosheng-guanyang* (pampered and spoiled).” Yina, a 35-year-old second-time mother, echoed this sentiment, applauding the change in the family planning policy and emphasising the need for siblings: “Now a lot of children have bad temperaments. Children before weren’t like that. Some kids even yell at their grandparents.”

### ***A Woman’s Sacrifice***

As we have shown, many women wanted, or were pressured, to have children for familial and generational considerations. However, these important factors also had to be weighed against the costs. Regardless of whether women decided to have more than one child, all talked about childbearing and childrearing in terms of sacrifice, which can be categorised into physical, personal and financial sacrifices.

#### *Sacrificing the body*

Lihua, at 44 years of age, was one of the oldest women interviewed; her first son was already 21 years old. Her pregnancy was unintended, and she had hesitated to keep it. She had been born in the 1970s and never imagined she would have another child. While some women took advantage of the childbearing opportunity immediately, Lihua did not know if she wanted another. She was worried about managing pregnancy, giving birth at an older age, and taking care of the child along with, in the future, grandchildren. Still, Lihua’s parents and in-laws



pressured her into keeping the child. She exclaimed, “I told them I was already so old, and there was a lot of risk. They said, ‘Don’t worry about it, get a Caesarean section.’ They all wanted me to have another!” She said she would have been less reluctant if the policy had changed a few years earlier.

Dr. Ma, one of the doctors interviewed, also regretted the timing of the two-child policy. As a woman in her early forties, she could not decide whether she wanted to have a second child:

“The two-child policy put our generation in an awkward position—it’s not easy for us to give birth anymore, since we’re so old. But our desire to have a second child is even stronger because we grew-up with siblings.” (44 years old, Jiangshan, attending physician)

Such women caught by the timing of the two-child policy expressed worry about their bodies’ ability to handle pregnancy and childbirth. They were also concerned that they would not have the energy to take care of a new-born. Dr. Wang said that as a physician, she advised many older women not to get pregnant given their age or physical health. However, she remarked, “Chinese women put their physical health last if everyone in the family really wants to have a child. Women will face a lot of risk to give birth. The doctor will tell them: don’t give birth anymore. But the woman simply wants another child.”

#### *Sacrificing career, time and freedom*

While physical concerns were a prominent issue among older women, the sacrifice of personal freedoms was another, particularly among younger women. Such women were more worried about the opportunity cost of raising children to developing their own careers or pursuing other interests. Aili, a 24-year-old with a job at a large Hangzhou e-commerce company, had an unintended pregnancy, and she did not plan on having a second child. She said,

“Without children, you could use your breaks to go on vacation, and to do whatever you’re interested in. I could work until late at night, or even go out with friends. Now I will have to go back to breastfeed the child. If the child gets sick, I have to take leave to take care of him. Of course, a lot of things will be sacrificed for him.” (24-year-old, Hangzhou, bachelor’s degree)

Huiqing, born in the 70s, set herself apart from these younger mothers who did not see value in having more than one child. She attributed this to the differences in the pre-1980s and post-1980s generation, before and after the beginning of China’s rapid economic growth:

“Nowadays everyone is so independent. Women aren’t like how they were before, taking care of children and cooking dinner at home. Everyone is out working, like their husband. So, I think the young, the white-collared, the college-educated, the ones who have a career—they are the ones who don’t want another child.” (45 years old, Jiangshan, middle school, homemaker)

Such women with careers had to rely heavily on their parents to take care of their child, and those who had no extra caregiver often opted not to have another child. For example, Dr. Wang revealed she wanted a second child, but could not possibly see how she could do it:

“I’m in a sticky situation because there’s no one in my family to take care of the child. Because if there isn’t, then you have to hire a carer. And if you hire a carer you have to be able to afford it.” (40 years old, Jiangshan, physician)

This was an issue for Lili, a 40-year-old who moved back to Jiangshan from Wenzhou, a city 335 kilometres away, so that she could be closer to her family. As a migrant worker with a middle school education, she gave up her job in Wenzhou, so she and her child could be taken care of by her parents. In Chinese culture, and in the absence of affordable childcare, it is a virtual expectation that grandparents who have the time and energy take care of grandchildren, particularly if both parents are working. However, in the case that grandparents are not available, it is the woman who must either give up her work, or else give up the idea of another child. Having children, therefore, is viewed as the woman’s sacrifice.

#### *Sacrificing financial resources and raising the perfect child*

Above all, women emphasised the financial sacrifices they would have to make if they were considering having a second child. Some, such as Changying, framed the economic burden in terms of wanting the best, and therefore the most expensive, for the child. She said,

“Raising and educating a child is expensive. Because now there’s fewer kids in the home, of course parents want to do what they can to give their child the best environment. Here in China, we all buy imported goods for our children because we trust them [to be safer than Chinese goods]—but they are expensive. I always ask others to buy things abroad for me, like medications and toys.” (29 years old, Hangzhou, bachelor’s degree, temporarily unemployed)

Many more also discussed their concerns about the finances to raise and educate the best kind of child: paying for them to get into a good school and attend extracurricular classes and activities. As Chuntao, a 35-year-old first-time mother said,

“You have to pay-out a lot for children from a young age. You have to pay for extracurricular classes. You don’t want them to lag behind, and you don’t want them to not participate in anything—otherwise it wouldn’t be good for their development.” (35 years old, Hangzhou, bachelor’s degree, office worker)

Others felt guilty for having more children, because it diluted the resources they could give towards each child. Meilin felt that keeping her second child would be unfair to her first:

“Let’s say I have 1,000,000 RMB. I can put all of that on one child. But now I have two children. Now it becomes 500,000 RMB each. For the first child, I could have given him a

better education. But if the economic circumstances don't allow it, then I can only give him the lesser option. In this kind of society, it's better to give your child the best, so he can improve his own abilities." (32 years old, Jiangshan, high school, shop owner)

For these women, the decision to have more children is fraught with considerations of money, particularly as the cost of childbearing, childrearing and education have increased enormously, and as individual households must bear such costs (Zheng et al. 2009). Their responses indicate that they want successful children in this competitive society, and will choose to concentrate resources on one child to bring out their full potential (Morgan and Taylor 2006; Zheng et al. 2009; Settles et al. 2013; Zhang 2007). These individual decisions are perhaps reflections of the original intent of China's family planning campaigns to reduce population "quantity" while raising population "quality" (*suzhi*) (Greenhalgh and Winckler 2005). They also reveal how the deepening of market reforms and neoliberalism on a larger scale have impacted on education and increased household costs, thereby affecting childbearing decision-making (Hannum and Park 2007).

Moreover, these economic pressures were not limited to raising children, but supporting them when they go to college, find jobs and get married. Women, particularly in Jiangshan, held the belief that parents should do their utmost to help their children in adulthood—and, as will be explained below, this economic burden was particularly heavy for sons. Nurse Cui noted:

"We have to help [sons] until they are so old. When they get out of college, you have to buy them a home [or apartment]. If they're working and only earn three to four thousand a month, they won't even have enough to rent a place and pay living expenses... So, parents have to buy them a house. Then once they have a child, you have to help take care of their child." (38 years old, Jiangshan, scrub nurse)

### ***The Two-Child Policy and Avoidance of Bearing Sons***

#### *One boy, one girl*

Traditionally, gender composition has been an important factor in family planning, and with the two-child policy, families came to explicitly consider it during childbearing decision-making. According to interviewees, most families' ideal was to have one girl and one boy (Chi et al. 2013; Ding and Hesketh 2006; Eklund and Göransson 2016). As Zhengmei, a 39-year-old from Jiangshan, noted in the Chinese language: "If you have a girl (女) and a boy (子), it forms the word "good" (好). So, if you have one girl and one boy, you're complete in both respects." Lin even saw something online:

"I read there was a minority group in which they used a medicine: if the first was a son, they take the medicine, and the next time it will definitely be a girl. Wouldn't that be great? In that case, we don't have to have this family planning policy, right. Everyone would have two, a boy and a girl." (39 years old, Jiangshan, vocational college, shop owner)

Still, the lack of ability to control the gender composition, as well as the economic costs of sons, played a key role in the decision to have multiple children.

### *The financial burden of marrying sons*

While the ideal was to have two children, one boy and one girl, many women, particularly in Jiangshan, hesitated to have another child if their first was a son. In contrast, if the first was a daughter, most would consider a second child. In Zhejiang and other provinces, the government, in recognition of son preference, institutionalised this even prior to the two-child policy: those who had a rural residency status could have a second child if their first was a girl. However, now that the choice to have another child was available to everyone, the decision became based on the economic costs of gender: raising two sons was simply too economically burdensome. Therefore, those with one son had to also decide whether the benefits of having two children would outweigh the possibility of having another son, an economic risk. Jinghua had just given birth to a boy, her first child, and expressed her disappointment:

“If I had a girl, I would have definitely considered [another child]. Now that I have a son, I don’t want to have another. It’s hard to take the risk. With boys you have to think about the long-term, and you have to invest more. We have to help him find a job, marry him off, take care of his kids. With girls we don’t really.” (23 years old, Jiangshan, high school, supermarket supervisor)

In the past, historical, cultural and economic factors underlay son preference in China: sons could carry on the family line, provide labour on the farm, or support their parents in old age (Arnold and Liu 1986). However, few women during our interviews described any of these traditional ideas as impacting their own decision-making. Instead, more women discussed their economic concerns about raising sons, embedded in patriarchal Chinese culture in which daughters are usually married out of the family, and sons tend to “fetch” the bride. In particular, the groom’s parents are expected to provide housing for the couple and pay bride wealth to the bride’s family. Given increasingly expensive housing prices and marriage costs, and the fact that a man in present-day China without a house would be hard-pressed to find a wife, parents anticipate the economic burden even from when the son is born (Eklund and Göransson 2016; Jiang and Sánchez-Barricarte 2012; Wei and Zhang 2009). These concerns have led to the avoidance of bearing more than one son due to economic risk (Chi et al. 2013; Eklund 2016).

### *Urban and rural differences*

Still, these preferences for specific genders may be stronger in rural areas such as Jiangshan; most interviewees in Hangzhou expressed sex indifference. Many of these women who were college-educated and born in the 80s and 90s claimed that the sex of the child had no bearing on whether they wanted more children. They rejected the idea that there was a larger financial burden with sons, saying that if they had the means to, they would buy homes for both sons and daughters. If they did not, they would let the children be financially independent themselves. Hualing’s

mother's siblings all had one child, and none believed in the tradition of "marrying out" daughters to another family or preparing a home only for their sons:

"We're all only children. And they all prepared homes—regardless if they're married out. We don't separate between marrying out or into a family. The two families are considered combined." (26 years old, Hangzhou, bachelor's degree, temporarily unemployed)

They emphasised that raising children well was more important, not worrying about paying for their future home. In fact, some even suggested that male children should be able to make money for themselves, like Jia: "I told [my husband] this—if we have two children, they won't use our money. If they want to use money, they earn their own." Many of them also strongly emphasised the role of social security and self-reliance and not relying on sons or children for old age support. This suggests that, at least in urban areas, considerations of intergenerational financial obligations are changing.

## **Discussion**

Since 1979, many Chinese women, mostly in urban areas, have grown up believing they would only have one child. With the gradual relaxation of the policy in the past decade, and finally its complete lifting in 2016, this is no longer the case. Now all women have the choice to have two children. However, this new choice and control over childbearing has brought to light other reproductive concerns for women and their families, which reflects a societal shift in traditional Chinese family decision-making.

From a fertility perspective, our qualitative study elaborates on what quantitative studies have revealed as a gap between families' ideal and actual family composition, or expressed fertility preferences and actual behaviour (Zheng 2013; Bao, Chen and Zheng 2017; Basten and Gu 2013). In particular, while most women are often happy to be allowed a second child, they must balance considerations of present sacrifices with future familial gains. That the rhetoric of having children is overwhelmingly phrased in terms of burden helps to explain why there is such low fertility intention in China (Zheng et al. 2009).

Our study also helps to explain changes to Chinese patriarchal culture along generational and gender axes (Santos and Harrell 2016). Traditional childbearing decision-making emphasised considerations of intergenerational responsibility, care of elders and son preference. While these still persist, they have taken on different forms and now compete with other reasons—children's psychological health, women's careers and the financial burdens of childbearing—for having or not having a second child. The moral and emotional basis of generational relationships is changing: There are increasingly more resource flows out to the next generation, while traditional expectations for reciprocation from children are decreasing (Santos and Harrell 2016; Zhan 2004; Eklund and Göransson 2016; Zhang 2007). As in other low-fertility societies, families in China are increasingly dependent on two incomes to survive, and women struggle to balance raising a family with pursuing a career and earning money (Frejka, Jones and Sardon 2010; Raymo et al. 2015). The lack of social welfare or institutional support for childcare means that the burden of childrearing continues to rest on the family (Eklund and Göransson 2016). This shortfall, in combination with the rising cost of raising a child in an increasingly competitive society, leads

women to have fewer children in whom they can invest more (Greenhalgh and Winckler 2005; Eklund and Göransson 2016).

These tensions are exacerbated when it comes to gender preference. Even before the relaxation of the policy, two sons were seen as too financially burdensome in rural areas where second children were permitted, owing to future economic investment for sons' marriages (Greenhalgh, Zhu and Li 1994; Chu 2001). Women, particularly in Jiangshan, tried to avoid this economic risk, which, in turn, drove many decisions to have or forgo second children (Eklund 2016). These behaviours demonstrate how childbearing decision-making in the new multiparous era continues to be gendered, embedded in a patriarchal society in which parents need to invest more in a son who must attract a wife with a house and financial resources. This reaction, however, was much less evident in urban areas where traditional marriage customs and reliance on sons have weakened.

While China has relaxed some of its control over reproduction, our study supports the idea that families' reproductive choices are based more on social and economic factors (Zeng and Hesketh 2016). Consequently, the new family planning policy is unlikely to significantly increase population size or reverse population ageing (Wang, Cai and Gu 2013). As long as the opportunity costs of having and rearing children remain high, there will continue to be a gap between families' ideal and actual number of children. This gap can only close if the government starts to offer social and financial assistance, as well as maternity and paternity benefits and legal protections for mothers within the labour market (Attané 2016; Wang, Gu and Cai 2016). Finally, we note that while many women in this study embrace their expansion of reproductive choice, this "choice" is still confined to two children; although this is an improvement from previous policies, reproductive rights are still not fully granted in present-day China.

Our study has a few limitations: our interviewees were a specific group of postpartum women giving birth very soon after the implementation of the two-child policy, in a wealthy province of China, and they are not intended to be representative of the views of women across the entire country. Although we did interview primiparous women who did not intend to have a second child, we did not specifically sample for those who only intended one. Moreover, many women did not explicitly discuss the roles their husbands played in the decision-making process, likely because their husband was also in the room, or because they spoke on behalf of them as a couple. Therefore, the husband's exact role may be underemphasised. Finally, our interviews do not account for all aspects of family planning, including abortion and contraceptive use, which could have been illuminating in the era of contraceptive choice. Further research should include husbands and other family members, and explore the impact of two-child policy on other aspects of family planning and reproductive decisions, such as those explicitly related to contraception, abortions, and fertility treatments. In the long-term, research should continue to follow changes in family planning policy and explore how they affect family dynamics and kinship structure over time, particularly as China continues to modernise and develop economically.

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**Table 1: Sociodemographic characteristics of postpartum women interviewed**

	Hangzhou	Jiangshan
<b>Parity</b>		
Primiparous (p=1)	10	6
Multiparous (p>=2)	14	15
Mean age of first child $\pm$ SD (range)	7 $\pm$ 5.1 (2-21)	8.3 $\pm$ 5.2 (2-17)
First child daughter	6	9
First child son	8	6
<b>Age</b>		
Mean $\pm$ SD (range)	32.5 $\pm$ 0.90 (25-44)	32.2 $\pm$ 1.28 (23-45)
20-24	0	2
25-29	6	6
30-34	10	6
35-39	7	5
40-45	1	2
<b>Highest Educational Qualification</b>		
Middle School	2	3
High School	1	9
Vocational college	1	6
Bachelor's	17	3
Postgraduate	3	0
<b>Currently Employed</b>		
Yes	19	10
No	5	11