

# National and regional trends in ideal family size in China

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## *Extended Abstract*

### **Background**

Ideal family sizes are useful in indicating both possible future directions of fertility in a given society as well as providing a 'barometer' to general societal-level attitudes towards childbearing and families (1). In China, an improved understanding of ideal family sizes can go some way to examining both the possible consequences of future reforms in family planning legislation and, related to this, to judge whether the country has fallen into the 'Low Fertility Trap' where small families become normalised and increasing fertility becomes extremely difficult (2).

Following a groundbreaking study by Whyte and Gu in 1987 (3), there has been relatively little literature in English on fertility intentions in China since, and what evidence there is highly skewed towards a particular region of the country. Merli and Morgan (4), Basten et al. (5) and Nie and Wyman (6), for example, each study childbearing preferences in Shanghai. Basten et al. found strong evidence of low mean childbearing intentions among Shanghai's registered population which, according to official surveys, fell from 2.04 in 1983 to 1.63 in 1994, 1.52 in 1998, 1.10 in 2003 and 1.07 in 2008 (7), despite the fact that a majority of couples would be free to have two children under the official policy as they are both singletons and respondents were explicitly asked to consider a future without any policy restrictions. Furthermore, the desired family size of migrants who come mainly from rural areas with higher rates of fertility, while higher than indigenous Shanghaiese, is still very low – especially when compared to other rural Chinese provinces. Merli and Morgan (2011), using the Shanghai Sexual Behaviour and Sexual Networks survey found similar results. They found that 66.1% of those eligible for a second child did not intend to do so. Finally, a recent extensive study of women in six Jiangsu counties who are entitled to have two children revealed a total ideal family size of just 1.31(8).

The reasons behind these low family size preferences seem to be primarily economic. In the Jiangsu study, the economic squeeze faced by young couples in the midst of a fast-changing and highly competitive society appears to be the main reason for postponing, limiting or even forgoing childbearing (8). Similarly, Merli and Morgan (4) find that 'cannot afford another one' and 'the burden of raising children is too heavy' as the most frequently given answers for not having a further child. Nie and Wyman's (2005) qualitative study of childbearing intentions in Shanghai emphasises the role of expense, but is useful in terms of placing this in the broader, Second Demographic Transition, context of self-actualisation, materialism and consumerism. Indeed, the total wealth of contemporary Chinese is infinitely greater than those of their forefathers who had many more children.

While the studies in English language journals is quite clear in reporting these lower family size preferences, as we have mentioned they are few in number and highly skewed towards the industrial, urban and advanced areas of Shanghai and Jiangsu, a juxtaposed province. In many of the English language studies described, however, there is frequent allusion to many further studies in Chinese language demographic journals which point to similar conclusions, frequently for other parts of the country and for other population categories. However, given the limited reach of these journals

beyond China and the ‘language barrier’, most of these studies are little known beyond the Chinese borders.

In order to expand the knowledge base of studies concerning reported ideal family sizes in China, we sought to perform a meta-analysis of relevant literature to be found in Chinese journals. We searched for recent studies on ‘ideal number of children’, ‘(mean) ideal family size’, ‘fertility intentions’ and ‘fertility ideals’ in three of the leading repositories of journal articles in China, namely *WangFang Data*, *CNKI* and *CQVIP* (9, 10). These articles were screened and 41 articles were gathered together in an MS Access database. In addition we utilised an earlier review article of past studies by Feng and Zhang (2001) (11) which presents outline statistics from a large number of previous studies. Where possible, disaggregated results were categorised and harmonised. In particular, we translated the reported level of educational attainment to the relevant unit of the UNESCO International Standard Classification of Education (IFSCED) (12).

There are, of course, many significant limitations to this study. Firstly, the structure and *raison d’être* of the studies vary greatly. In particular, the level of disaggregation of the results provided varies. Secondly, the studies are not methodologically harmonised. Most are survey-based, but some small-scale qualitative studies are reported. We decided to include the qualitative studies despite their smaller sample size in order to maximise the number of studies reported. Thirdly, the reporting of the questions used is often unclear. While the question concerning ‘ideal family size’ is usually couched in individual terms, sometimes it is unclear whether or not the questions are meant at a societal level – i.e. compare ‘what is *your* ideal number of children as an individual’ and ‘what is *the* ideal number of children for an individual to have.’ This consistency in questioning is especially important given the role of policy. Many studies explicitly ask respondents to answer ‘as if there were no policy restrictions’. However, some are not explicit on this.

As with a wide variety of topics found in social surveys, respondents tend to give their answers based upon not just personal views, but within the nexus of social norms and what might be termed ‘politically correct’ attitudes. While surveys from a wide variety of settings and contexts have found a general correlation between fertility intentions and outcomes (13), it is possible to argue that the ‘politically correct’ motivation of respondents in China may be particularly strong – especially given that the SMPFPC Survey was carried out by a Governmental organization. Hermalin and Liu (14) compared face-to-face and anonymous methods of data collection of fertility preferences in the mid-1980s, and found that the anonymous returns were generally higher, by up to 0.5 children. As such, even with this degree of uncertainty and building in such inflation, the levels reported for Shanghai are still well below replacement level.

Given the number of constraints issues highlighted above, our level of analysis is necessarily basic. Here, we simply report the preferred ‘ideal family size’ and the calculated mean ideal family size. This measurement, again, has numerous constraints, with many studies questioning what ‘ideal family size’ really *means* in practise. Finally, any attempt to perform analysis on a more statistically enhanced level is hampered by the fact that not one of the articles contains a regression analysis.

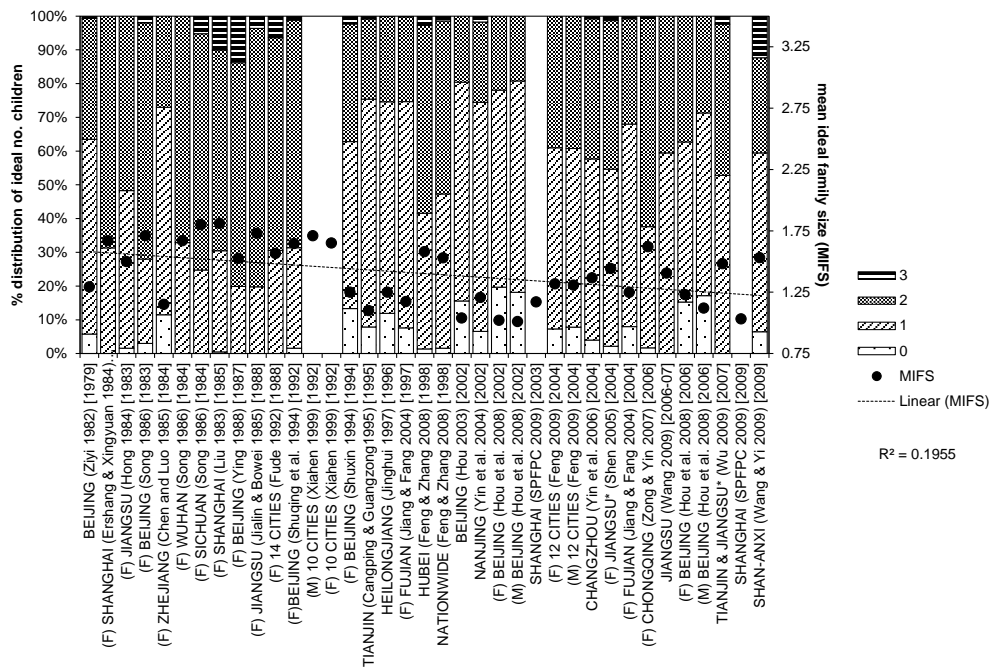
Despite these many constraints, we feel that the dearth of English language literature on childbearing preferences in the English language literature warrants such an analysis, imperfect as it may be. The reported ideal family sizes can act as a ‘bellweather’, or simple indicator of societal and individual attitudes towards childbearing. As we conclude, such a meta-analysis needs to be validated or challenged by in-depth sociological study.

## **Preliminary Results**

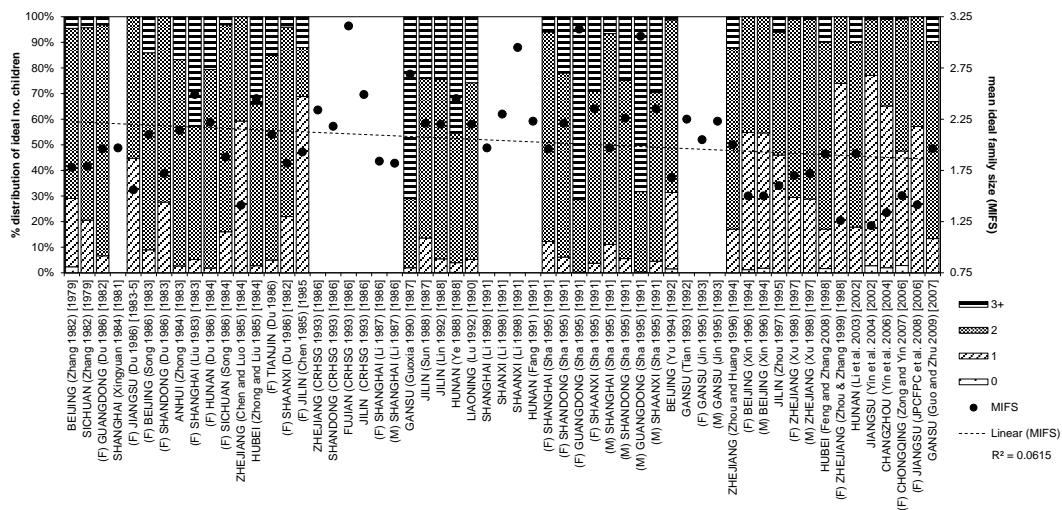
Figures 1-2 show the results of the meta-review regarding broad childbearing preferences as well as the calculated mean ideal family size (MIFS). We have differentiated between rural and urban studies on the basis of at least two-thirds of the surveyed population being either rural or urban. Where the study is based upon a more equal number of respondents from each setting, we have placed it in

Figure 2. For the studies examined by Feng and Zhang (2001), we have relied upon their rural-urban categorisation.

**Figure 1: Reported and mean ideal family sizes, *URBAN* China, 1979-2007**



**Figure 2: Reported and mean ideal family sizes, *RURAL* China, 1979-2007**



In the paper to be presented at IUSSP, we will also show differentials in ideal family size by education level, income, age group and sibling status.

## Discussion

The findings of our paper suggest that even after possible readjustment for ‘politically correct’ response bias, ideal family sizes in China are well below replacement rate in both rural and urban areas.

We suggest that this evidence points to the internalisation of the one child family in China. However, rather than simply interpreting this as a residual of the One Child Policy (and other family planning restrictions), we find that the ideal family sizes reported in China are strikingly similar to those

reported elsewhere in East Asia, for example in Hong Kong and Taiwan (15). This accords with much recent research which has emphasised the role of urbanisation, economic development and social change in driving fertility decline in China rather than the explicit effect of family planning restrictions (8, 16, 17). Furthermore, evidence from experimental two-child areas in China suggests that there is relatively little appetite for larger families (18).

This suggests that wholesale reform of the family planning restrictions is unlikely to have a major impact upon period or cohort TFR in China.

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