Extended abstract

The purpose of the study

Over the last three decades, China’s fertility has declined consistently and substantially to the below-replacement level, from over 5 children per women in the 1970s to around 1.1 today. While China’s prolonged fertility decline has been undisputable, one question remains unsettled: whether a drop of fertility rates after the implementation of restrictive birth-control policy is attributable mainly to the policy or such drop tracks with the standard factors (such as the improvement of women education and the rising living standards) implicated in low fertility elsewhere.

Current understandings on key causal factors are controversial. Many observers believe that the major driving force is the heaved-handed government in intervention through the enforcement of nationwide one-child policy, which has prevented at least 400 million additional births over the past three decades (Peng, 1991; Scharping, 2003; Greenhalgh and Winckler, 2005; Tao and Fan, 2011). Based on the findings from areas adopting the two-child policy for all couples, a group of academics have argued that China’s current low fertility is not simply a result of the birth-control policy and its various permutations (Gu and Wang, 2009). They proclaim that now most Chinese couples no longer want to have a second child. Explanations of fertility decline should give a prominent place to changing socioeconomic conditions that provide couples with incentives to limit their fertility.

Comprehending the sources of fertility decline can serve as a major signpost on whether and how to relax, if not abolish, China’s decades-long birth-control policy. However, this represents a challenging task, given the intrinsic and intricate interaction of the policy with the effect of socioeconomic development on people’s childbearing preference. This study intends to make contribution to such
understanding by examining Yicheng County in the northern part of China, one of the first central-government designated experimental counties of “universal” two-child option for over a quarter of a century. To many, including reputable media, Yicheng has been perceived as one of the novel, odd exceptions in China’s draconian, officially sanctioned one-child policy. Some have evaluated the demographic outcomes of the program in terms of birth rates and population growth (Zhang et al., 2009). Their proposition is that the county under the universal two-child option maintains, as a result of low childbearing intention, a slower population growth than that of other areas that implement the one-child policy. This perception implicitly assumes that the birth-restrictive policy would not be the main driver of fertility decline there. It underscores an argument voiced with growing insistency by those who want China to abandon its one-child restrictions as soon as possible. Such call becomes crescendo after China’s one-child policy has passed its 30th birthday, as many believe the present version of the birth-restrictive policy is not deserving of such longevity.

This paper aims to examine the validity of this perception based on the close reading of documentary evidence and intensive field research. Our analysis draws on the archives of internal policy documents, published and unpublished local statistics, as well as on in-depth interviews with key makers of the Yicheng program and the officials who enacted the program and monitored childbearing. The paper first traces the policy formulation of the conditional two-child program carried out in Yicheng County twenty-seven years ago (the Yicheng program hereafter for simplicity), and probes, retrospectively, an ultimate objective of the program. The contextual review provides the rationale for the Yicheng practice, which tells perhaps how far or little the Yicheng program has departed from the China’s population control path. It then explicates the nuances of fertility regulations in the Yicheng program. We will clarify some misreading of the program, especially with regard to its complexion. On that basis, the paper contrasts the role of birth-control policy and the effect of socioeconomic development in explaining demographic outcomes of the program. Multivariate analysis is used to examine the extent to which socioeconomic development explains fertility reduction. The paper concludes by addressing the implications of our empirical investigation.

Tentative arguments/findings

- The Yicheng program has been mistakenly interpreted and prognosticated by the media (and some published studies). When reporting the Yicheng program as an unique case of birth-control experiment, some observers may have focused more on its differences from the national one-child policy than on its adaptive continuity of government-mandated birth policy, and tend to trumpet the program’s effects on slow growth of population and low fertility. As a result, the role of the policy on fertility decline is often under-stated and the role of other factors is exaggerated. Our analysis shows that the Yicheng program cannot be
simply treated as a natural, policy-free experiment that reflects fertility responses
to changing socioeconomic circumstances only.

- Diagnosis of the Yicheng program by the close reading of relevant policy papers
can come up with better understanding on the nature of the program. While it is
small comfort for peasants who are hard to accept one-child policy, the Yicheng
program is an “adapted and adjusted” but tenacious continuity from the national
population control process in terms of the timing of marriage, the number of
children, and the childbearing interval. Yicheng is not an exception of state
control over procreation. Individual fertility intention must be subordinated to the
national demographic goal and state regulation of childbearing.

- Fertility outcomes in Yicheng are largely a function of birth rationing. Statistical
analysis demonstrates that policy aimed at reducing fertility has done much more
on recent birth rates than a process powered by socioeconomic development,
though one cannot conclude that precipitous changes in birth rate are totally
irrelevant to selected socioeconomic variables.

- This analysis is intended as a contribution to, rather than a refutation of, the
established hypothesis on the relationships between fertility and development in
the literature. The Yicheng experience does not prove that all examples of fertility
decline in China can be mainly attributed to the strong enforcement of
birth-control policy. China’s fertility falls as a result of birth-control policy
interacting with socioeconomic development. While it is generally accepted that
both sets of factors have played a role, their relative significances have varied
across localities. Furthermore, China’s fertility control policy has evolved with
highly localized features to accommodate heterogeneous geographical and
demographic conditions across the country. Even though our analysis shows that
socioeconomic developments have played an insignificant role relative to policy
factors in changing fertility, this finding cannot be readily translated into a
blanket assertion at the national level on the likely consequences of
socioeconomic transformations for fertility in the absence of large-scale
comparative studies. The fertility implication of the Yicheng program, if scaled
up to the entire country, is uncertain still. To generalize how socioeconomic
developments create incentives for rural couples to limit their fertility, other
sources of evidence, including quantitative and macro-level studies, will always
be needed.

References cited

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