AN ASSESSMENT OF THE ONE-CHILD POLICY IN CHINA FROM 1980 TO 1985 *

Ulla LARSEN

Dept. of Sociology, SUNY Stony Brook, Stony Brook, New York, NY 11794-4356, USA

Received October 5, 1989; final version received May 7, 1990

Abstract


An analysis of second and third live birth conceptions, from January 1980 to July 1984, in the two Chinese provinces of Hebei and Shaanxi from the In-Depth Fertility Surveys showed: (1) in urban areas third live birth conceptions were quite rare, and higher economic development was associated with lower second live birth conception risks; and (2) in the countryside the preference for sons was a strong predictor of both second and third live birth conceptions, and higher household income was followed generally by lower risks of second and third live birth conceptions, while other socioeconomic factors had little effect.

Résumé


Des enquêtes approfondies sur la fécondité de deux provinces chinoises de Hebei et Shaanxi ont porté sur la période s'étendant de janvier 1980 à juillet 1984. Une analyse des naissances vivantes de rangs deux et trois montre que: (a) dans les zones urbaines les naissances de rang trois sont très rares; de même, plus le développement économique est élevé plus le risque de naissances de rang deux est bas; (2) dans les zones rurales la préférence pour les garçons permet de bien prévoir les naissances vivantes de rang deux et de rang trois; également un revenu plus élevé du ménage entraîne généralement moins de naissances de rangs deux et trois, tandis que d'autres facteurs socio-économiques ont une action négligeable sur cette fécondité.

* An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association in San Francisco, August 9–13, 1989.
1. Introduction

The one-child per couple policy in the People's Republic of China has been the focus of much attention. No other society ever has put so restrictive a demand on limiting reproduction. It has been questioned often whether the one-child policy will succeed. Traditionally the Chinese have had large families, and the relatively low level of economic development may not be compatible with fertility as low as one child per couple. Strong cultural and socioeconomic forces might work against the government policy, and it is generally agreed that only a very organized political structure could hope to lower fertility to about one child per couple (Banister, 1987; Birdsall and Jamison, 1983; Bongaarts and Greenhalgh, 1985). The Chinese population has expressed strong resistance to the one-child policy announced in 1979, and exemptions allowing a second child have been made (Greenhalgh, 1986). Today, in 1989, two children are accepted in many rural areas, but three children are not allowed under any circumstances, and the basic idea of only one child per couple is still maintained (Hardee-Cleaveland and Banister, 1988).

Fertility continued to decline during the early 1980s: the total fertility rate was 2.7, 2.7, 2.3, 2.1, 2.1 and 2.4 in the years 1981–86 respectively (Hardee-Cleaveland and Banister, 1988). The rise in period fertility in 1986 is attributed partly to a declining age at marriage and age at first birth. Also, many couples had both a second and a third child in the 1980s. To determine the characteristics of the couples who had a second or a third child under the one-child policy is the focus of this study. Knowledge about the determinants of fertility in recent years is crucial to enhance understanding of contemporary values in China, to evaluate the effectiveness of the current family planning programme, and to implement future family planning policies.

Detailed data about individual women's reproductive histories and their socioeconomic background became available when phase one of the In-Depth Fertility Surveys was released in the fall of 1987. In phase one a multistage survey was carried out in April 1985 in the two provinces of Hebei and Shaanxi and the municipality of Shanghai. The present study was confined to the two provinces of Hebei and Shaanxi, and to second and third live birth conceptions that occurred between January 1980 and July 1984. The analysis begins in January 1980 to allow some time for the policy to be implemented, and it ends July