

CHAPTER EIGHT

Birth Control and the Making of a New Fertility Culture

Of all the state-sponsored programs of social engineering since 1949, birth planning (*jibua shengyu*) is perhaps the most dramatic and far-reaching, fundamentally altering the family structure and redefining the private lives of the Chinese people—urban and rural alike. In Xiajia village, residents were caught by surprise by the official birth control policy and thereafter experienced a painful process of resistance, coping, and adjustment during the 1980s and 1990s.

Although the propaganda and education program for birth control started in the mid-1970s, Xiajia villagers did not pay much attention to it until a team of birth planning workers arrived in late summer 1977, a year before I left the village to begin my college education. I recall seeing the villagers assembled at educational meetings in the headquarters of production teams to learn the three-point program “*wan, xi, shao*,” meaning “late births, larger spacing, and fewer births.” At that time, most villagers could not accept the argument that having fewer children would benefit their own families and the country.

During one of the meetings, Mr. Zhao, an outspoken man and father of three daughters, openly challenged the state policies and confronted the birth control workers from the township government. He became an instant hero when he shouted in the face of a woman doctor: “I want to see who can control how many times I knock up my own wife!”

Mr. Zhao learned a hard lesson in subsequent years. First he was fined for having two more daughters; then he had to abandon his hopes for a son when his wife was sterilized during the harsh birth control campaign in 1983. When I met the man again in 1989, he still had not fully recovered from a feeling of despair. He had become an alcoholic, often tearfully complaining about his bleak future as a man without a son.

The third time I met Mr. Zhao was during a wedding banquet in 1998; he appeared to be happy, healthy, and affluent. Fellow villagers told me that Zhao had actually benefited from his five daughters, all of whom were hard workers in factories outside the village. More important, he had not spent much for their marriages and had been enjoying care and help from his daughters and sons-in-law. When I congratulated him on a good life, Zhao accepted it matter-of-factly and said: “I knew all along my daughters would be good to me. They are better than boys. As Chairman Mao said, times are different; men and women are the same.”

Another anecdote concerns a well-built young man nicknamed “Iron Pole,” who was born in 1966 and married in 1986. In January 1987, about four months after his wedding, Iron Pole’s wife gave birth to a baby girl. The couple named the child Jing, meaning “glitter” or “shining,” a vivid reflection of their happiness. In November 1988 the couple had a second baby girl and was fined 1,400 yuan for violating the birth control regulations. They could have waited two more years and applied for a permit for a second try because their first child was a girl; but Iron Pole had been so eager to have a son that he could not wait. Disappointed by the sex of their second child, Iron Pole named her Pan, meaning “to long for,” which showed his determination to have a son. The second girl’s name attracted the attention of Ms. Wang, the veteran leader of the Women’s Association in Xiajia, who had worked as a birth control cadre since 1978. Ms. Wang made extra efforts to see that Iron Pole’s wife used contraceptives and tried to persuade Iron Pole not to violate the policy again. Ignoring many people’s advice and his wife’s poor health and reluctance to become pregnant again, Iron Pole impregnated her again and they had a third

child in 1992—this time a boy. He happily agreed to pay the heavy fine of 6,000 yuan and named his son Delong, meaning “receiving a dragon.” The dragon is a positive and powerful symbol in Chinese mythology, representing the *yang* element, lightness, good luck, masculinity, and more important, the emperor in imperial China.¹ The boy’s name reflected Iron Pole’s happiness as well as his high expectations for his precious son.

During my interview with Iron Pole in 1993, he was delighted to recall how he had cleverly cheated the birth control cadre, Ms. Wang, convinced his wife, and finally had good luck. However, when we met again in 1997, Iron Pole was no longer excited by his reproductive triumph because he and his wife had been experiencing economic hard times in raising their three children. At our last meeting in 1999, Iron Pole openly admitted the mistake of ignoring the birth control regulations in 1988 and said: “If I had waited for a few more years I could have received permission for a second child and I probably would have a son.” Then he told me that his youngest brother and sister-in-law had had a daughter the previous year and had decided not to have a second child; this too, in his opinion, was a mistake: “They are too young to consider things seriously, just as I was ten years ago. But I don’t know who is more stupid—my brother or me.”

Iron Pole’s brother is not alone. By 1999 more than a dozen young couples in Xiajia village whose only child was a girl had decided not to have a second child. A closer look at the demographic changes in Xiajia shows that in their response to the birth control program many villagers had transcended their fertility ideals and behavior while others had made adjustments. As a result, a new fertility culture is in the making, and by the end of the century the state-sponsored birth control program had begun to shift toward to a more individual-oriented family planning program.

In the following pages I review the birth planning program in the village during the 1980s and 1990s and examine how the villagers coped with the state policies. I analyze the social and cultural factors that have contributed to the emergence of a new fertility culture and conclude by discussing the significant implications.

Two Decades of Birth Planning

The birth planning program in Xiajia that began in late 1977 started modestly, relying mainly on propaganda and educational meetings. Although many villagers openly rejected the idea of birth control, some found it a helpful solution. According to Ms. Wang, nine Xiajia women voluntarily underwent sterilization between 1978 and 1979 because they did not wish to have more children.

State policies became much stricter in 1980, and in order to rapidly reduce the population growth, the single-child policy was implemented, first in cities and then in the countryside. In Xiajia village, a fine of 700 yuan was imposed on any couple who had a second child (or more) after April 1, 1980. Married women of fertility age were required to use contraceptives, and newlywed couples had to apply for permission to have their first child. These policies encountered strong resistance from many villagers whose lifetime goal was to have as many children as possible, especially sons (see Li Yinhe 1993; Wasserstrom 1984). To reduce the massive discontent and anger, the Xiajia Production Brigade provided a subsidy of 420 yuan so that people could pay the 700 yuan fine for having more children.

It was not until 1983 that Xiajia villagers truly experienced the impact of the powerful birth planning program. Unlike in the previous years when the focus was on propaganda and education, the emphasis in 1983 was on the insertion of intrauterine devices (IUDs) and female sterilization (tubal ligation). All women of fertility age who had had a son by 1983 were required to be sterilized, except those with serious health problems. Women whose first child was a girl were required to get an IUD. Individual will was ignored. Six middle-aged women who had voluntarily used contraceptives long before the campaign began asked to be spared the sterilization because they did not want to have more children in any case. Their requests were rejected, and they had to undergo the operation. In addition to the government-imposed fines, the collectives punished birth control violators by withholding grain rations and other benefits for newborns. Most informants agreed that they were terrified by the very strict campaign, and few dared to resist.²

By the end of the 1983 campaign, 102 women in Xiajia village had been sterilized. Virtually every family had either an immediate member or a close

relative who had had the operation. As informants recalled in the 1990s, anxiety, discontent, grief, and strong feelings of helplessness had been typical emotional responses in 1983. Men who did not have male offspring reacted the most strongly and, for a short period of time, despairing husbands were commonly seen drunk on the streets. Two men cried out loud in the hospital while their wives were undergoing the operation.

Women suffered even more, enduring both physical and psychological pain (see Greenhalgh 1994a). According to my female informants, four women were taken to the operation table literally by force when at the last minute they had refused to have the surgery. At that time, the local hospital was poorly equipped for such a large number of operations in both human and material terms; it did not have enough beds or painkillers to treat all the women. One woman told me that she had been rushed to the county hospital in the middle of the operation because of massive bleeding. "I felt I was dying right there on the table. But I kept thinking of my three children and that helped a lot," she recalled. After the operations, the women were transported back to Xiajia village in small groups by a tractor-drawn wagon. As the wagon bumped roughly along the unpaved country roads, many women could no longer control themselves and cried out loud.

Villagers believe that when a woman is sterilized her *qi*, that is, the essence of her body, flows out. She simultaneously loses both her reproductive abilities and her physical strength. In fact, many women who underwent the operation complained that for a time afterward they felt weak and easily became ill. In addition, both men and women regarded female sterilization as akin to male castration. They used the word *qiao* to refer to female sterilization, which usually is only used to refer to gelding and spaying animals, especially pigs. Although the medical term for both male and female sterilization is *jue yu*, ordinary villagers did not refer to it in this way.³ The fact that villagers insisted on using the term *qiao* indicates that female sterilization produced a great deal of anxiety and unhappiness.

To compensate for losing part of their bodily essence (*qi*) and to ease the anxiety and despair of both the women and the men in the community, the women created a gift-giving ritual. As on other ritualized gift-giving occasions (see Yan 1996: 52–67), relatives and friends visited the woman who had been sterilized, bringing eggs, brown sugar, canned fruits, preserved meat,

and other kinds of food considered by the villagers to be nutritious. According to my informants, large-scale gift-giving began when one woman fell seriously ill after being sterilized; thereafter all women who were sterilized began to receive gifts and the new ritual of gift exchange was created.

As in other rural areas, the local government and cadres in Xiajia village relied on the imposition of fines to force the villagers to comply with the birth control regulations; the size of these fines was constantly increased. The heavy fines did have a deterrent effect on some villagers. When asked why they did not continue trying to have a son, some who had had multiple births, going against the official plan, gave me the same simple answer: "*fa pa le*," meaning they were afraid of the repeated fines. Table 8.1 summarizes the fines imposed during the 1980s and 1990s.

The fines frequently increased, their imposition more and more arbitrary by the late 1990s, and a wide range of fines was created for each category of births that defied the official plan. Xiajia villagers complained to me that in practice the local government always imposed the heaviest fines possible because the government benefited economically from them. When a family accumulated too many unpaid fines, the village office had the power to confiscate the family's contracted land as further punishment. The fines were shared

TABLE 8.1.
Fines for Unplanned Births, 1980–1999 (yuan)

Period	Fines for first birth	Fines for second birth	Fine for third or higher-order birth
April 1980– January 1983		700	Same as for second birth
February 1983– December 1987		1,200	Same as for second birth
January 1988– September 1989		1,400	Same as for second birth
October 1989– January 1990	2,200	4,200	6,200
February 1990– June 1994	3,000	6,000	9,000
July 1994– present	1,000–5,000	5,000–30,000	10,000–60,000

NOTE: Since October 1989 couples have been required to apply for a certificate of a planned birth after their marriage. A first birth without a permit is regarded as an unplanned birth and thus is subject to fines.

between the village office and the local township government. The village office kept 40 to 60 percent of the fines to use as rewards for one-child households. The rest of the collected fines went to the birth planning committee in the local government to be used as part of its operating budget. For obvious reasons, therefore, both the local government and the village office were keen to impose and collect the fines.

A large-scale campaign of female sterilization was relaunched every two or three years after 1983, but it never was as coercive or massive as the first. The last campaign took place in 1994 when twelve Xiajia women underwent sterilization. Since then state birth control policies have been relaxed. Women with a son no longer have to be sterilized; instead they are allowed to use an IUD or to take birth control pills. In addition, beginning in 1987, couples whose first child was a girl were also allowed to have a second child if the wife was 28 or older and the interval between her first and second birth was four years or more. These policy changes eased the worries of villagers who wished to have at least one male heir. More important, new fertility ideals were created among the younger generation in the 1990s.⁴ Table 8.2 summarizes the demographic changes during the 1980s and 1990s.

The obvious and most important change is the dramatic drop in higher-order births. As shown in Table 8.2, there were a total of 383 live births from 1979 to 1998: 221 were first births, 102 were second births, 37 were third births, and 23 were fourth or more births.⁵ A clear line can be drawn in 1992, when the last third and the last fourth births occurred. Actually, fourth (or more) births were rare as early as 1984, with only two during the subsequent fifteen years. Similarly, the number of third births also declined to one or two per year after 1984.

As a result of the reduction and eventual elimination of higher-order births, the total number of births per year dropped from 34 in 1979 to 11 in 1998, and the percentage of first births among all births increased from 32 percent in 1979 to 91 percent in 1998. By the end of the 1990s not only had the fertility rate decreased significantly, but birth parity had shifted to a predominantly first-birth pattern. It should also be noted that in the 1990s there was only one illegal second birth; all other second births conformed to the revised policy that allowed couples whose first child was a girl to have a second child. Consequently, the percentage of second births also dropped dramatically from 29 percent in 1979 to 9 percent in 1998.⁶

TABLE 8.2.
Distribution of Births by Parity, 1979-1998

	First birth		Second birth		Third birth		Fourth or higher birth		Total number of births	Total number by sex (male:female)
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent		
1979	11	32	10	29	8	24	5	15	34	16:18
1980	11	35	12	39	6	19	2	6	31	15:16
1981	9	32	7	25	4	14	8	29	28	16:12
1982	10	34	11	38	5	17	3	10	29	14:15
1983	11	48	7	30	3	13	2	9	23	12:11
1984	12	67	4	22	1	5.5	1	5.5	18	8:10
1985	14	74	5	26					19	8:11
1986	7	41	9	53	1	6			17	8:9
1987	10	45	9	41	2	9	1	5	22	9:13
1988	12	60	6	30	2	10			20	9:11
1989	13	72	3	17	2	11			18	8:10
1990	7	50	6	43	1	7			14	9:5
1991	10	77	2	15	1	8			13	7:6
1992	13	76	2	12	1	6	1	6	17	10:7
1993	11	79	3	21					14	8:6
1994	14	82	3	18					17	10:7
1995	13	93	1	7					14	6:8
1996	12	100							12	6:6
1997	11	92	1	8					12	7:5
1998	10	91	1	9					11	6:5
All year total	221		102		37		23		383	192:191

The ratio of male to female births is another interesting figure shown in Table 8.2. Although the sex ratio of newborns fluctuated in 1980s and 1990s, overall there were 192 boys and 191 girls born during this twenty-year period. But this surprising ratio of 100.5 boys to 100 girls is largely the result of the first decade of birth control, during which there were 115 newborn boys and 126 newborn girls, a ratio of 91:100. The higher birth rate of girls in subsequent years is a direct result of parents' efforts to have male offspring. This trend took a remarkable turn in 1990 when the number of newborn boys was almost twice the number of newborn girls, and this continued in most years during the decade. The ratio increased to an alarming 118:100 during the second ten-year period, echoing the national pattern of strong preference for males among Chinese parents in both the cities and the countryside.⁷ Paralleling the rise in male births, the number of illegal births declined significantly. This suggests that some villagers might have taken a more direct strategy to secure a male offspring, a rather common nationwide phenomenon in the 1990s.⁸

Xiajia villagers are aware of the demographic changes, and they attribute the radical drop in the number of births to the new mentality of the younger generation as well as to the state birth control campaigns. Ms. Wang, the birth control cadre in Xiajia, told me that her job had become much easier in the 1990s because many young couples preferred to have fewer children and their parents had also given up the old ideal of *duozi duofu* (more sons, more happiness). Consequently, Xiajia village maintained an excellent record of birth planning for six successive years after 1993, with only one birth outside the plan. According to the official birth quotas issued in late 1998, Xiajia village was allowed to have eleven first births and two second births in 1999. These quotas, Ms. Wang told me, were more than enough for Xiajia; based on past records and her own information, she predicted that the village would not even reach its quota. Simple evidence of this new trend, Ms. Wang said, were her difficulties in issuing second-birth permits to the qualified couples. In the late 1980s, applying for such a permit cost only twenty yuan. A number of young couples applied for the permit, but not all of them had a second child. In 1992 the local government decided to add a registration fee of 500 yuan, the sole purpose of which was, according to the villagers, to increase the revenue of the local government, particularly that of the birth planning

committee. This proved to be a bad strategy, at least in the Xiajia case. Ms. Wang told me that only ten couples applied for the permit from 1992 to 1997 (nine had a second child). "Unless a couple has made a definite decision, they don't want to spend the 520 yuan for a piece of paper. Who knows when the state policies will change again," she explained, as she showed me several blank permits for a second birth. Not long ago, these permits had been regarded as scarce resources.⁹

Ironically, by the end of the 1990s, cadres in local birth planning agencies had begun to worry about the radical changes that they had contributed to bringing about. Because fewer and fewer villagers were violating the state policies, fines and the sale of second-birth permits declined, and the cadres faced a serious shortage of revenue. As a schoolteacher humorously noted, Xiajia village's perfect score in birth planning was bad news for many cadres in the local government.

Individual Choice and Reproductive Strategies

After carefully examining the interactions among the central state, the local state (represented by the village cadres), and the ordinary villagers, Susan Greenhalgh suggests that the family planning program in rural Shaanxi has been "peasantized" in the sense that both the state and the villagers have retreated from their original positions. The state was forced by strong peasant resistance to change its original radical policies, and it gradually relaxed the single-child policy, allowing some villagers to have a second child if their first child was a girl. Although this change reinforces the traditional preference for male children, villagers have begun to change their opinion about the ideal number of children, with many concluding that the ideal is one son and one daughter—the "optimal two" (see Greenhalgh 1993).

What I find most intriguing about Greenhalgh's study is the idea that nothing was immutable in the two decades of birth planning in rural China, and the results were derived from the dynamic contestations and negotiations among the parties involved. In light of Greenhalgh's findings, I went further in my own research and tried to understand who, at the individual level, made what choices and why, taking into consideration the interactive

relationships among the state, the local cadres, and ordinary villagers. Some clues about individual strategies can be gleaned from Table 8.3.

The data presented in Table 8.3 differ from those in Table 8.2 in several respects. First, the numbers represent the couples, instead of actual births, whose status in childbearing is defined by their most recent birth. A couple with three children is still counted as one couple in the category of "third or more births outside the plan." Second, as mentioned, enforcement of the birth control policies in Xiajia began on April 1, 1980. Before that, villagers did not have to make any choices about childbearing. So, couples who had children before 1980 are not included here, but the five couples who had their first child in early 1999 are. Third, in grouping the individual cases, I draw a line after 1986 because after the implementation of policy changes in 1987 some couples qualified for a second child. Another divide is in 1992, when the birth planning program in Xiajia took another turn, as shown by the near-disappearance of illegal births thereafter.

Facing increased pressure from the birth control policies, villagers had to choose between complying with or defying the policies. Customarily, local birth planning cadres classify villagers into two large categories: *jishengbu* (planned-birth households) and *chaoshengbu* (households in which one or more births do not conform to the birth rules). One hundred and sixty-two couples observed the birth control regulations and had either an only son, an only daughter, or two children with a planned second birth after 1987. Another eighty-nine couples defied the state policies by having more children, including both second births and higher-order births.

Planned-Birth Households

The fifty-nine couples who were the parents of an only daughter were eligible to have a second child, but by the summer of 1999 they had not done so. Their unconventional choice challenges the widely accepted assumption that Chinese peasants universally prefer male offspring (see, e.g., Li Yinhe 1993).

A focused survey of this group revealed, however, that thirty-two of those couples had had their first child in or after 1993 and were therefore qualified for a second child for only a short period of time or were too young to be qualified. In either case, it is hard to know whether or not they intended to have a second child. In addition, of the twenty-seven couples whose only

TABLE 8.3.
Villagers' Childbearing Status Defined by Last Birth, April 1980–July 1999

Period of childbirth	Planned birth ^a			Unplanned birth ^b			
	Only-daughter	Only-son	Second birth	Second birth		Third or higher birth	
				Did not have a son before this birth	Had a son before this birth	Did not have a son before this birth	Had a son before this birth
1980–1986	6	10		21	17	16	6
1987–1992	21	32	12	10	7	10	1
1993–1999 ^c	32	38	9	1			
All years	59	82	21	56		33	

^a A planned birth is a birth that conforms to the official birth control regulations.

^b An unplanned birth is a birth that does not conform to the official birth control regulations.

^c Because my last field research was conducted in July–August 1999, birth data for 1999 are incomplete. Four first births and one planned second birth were expected when I left the village.

daughter was born before 1993, eight were unable to have a second child because of health-related problems or the death of spouse. This narrowed my investigation down to the remaining nineteen couples.

The official birth control records show that among the wives of the nineteen families, seventeen had IUDs and the other two had been taking contraceptive pills since giving birth to their first child. Some of the women had had their first child in the late 1980s, and their only daughters were already in primary school. Had they decided to have a second child, the interval between children would have been nearly ten years. According to Ms. Wang, these couples were content with an only daughter, and all except one had expressed the intention of not having a second child. They were officially recognized as *dunubu* (only-daughter households); the other twenty-one similarly qualified couples who had given birth to a second child during this period were still referred to as "planned-birth households" (see Table 8.3).¹⁰

Through interviews and household visits I found that these parents of only daughters shared several things in common. They were born either in the late 1960s or the early 1970s (with one exception), and all had established their conjugal households shortly after their weddings. Economically, they formed a rather homogeneous group slightly above the village average—having a new house, major electric appliances, and some savings. However, in their consumption of food, clothing, and leisure goods, such as music tapes and videos,

these couples lived much better material lives than the average, even comparable to the rich in some respects.

Moreover, many husbands in this group were landless laborers, because they were too young to be given a share of contract land during decollectivization in 1983. Only two men had a full share of contract land, seven had received a half-share (because they were 16 or 17 years old in 1983), and the remaining ten had not received any contract land. Seeking temporary work in cities, therefore, was the main channel of income for these young men, and, with one exception, they regularly spent six months or so per year working in urban areas. Their experiences working and living in cities no doubt affected their mentality and behavior, and many were among the most open-minded individuals in Xiajia.

When asked about the unconventional idea of having an only daughter, the most common answer from these parents of only daughters was *yatou xiaozi buzhongyao, guanjian shi xiaoshu*, meaning “it is unimportant whether the child is a son or daughter, the key is to have a filial child.” The wives seemed to be even more open-minded and vocal during my interviews, and several provided detailed stories about sons who had failed to support their elderly parents. Among the six husbands, four admitted that they would probably have wanted to have a son had their wives agreed to having a second child; but it was also fine with them to have an only daughter because many daughters were indeed better caretakers of their elderly parents. Five men and eight women in this group also identified quality of life as their primary concern in deciding not to have a second child, and their excuses were either *yangbuqi* (cannot afford) or *zhaogu bu guolai* (cannot take care of [so many children]).

When I discussed my findings with Ms. Wang, the birth control cadre in the village, she told me that these new ideas regarding childbearing had emerged in the 1980s and that the first couple to have an only son had decided to do so in 1981. But in the 1980s most villagers were just playing with words, and it was only in the late 1990s that more and more young couples became serious about having only one child. Ms. Wang then called my attention to another group—the eighty-two couples with an only son (see Table 8.3), and said: “I am not sure the parents of an only daughter won’t change their minds because they still have the time to do so. But I can assure you these only-son families will stay the same, unless the government policies change again.” Her

confidence was due to the almost perfect record of the birth control program in Xiajia village, which also reflected Ms. Wang’s hard work.

I found Ms. Wang’s statement convincing because most parents of an only son were in their early thirties or late twenties and shared the same social background and economic status as the nineteen parents of an only daughter. Given the fact that some open-minded young couples had found an only girl household acceptable, it was likely that most of these eighty couples would continue to comply with state policies—although some might do so by default.

Households with Births in Defiance of the Plan

By 1999, fifty-six couples had two children and thirty-three couples had three or more children. Did they all want to have a son so ended up with more children than they were allowed to have? Some did, but others did not.

Of the fifty-six couples who were fined for having a second child, thirty-two did not have a son before the second attempt, and twenty-four did. This means that only some of these couples decided to violate the state policies in order to have a son; others may have been hoping to have a daughter, or simply a second child. Male preference, therefore, was not the sole motivation for villagers to have a second child.

How many couples achieved their sex preference goal when they risked having a second child? Table 8.3 shows that of the thirty-two couples whose first child was a daughter, fifteen had a second girl, and seventeen had a boy. Similarly, of the twenty-four couples who already had a son but decided to have a second child, thirteen had daughters and eleven had sons. If the gender was their priority in having a second child, their chances of success were about fifty-fifty.

But some couples cared less about the sex of their second child than about having two children. Several villagers explained to me that they felt it was unfair for the first child to grow up alone. “Everybody needs to have siblings and relatives,” claimed one middle-aged mother. This sentiment was particularly strong among couples whose first child was a son. In other words, contrary to widely accepted scholarly wisdom, gender may not be the only reason for a second birth in defiance of the birth control plan.

Male preference, nevertheless, seems to be the major motivation among those who had three or more children. The majority of the couples who chose to have a third or fourth child (twenty-six out of thirty-three) did not yet have a son. By 1992, the last year of a higher-order birth, only fourteen of the twenty-six couples had had a son, and the other twelve couples ended up having three, four, or even five girls. Again, when couples tried a second or third time to have a son, the success rate was about 50 percent. This may also explain why in the 1980s the sex ratio of newborns was unusually low, because many of the higher-order newborns were girls. These couples had a much stronger male preference in the first place, so an unsuccessful second attempt led them to third and fourth attempts. Of these thirty-three couples, eighteen had three children, nine had four children, four had five children, and two had six children. So, by 1992, these thirty-three couples had produced 122 children, which translates into a fertility rate of 3.69 per woman in this small group, much higher than the average of 1.8 births per woman among the cohort of reproductive age from 1980 to 1999 in Xiajia village.

Seven couples had already had a son by the time they had their third child, but six had the higher-order birth in either 1980 or 1981 when the birth control polices were not strict. For these six couples, the direct cost of having a third child was tolerable because the collectives subsidized a major part of the 700-yuan fine. After the 1983 birth control campaign, however, only villagers with a strong desire for a son defied the state policies to have a third or fourth child.

The only exception was the couple who had their fourth child in 1989. It may not be coincidental that the husband in this couple was known for being an extremely conservative and patriarchal tyrant at home, and economically the household was way below average in the late 1980s. They could not afford to pay the rising fines for higher order births—they were fined 6,000 yuan for their third child and 9,000 yuan for the fourth—and went even deeper into debt.

A lower economic status is perhaps the most salient feature of this group. Twenty-four of the thirty-three couples in the multiple-birth group were poor, and the other nine had barely average incomes. Even worse, twenty-eight couples owed fines to the village office and many were also in debt to relatives. Although most husbands in this group were old enough to have received contracted land in 1983, their land had long ago been confiscated by

the village office to pay their accumulated unpaid fines. The everyday struggle of raising several children dragged these couples further down. Their impoverished multiple-birth situation was vividly described by fellow villagers as *yue qiong yue sheng, yue sheng yue qiong*, which means “the more poor, the more children; the more children, the more poor”—a vicious circle. Consequently, many couples in this group were looked down upon by other villagers and thus also suffered from a lack of self-esteem and social prejudice against them. A few couples in this group regretted their choices or were interested in rethinking their reproductive strategies, but the majority still insisted on the ideal of “more sons, more happiness.” Their insistence on traditional notions may also be explained by their age; they were generally in their early forties or older in 1999 and thus had spent their youth during the collective period.

Understanding the New Fertility Culture

The above analysis demonstrates that villagers did not respond homogeneously to the birth planning program imposed by the powerful state; instead they employed different strategies to cope with it. No single explanation, such as repression, resistance, or adaptation, reflects the richness and individual variations of their lived experiences in this aspect of their private lives. And the fact that a large number of young couples were content with having an only child—an only daughter in some cases—indicates that a new fertility culture had emerged by the end of the 1990s, which can be examined in economic, demographic, gender, and communal terms.

The Cost and Utility of Children: The Economic Factor

Economic considerations emerged as a major factor contributing to changes in fertility behavior among the young villagers.¹¹ Recall that a number of young parents of an only daughter said that not being able to afford or to take good care of another child were the major reasons not to have a second child. Many parents of an only son held the same view, though they did not use it to justify their reproductive choice. The interesting point is that, as shown in the above analyses, parents of an only child tended to enjoy a better economic

status than those who violated the birth control policies to have more children; yet it was the former rather than the latter who seriously considered the cost of raising children when making fertility decisions. Having said this, I must stress that, by the late 1990s, all informants—regardless of age, sex, and or fertility situation—agreed that they could hardly keep pace with the increasing costs of raising children.¹²

When reviewing the cost of raising children, villagers seemed to be most concerned with *linghuaqian* (incidental expenses); this newly emerged category that had little to do with life's necessities has been rising rapidly. Toys are incidental expenses; but the most incidental expenditures were for food items, including candy, soft drinks, ice-cream bars, cookies, fruits, fried instant noodles (which are consumed as snacks by children), and sausages. By the end of the 1990s, these incidental expenditures were a must for families with small children, poor and rich alike. The average daily expenditure per child was 1 yuan in summer 1998, or 360 yuan per year, nearly one-tenth of the average annual household income (4,000 yuan). Influenced by the urban culture, young parents competed with one another to buy fancy toys and plentiful snacks to show affection toward their children (in many cases, an only child), a practice that, interestingly, attracted little criticism from the older generation.

By the late 1990s children had become accustomed to such daily luxuries and had developed a strong sense of entitlement. In the summer of 1999, when two children (ages 6 and 10) learned that their mother, a schoolteacher, had received a salary increase, they demanded that she also increase her monthly incidental expenditures on them from 70 yuan to 100 yuan. The mother told me that her parents had never spent extra money on her when she was young, buying only necessary food and clothing. "It is amazing that these little people dare to ask for a raise," the mother complained while holding both children in her arms and smiling.

Although incidental expenses attracted a lot of attention, the more important expenses are for basic daily needs. According to several villagers' accounts, to raise a child from birth to age 20 a couple needs at least 200 yuan per year for clothing, 160 yuan per year for medicine and emergencies, and 800 to 1,000 yuan per year for food. Since the late 1980s, education has become increasingly costly, and many parents complained that they could no longer afford to send their children to school. The normal cost of education

was estimated at 240 yuan per year (an average of the costs of primary and middle school).

The most expensive item, however, is a marriage.¹³ The custom of providing a generous bridewealth and dowry has flourished since the 1980s, and the average cost of marriage (for a son) increased more than tenfold over the five decades after 1949, reaching 30,000 yuan in 1999. With young people demanding conjugal independence and individual property rights, a new house is now also a precondition for marriage. This means that a son's marriage normally costs his parents 40,000 to 50,000 yuan (it is much less costly to marry off a daughter because the parents need only provide an acceptable dowry). In total, my informants estimated that parents had to spend 70,000 yuan or more for a son and 40,000 yuan for a daughter over a period of twenty years.

Although these figures are derived from individual accounts rather than a systematic survey, they still provide a rough estimate of the rising costs of raising children and their impact on the current generation of young parents. In fact, the estimations of the Xiajia villagers approximate those from survey results. A 1995 survey in rural Shaaxi found that the total cost of raising a child from birth to the age of 16 was 30,120 yuan, but this figure did not include the largest expenditure—the cost of marriage (see Zhu and Zhang 1996).¹⁴

While the costs of raising children are on the rise, their perceived utility has been decreasing at an equally rapid pace. As is widely recognized in both scholarly work and among the public, children are valuable as potential laborers for the family economy, future providers of aged parents, carriers of the family/descent line, and a source of parents' happiness and psychological fulfillment. The existence and importance of these roles vary from one society to another according to the specific conditions of social and economic development. In contemporary American society, it is the latter that matters the most, while in rural China, scholars have long considered the first three to be the most important reasons villagers want more children.

The Xiajia case reveals some astonishing changes in this respect. First, the shortage of land and other employment opportunities has led to a serious surplus of laborers since the early 1980s. It is at least unwise, if not suicidal, to invest in children as laborers. This is obvious to the villagers because children born after 1983—the year of decollectivization and land redistribution—did not receive a share of rationed land, not to mention per-male-laborer-based

contract land. Second, the new custom of early family division further reduced the potential of adult children contributing economically to their parents' home; they all left to establish their own conjugal household shortly after marriage. Third, the traditional notion of filial piety is collapsing, and elderly support has become increasingly problematic. Although adult children (mainly married sons) still fulfilled their responsibilities to feed their parents, a number of elderly parents were forced to live alone to avoid heart-breaking conflicts with unfilial sons. Both ideologically and as a practical matter, the first two values of children—as family laborers and providers of elderly support—are quickly declining.

This is particularly true regarding the marginal utility of high-birth-order children. When it comes down to the matter of elderly support, married sons tend to shift the responsibility from one to another, but an only son has no such ability. As a result, everything else being equal, elderly parents of multiple sons found themselves worse off than their counterparts with only sons. In this connection, it is noteworthy that a 1996 survey of 660 households in three different rural areas showed that 60 percent of elderly parents lived alone, with a pattern whereby the more sons aged parents had, the higher the chance they would live alone (see Peng and Dai 1996: 57–58). Improvements in the medical system and the drop in child mortality have further undermined the marginal utility of multiple sons. By the end of the 1990s, villagers all agreed that the number of sons did not count for much in terms of old-age security; it was best to have one filial son. Similar reflections have been reported from many other areas of rural China as well (see, e.g., Li Yinhe 1993; Peng and Dai 1996; and Ye 1998).

A New Generation of Parents: Demographic Factors

Some Chinese scholars have disputed the applicability of the cost-utility model to rural China because the demands for children are deeply rooted in a cultural tradition that is characterized by familism and the worship of fertility. The perpetuation of the family line through reproduction is what makes life meaningful to Chinese villagers, and it is for this reason that children (particularly male offspring) evoke a kind of religious feeling of fulfillment that cannot be measured by economic gains or losses. In this view, the cost-utility model cannot explain why so many villagers had multiple chil-

dren regardless of the price they had to pay and why in some developed rural areas of southern China the fertility rate remained high even after the cost of children increased and a better social system of elderly support was put into place (see Li Yinhe 1993; Chen and Mu 1996: 127).

In my opinion, such a cultural perspective is important in understanding the persistence of the traditional fertility culture and peasant resistance to birth control policies. However, scholars of this view tend to regard the conservative characteristics of peasant culture as timeless and immutable and also to assume that Chinese villagers homogeneously refuse to accept new fertility ideals. The Xiajia case proves otherwise in two ways.

First, traditional notions of fertility have changed to a great extent. By the end of the 1990s, few Xiajia villagers still upheld the old ideal of “more sons, more happiness” (*duozi duofu*); instead the view had changed to “more sons, more worries” (*duozi duochou*). Villagers also began to question the notion of *yang er fanglao* (raising sons for old age) and tried to increase old-age security by establishing personal savings and cultivating close relationships with married daughters. Although most villagers still perceive the continuation of the family line only through sons, the pressures to produce a son for the family have begun to wane: third births among parents of two daughters are rare, and only-daughter households are no longer exceptional. Similar changes in the fertility culture are reported from other parts of rural China as well (see, e.g., Peng and Dai 1996).

Second, it is not accidental that births that defied the official policy dropped sharply in the early 1990s and then ended entirely in the late 1990s in Xiajia village—the secret lies in the demographic transition of parents of fertility age. Young parents in the 1990s were born in the early 1970s and grew up in a social environment where birth control was emphasized as a fundamental strategy for national development. This constitutes a sharp contrast to the social environment of their parents, who grew up during the Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution when the traditional notion of “more sons, more happiness” was translated into the Maoist slogan of “more people, more power.” These young parents, therefore, have been less affected by the legacy of the old fertility culture and are also more ready to accept the reality that their fertility desires must comply with the state birth control policies. Actually, few still consider the birth of a child to be a purely private and family matter. On several occasions, young villagers asked me what it was

like to live in a country where one can have as many children as one wants. They simply could not imagine this from their own lived experiences. In other words, the notion of planned birth has become part of the mind-set of the young generation, and this alone may help us to understand the relative ease with which young villagers comply with birth control policies.

But the generational differences go beyond the impact of state ideology and policy implementation. Many young parents view the meaning of life differently from their older siblings and parents. Based on data collected from 1989 to 1994, I elsewhere document the rise of a youth subculture in three villages in northern China and argue that village youth of the 1990s had a much stronger desire than their elders to pursue happiness in their personal lives. Their notion of happiness was more individualistic than that of their parents or elder siblings and, more often than not, was defined by material comforts such as fashionable clothing, good housing, and better jobs (Yan 1999: 80–81). The same group of village youth that I previously studied was married and had become young parents by the end of 1999. Following their footsteps in life, I could see clearly the continuing influence of the youth culture in their family lives, including fertility planning. Their pursuit of material comforts made them particularly aware of the rising costs of children; their awareness of individual rights led them to cast doubt on traditional fertility notions; and the national trend of consumerism further raised their life aspirations (see Yan 2000). During my interviews, young parents frequently cited the difficult lives of their own parents as unsatisfactory and even unworthy of living, saying that they could not understand why their elder siblings were willing to pay heavy fines to have several children and end up living in poverty.

When a Wife Is in Charge: The Gender Factor

Generational differences matter, and so does the gender relationship. Household surveys and interviews revealed a link between the choice of an only child on the one hand and a wife's status at home and the quality of the husband-wife relationship on the other hand. For instance, among the nineteen couples whose only child was a daughter, twelve wives (63 percent) were in charge of family affairs at home; in contrast, only three husbands were in a similar po-

sition of power. In the remaining four couples, husbands and wives enjoyed an equal relationship in decision-making and household chores. Moreover, eleven of the nineteen couples were also known for “having good feelings” (*ganqinghao*) toward each other in local terms, which means that their conjugal relationship was close and affectionate.

A similar pattern existed among the forty-seven couples whose only son was born before 1993. Again using the power relationship as a measurement, twenty-seven only-son families were wife-led (57 percent), nine were husband-led (19 percent), and in the remaining eleven the husbands and wives enjoyed an equal relationship at home (23 percent). This suggests that when a wife is in charge of family affairs the couple is likely to comply with birth control policies and, in some cases, young couples manage to overcome the traditional preference for a male child.

Additional supporting evidence can be found among the opposite group—the couples who defied the control policies. Among the twenty-four couples who had had a son before having their second child, there were ten husband-dominant families, five wife-led families, and nine couples with an equal relationship. Given the current trend among the younger generation for more wives to be in charge of family affairs, the percentage of husband-led families in this particular group is obviously higher than the average. It is conceivable that if more wives had played a leading role in this group there would have been fewer illegal second births.

Either way, the Xiajia cases reveal that the status of women, particularly that of young wives, may be one of the key elements in determining a couple's reproductive strategy. Couples in wife-led families tended to easily accept the new ideal of childbearing and most chose to have only one child. In households where the husbands were in charge, the couples tended to follow the traditional ideals and violate the birth control regulations in order to have more children or to fulfill their desire to have a son. One can infer that in those families it was the husband and/or the relatives of the husband who opposed the new policies. Since children are now less useful as a source of labor and less reliable for elderly support, the continuity of the descent line has become a major motivation for having more children; this concern was, understandably, more prevalent among the husbands and their relatives than among the wives. Moreover, when the conjugal relationship is based on affection, respect, and

companionship, resulting in a more equal gender relationship, it is likely that the couple will pay more attention to the quality of family life and will rationally calculate the pros and cons of births that defy the regulations.

In this connection Hill Gates's finding from Taiwan and the city of Chengdu, Sichuan province, is particularly noteworthy. In both places women who own small businesses tend to have fewer children, and their choice is a strategy of both work and life (including kinship practices):

Chinese women do not choose to limit this burden only because childcare and childbearing are sometimes uncomfortable, painful, and exhausting, and at worst fatal. They do so as well because they have access to a secondary model of kinship relations that is submerged within a more visible kinship ideology. This model, especially clear among petty capitalists, rationalizes childbearing as a measurable contribution made to meet a specific obligation, and also rationalizes its limitation. (Gates 1993: 255)

Cunfeng: The Community Factor

Finally, the community also plays a role in influencing villagers' fertility desires and demand for children. When discussing birth planning with me, Ms. Wang, the local birth control cadre, repeatedly pointed out that Xiajia village benefited from a good *cunfeng*, which literally means "village wind" but may better be translated as the "village trend" or "village mood." What Wang meant were the established community practices that provide the social norms for the villagers to follow.

Initially, birth planning work in Xiajia proceeded more smoothly than in surrounding villages, primarily because of Xiajia's strong and relatively clean leadership and its successful collective economy in the late 1970s and early 1980s, which gave the cadres enough resources to use both sticks and carrots as incentives.¹⁵ The absence of serious kinship-based fights within the village also contributed to the emergence of a new fertility culture, and the established new fertility norms in turn regulated the people's behavior.

In addition to its economic function, a family's manpower—the physical power of men—is socially important in rural communities where disputes and other conflicts are often resolved by kinship intervention rather than legal procedures. The number of sons in a family often serves as a direct gauge of a family's influence and status, and this is particularly true if there are fre-

quent kinship-based violent conflicts.¹⁶ In Xiajia village, the kinship structure emphasizes marriage-based alliances rather than lineage-based power. The fact that more than 80 percent of the villagers in Xiajia were related significantly reduced the perceived needs to develop family manpower to deal with kinship-based conflicts. There have been violent conflicts between families in the recent past, but the new patterns of alliance-making depend more on friendship and affinal ties, and actual practice is even more fluid and individual-centered (see Yan 2001). The need for manpower in violent conflicts alone, therefore, can no longer motivate Xiajia villagers to demand more children.

Established practices in a community have more regulating power on its members, and this is the underlying meaning of what Ms. Wang calls *cunfeng*, the village trend or mood. During my interviews I frequently heard informants cite *sui daliu* (following the big trend) as their rationale for making a particular fertility choice. A middle-aged couple with two sons and three daughters told me that in their time (the late 1970s and early 1980s) many neighbors had several sons, "so we figured we must not have only one son." After paying fines for their fourth and fifth children, the couple luckily achieved their goal; but many others were not so lucky. Similarly, a number of young parents with an only son admitted that they did not want to have a second child because no one else did.

As a result of interactions and readjustments, community norms have emerged and evolved over the years, and villagers consciously use the new norms to guide their actions and judge those of others, labeling them as either *beli* (reasonable) or *bubeli* (unreasonable). For instance, having a third child in order to have a son was regarded as reasonable until the early 1990s, but it was considered unreasonable in the late 1990s. At the end of the 1990s, although the ideal number of children in a family was two, not a single couple with an only son had tried to have a second child after 1993 because it was regarded as not only unreasonable but also immoral to compete for the limited birth quota with those couples whose first child was a girl. Yet the nineteen couples with an only daughter were also regarded as a bit strange by the majority of villagers because they did not follow the big trend (*sui daliu*) and went beyond the community norms.¹⁷

From Birth Control to Family Planning

In short, the long-term interactions among the state, its local agents, and ordinary villagers made birth planning a much easier task in Xiajia, and a new fertility culture had emerged by the end of the 1990s. By examining the villagers' individual choices and reproductive strategies, I reveal how ordinary villagers made their childbearing choices when they were facing an unprecedented intrusion into their private lives by a powerful state. Passive resistance, the most popular form of peasant response, was certainly a part of their strategy, but they have also established a new fertility culture. It is time, therefore, to pay closer attention to the villagers' capability to transcend older values and norms (and to a certain extent even themselves) in human reproduction.

The new fertility culture, however, is still evolving; most changes thus far involve only the number—ideal or actual—of children. There have not yet been obvious changes in the other two, equally important, aspects of rural fertility culture: the sex of children and the time of birth. The fact that nineteen couples intended to remain the parents of only daughters certainly marks a significant development in the battle against the age-old preference for male children, yet the alarmingly high ratio of male to female births (118:100) in the 1990s prevents one from being too optimistic in this respect. State birth control policies only reinforced the traditional ideal of early birth; fertility itself is now regarded as both a privilege and a scarce resource. A common strategy, therefore, is to marry earlier and to give birth earlier, pushing the average age of first births among Xiajia women down to 21 (many village youth even lied about their age in order to marry earlier).¹⁸

The emerging fertility culture involves another significant change—the shift from state-imposed birth control to a family planning program that is based more on individual choice and family strategy, as revealed by the two anecdotes at the beginning of this chapter. Back in the 1970s, villagers regarded childbearing as a natural matter determined by the supernatural, including the goddess of fertility and one's own fate. That is why Mr. Zhao did not believe that anyone (probably not even he) could control the frequency of his wife's pregnancies. Such a cultural construction of fertility as a natural/supernatural process ended after April 1980. Once the believed mystery of fertility was destroyed by abortion, sterilization, and contraceptive devices,

individual choice and strategies became the new foundation for fertility desires and childbearing. Many parents of an only child are officially recognized as vanguards in family planning because their choices and strategies are sanctioned by state policies. Yet those who resisted the birth control program and managed to have additional children also actively engaged in family planning in their own way, such as Iron Pole, who not only planned the last two births but also manipulated many people in order to have a son. In this sense, the shift toward a more liberal form of family planning has begun, albeit initially due to the intervention of a powerful state.

Based on her fieldwork in the late 1980s, Susan Greenhalgh correctly points out that the Chinese concept of birth planning differs from the Western liberal notion of family planning in that the role of the state is paramount and individual choice is either dismissed or suppressed (1994: 6). In the late 1990s, some Chinese demographers also reflected on the previously narrowly defined notion of birth planning (see Gu 1996). In this connection, the Xiajia case may shed new light on both scholarly inquiry and the continuing implementation of birth control policies in China. Now a key question is: when will the matter of family planning in Xiajia village be based entirely on individual choice and family strategy, balancing the number, sex, and time of birth? The hope may lie in the continuing development of the new fertility culture and with the new generation of young parents, as signaled by the fertility choice of Iron Pole's youngest brother.¹⁹