

China:

***The Effect of Family Planning on
Women's Lives***

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**Summary of Final Report Prepared for
The Women's Studies Project
Family Health International**

June 1998

**This summary highlights findings from a larger scientific report
and includes recommendations from in-country researchers.**

China: The Effect of Family Planning on Women's Lives¹

I. Background

Fertility has declined precipitously in China over the past three decades, so there are generations of Chinese women alive today who have been affected very differently by family planning. China's total fertility rate (TFR) fell from more than six children per woman in the 1950s to approximately two children in 1992. Today, nearly all couples in urban areas have one child, and most couples in rural areas have two children. In 1979, China implemented a one child per couple population policy (with some exceptions soon made, particularly in rural areas for daughter-only couples). This policy has come into conflict with a culture that values males over females. The legal position of women has improved, as has women's status when measured by education and employment statistics. However, attitudes and behaviors toward women suggest that gender norms and roles are slow to change.

The Chinese government recognizes that the family planning program has had some beneficial effects for Chinese society but also acknowledges that the program may have negatively affected individuals. While the State Family Planning Commission (SFPC) maintains fertility goals and contraceptive use targets, the program is now committed to improving the quality of client services.

II. Objectives

The objectives of this study, supported by the Women's Studies Project (WSP) at Family Health International (FHI), were to investigate the role family planning has played in affecting three domains of women's lives: personal, familial and social. The study investigated women's experiences with family planning methods and services, and with pregnancy and childbearing, and the role women attributed to family planning in the opportunities they have had in their lives. Data collection and analysis were based on the WSP conceptual framework. While women's perceptions were of primary interest in this study, men's experiences also were examined.

III. Methods

This study, conducted in 1996, was undertaken jointly by the China Population Information and Research Center (CPIRC) in collaboration with FHI. Research was conducted in two counties in

¹ This study, funded by a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation, examined family planning experiences in two provinces in China. A grant from the Ford Foundation is supporting research in a third province. The Women's Studies Project was supported by a cooperative agreement from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to Family Health International; however, no USAID funds were used to support the China studies.

each of two provinces: Counties A and B are in South Jiangsu Province, an east coast province with a booming economy, a strong family planning program and rapid decline in fertility, and Counties C and D are in North Anhui Province, representing middle China, with an agrarian economy and a less effective family planning program. The study included a survey of 1,996 women and 506 men, plus 56 focus group discussions (FGDs) with 375 people (220 women and 155 men). The FGDs were conducted with older women and men, reproductive-age women and men, unmarried women and men, and women entrepreneurs (a group of special interest in China).

IV. Results

A. *Life Cycle and Other Personal Factors*

The physical, socioeconomic and generational context of women's and men's lives in South Jiangsu and North Anhui differed considerably. People in South Jiangsu were more prosperous than those in North Anhui. Almost all study participants were married and were, on average, in their mid- to late-30s. Educational attainment was higher in South Jiangsu than in North Anhui. Men tended to have more education than women and younger people had higher educational attainment than did older people. The majority of men and women in North Anhui worked as farmers, while only one in five respondents in South Jiangsu were farmers. The most common occupation in South Jiangsu was working in a local enterprise.

Household size averaged 3.6 people in South Jiangsu and 3.8 in North Anhui, with respondents in South Jiangsu generally living in larger and newer homes than residents of North Anhui. Housing was more prosperous in South Jiangsu than in North Anhui. With the exception of bicycles and televisions, households in South Jiangsu were more likely to own all other consumer goods, such as refrigerators, and washing machines and means of transportation, such as motorcycles. Only ownership of tractors was more common in North Anhui than in South Jiangsu.

B. *Childbearing Experience*

Knowledge of the fertility policy. People tended to know the fertility policy in their area and were, for the most part, adhering to it. A woman summed up the situation in South Jiangsu: "Not many people have two children. Only the older generation had three or four. South Jiangsu strictly enforced the one-child policy with few exceptions, while North Anhui had a more relaxed policy, which allowed couples whose first children were daughters to apply to have another child. A young man from North Anhui knew and explained the policy. "You have to submit a report before marriage and have to go to the township to apply for a pregnancy certificate ... If you have a rural residence permit, if the first is a daughter, after several years you can have another, but I can't remember the spacing."

Number and sex of children. Women in South Jiangsu had an average of 1.3 live births (0.7 sons and 0.6 daughters) compared to 1.8 children (1.0 sons and 0.8 daughters) in North Anhui.

C. *Contraceptive Use and Experience with Abortion*

Contraceptive use. In South Jiangsu and North Anhui, contraceptive use was reported at more than 90 percent among survey participants. Individuals generally followed the guidelines of the family planning policy, and their contraceptive decisions were based on fertility rather than on personal choice. According to one respondent from North Anhui, “Everyone knows that after birth you have an IUD (intrauterine device), but frequently the IUD drops out.” Respondents with one child used IUDs and those with two children were sterilized, particularly in North Anhui where the government has strengthened enforcement of the policy during the past decade. Method switching generally occurred with a change in parity, and around half of those who switched in North Anhui said they did so at the urging of family planning workers (compared to 10 to 30 percent in South Jiangsu).

More than 95 percent of women in South Jiangsu and more than 80 percent in North Anhui said they were willing to accept their current method of contraception, and women expressed satisfaction with the method. The main reason noted by women and men for not using the method they deemed more suitable for themselves or their partners was policy restriction on the method, cited by more than 70 percent of respondents.

Contraceptive Failure and Abortion. One-quarter of the South Jiangsu respondents said that they (or their partners) had had an abortion, compared to less than 10 percent in North Anhui. Most abortions were due to out-of-plan pregnancies, and more respondents in North Anhui than in South Jiangsu said that the family planning cadre had compelled them to have their last abortion.

In the FGDs, women and men talked about the high failure rate of the steel ring IUD, used throughout China until recently. Women noted that they worried about contraceptive failure (sometimes repeated failures). One young woman said, “Even when women use family planning, they worry about the efficacy of the method. They worry about their sex life.” The problem of IUD failure should be ameliorated in China with the switch to copper-bearing IUDs.

D. *Experience with Family Planning and Reproductive Health Services*

The Context of Reproductive Health. Younger and older women had very different experiences with family planning, childbearing and pregnancy. Many older women in the FGDs characterized their lives as spent in bearing too many children and trying to raise them in poverty. One woman from South Jiangsu said, “My mother died...in the delivery of her third child of a hemorrhage. The baby was alive, but was buried with my mother. Not even the midwife came because my family had no money.” Older women wished they had had access to family planning sooner so that they could have limited their family size. Women of all ages agreed that younger women have a much easier time in childbearing than did older women. Most women agreed that, in general, the

reproductive health of younger women is better than that of older women. There was also a sense that people -- including male cadres -- have a better understanding of women's health.

Family Planning Information and Reproductive Health Services. There has long been acceptance of family planning in South Jiangsu and until recently, resignation towards it in North Anhui. Now, particularly among younger women and men, family planning use is the norm. Messages about family planning are reinforced by family planning cadres and community leaders.

In South Jiangsu, women received family planning and other health services at the township level, either in health clinics or maternal and child health (MCH) hospitals, while in North Anhui most women got their services from the township family planning station. Typical services received included pregnancy tests, family planning consulting and services, and MCH services. Fewer than one in five women had complaints about their current service delivery point (SDP), although the percentages varied by county. The main complaints included long waiting lines, crowded clinics, the distance from home to clinic and the cost of services.

Women's Tests. In order to make contraceptive use more effective and to reduce the abortion rate, the family planning program has instituted a system of quarterly "women's tests" (pregnancy tests and IUD checks), which are mandatory for women of reproductive age who are not sterilized. A woman from North Anhui said, "Some service stations require 100 percent participation -- even from young married women." In addition, for a small fee, women can receive a gynecological check. When they were first instituted, many women considered the tests an imposition on their time, but once the women were "educated" about the "importance" of the tests (some were fined for not participating), they were resigned to coming to the family planning clinic four times a year. Some women expressed appreciation for the tests, indicating that the tests provided needed gynecological care for rural women.

Men and Family Planning. In the FGDs, men noted that family planning use is typically women's responsibility. According to a middle-aged man from South Jiangsu, "Males take less responsibility for family planning ... Men are important and should be protected. Women should use family planning." In the survey, women and men in North Anhui were more likely than those in South Jiangsu to say that men should have vasectomies and that they should use condoms. Uneasiness about men and women receiving services at family planning clinics does not appear to be a significant barrier to male involvement in contraceptive use. In China, a bigger barrier to male use of contraception appears to be government policies advocating use of female methods, namely female sterilization and IUDs. A young man from South Jiangsu said, "I wish we had better methods for males."

Reproductive Health Information and Services for Young Adults. The Chinese government is concerned about controlling young adults' fertility and meeting their reproductive health needs. Abortions for unmarried women, particularly in cities, are prevalent. There is a gap in reproductive health services for young people between school and marriage. In the FGDs, young people said that the information they received on sex and reproductive health was too general.

One young woman from South Jiangsu said, “Because of the ideology in rural areas, people are shy to ask such questions.” Some said that such subjects are taboo in rural areas. A young woman from North Anhui noted, “Our family will oppose. We need to avoid such topics.” Young people said they usually have to wait until marriage to learn details of sex and family planning.

E. Family and Household Roles

Gender and Generational Roles. In households in South Jiangsu and North Anhui, these roles are changing, although for the most part, women are primarily responsible for housework, such as cooking and cleaning. In the FGDs, women and men agreed that as more women work, men are slowly (although sometimes reluctantly) increasing their contribution to domestic work. Women have been more involved in household decision-making, and as women increasingly work outside the home for an income, they are accorded more autonomy. According to a man from North Anhui, “Women have become important in decision-making in the family.” A woman from South Jiangsu noted, “My position is equal to my husband. I can spend money and discuss with my husband.” A young man from North Anhui commented, “Nowadays, whoever is more capable, with more education and more income, that person will be in charge.” Some older people lamented the lack of respect among the young for their elders -- and the lack of work and childrearing ability among the young. A woman from North Anhui complained, “My daughter-in-law has one child. She walked away and left the baby for the grandmother to look after. She is not home the whole day.”

Satisfaction with Family Size and Sex Composition of Children. Women and men tended to say they had the right number of children for their circumstances. The most satisfied were those who had one son and one daughter. Those who were not satisfied tended to say they had too few children, rather than too many.

In the FGDs, some women and men stated a preference for daughters because they are easier to raise, less expensive to care for, and nicer to their parents in old age. One woman from North Anhui noted, “I have two sons -- that’s too much burden. They have to go to school and get married. That’s going to be expensive.” Furthermore, women and men in one county in South Jiangsu had an economic reason for wanting daughters -- for their embroidery skills. Still, desire for sons remained strong. According to a woman from South Jiangsu, “My mother-in-law said it is inferior to have daughters. If you have a son, even your house will look higher.” A woman from North Anhui agreed: “If you have a son, you will be seen as a strong family relative to families that have no son, which are regarded as weak.” A woman from North Anhui said, “There is very much discrimination against [women with two daughters and no sons] by the mother-in-law and the family. They lead miserable lives, especially if they are sterilized. Then there is no hope. You have terminated your family line.”

FGD participants talked about the lengths women would go to have a son. All cities and many villages have ultrasound machines, which are designated for use by the government to check IUD placement. The practice of using ultrasound to determine fetal sex is illegal, but, as noted by FGD participants, continues. According to a woman from North Anhui, “People use an ultrasound B machine. If it is a female fetus, they don’t want it. People will usually go elsewhere to check. ... No matter how much money they have to spend, they think it is worth it.” It is possible, however, that if sex-selective abortion is effectively banned, infanticide may increase, unless the cause of the problem, the low status of women in China, is addressed.

Out-of-Plan Births. Out-of-plan births include births outside the planned number for a community, or births that are allowed but occur outside the time they were included in a community’s birth plan. One-third of the respondents in North Anhui had out-of-plan births compared to 2 percent in South Jiangsu. Out-of-plan children were twice as likely to be sons than daughters. People noted being fined for out-of-plan children. One woman from North Anhui said, “In our rural areas, family planning only allows people not to have babies, but does so by relying on fines.”

Although the government has said out-of-plan children will not be given preference for social services, out-of-plan children were not likely to be school dropouts, and they were likely to have received medical treatment and immunizations.

Family Planning and Marital Relationships. Family planning use appeared to have little effect on marital and sexual relationships. In addition, women and men reported little couple disagreement about family size; when disagreements occurred, couples generally discussed the issue and reached a joint decision. The congruence of the views of women and men in this study (particularly in the survey) imply that women and men do communicate about family planning and reproductive health issues.

Desired Attributes in Spouses among Young Adults. While people of all generations noted the changing status of women, including women’s role in decision-making in the household, young women and men expressed traditional gender norms when they talked about their desired attributes in a spouse. They said that husbands should be the primary breadwinners and the wives should be responsible for household chores. One woman from South Jiangsu said, “...to support the family depends mostly on the husband’s salary.” A young woman from North Anhui said, “I want a career before marriage. After marriage there is so much housework to worry about.” No young men said they were worried about not finding a wife, due to the unbalanced sex ratio. One woman in North Anhui did say that “even ugly boys can find wives now” because her village was so prosperous.

Young people in both South Jiangsu and North Anhui said that premarital sex and cohabitation were uncommon in their communities. Few said they would engage in such behavior, although they could understand young couples who did.

F. Economic, Social and Community Roles

Economic Roles for Women. Younger women in both provinces had more exposure to education and work opportunities than did older women. Said one woman from North Anhui: "... Young women are in heaven and we are on the ground. We aren't even 10 percent as good as them." A woman from South Jiangsu noted, "Women's status has improved. When it comes time for bonuses and promotions ... I don't see man way ahead and women behind in my school." However, women in South Jiangsu had broader choices for work than did women in North Anhui, the majority of whom were farmers.

Income and Spending. Nearly three-quarters of the women and men in South Jiangsu received a wage for their work, compared to less than 8 percent in North Anhui. Payment from household economic income was also common in both provinces. Some respondents had multiple sources of income. Women in both provinces said they work to earn money for their children (for education, weddings and houses -- for their sons) and for their own old-age support. One woman from North Anhui said, "I just want to get rich to have a house for my son. I think all the time about how to do business." A woman from North Anhui agreed. "Although we now have fewer children and the economic burden is lighter, we still want to make more money. As long as we have enough to spend, we're all right." Average family income in 1995 was significantly higher in South Jiangsu than in North Anhui (about 21,000 yuan compared to 4,000 yuan²). Housing and children accounted for the largest portion of income for families in South Jiangsu and North Anhui.

Social Welfare Benefits. Since the beginning of the new economic responsibility system beginning in the early 1980s, state support for people's incomes and welfare has been reduced. Workers in the formal sector receive an array of social welfare benefits not available to rural agricultural workers. These benefits include paid sick leave; maternity leave; old-age, health, life, hazard and disability insurance; and housing allowance. There was a vast difference in the social welfare benefit net between the two provinces. With the exception of sick leave, 40 to 75 percent of the respondents in South Jiangsu receive other social welfare benefits. In contrast, women and men in North Anhui, because they were farmers, were unprotected by social welfare benefits.

Old-Age Support. The convergence of the new economic responsibility system and the so-called one-child policy that have governed people's productive and reproductive lives since the early 1980s has implications for their old-age support. Women and men in the most prosperous county in the study (in South Jiangsu) were least concerned about support for themselves in old age while those in the second most prosperous county (also in South Jiangsu) were the most concerned. Respondents generally said they will look to their spouses for support when they are old. Respondents in each county were more likely to list sons than daughters as more dependable for old-age support. Few respondents thought the government was dependable for old-age support.

² In January 1995 US\$1 equaled 8.4 yuan.

In the FGDs most participants said sons are better than daughters for old-age support because daughters marry into another family (although some spoke of the benefits of having “adopted sons-in-law,” which meant having a son around and still having their daughters to care for them). A few older participants, however, said younger people are not doing their duty of taking care of their aging parents. Some older people spoke of the five guarantees (housing, food, clothing, health care and a decent burial) for the childless elderly or for those whose children do not support them. Some also gave very complimentary descriptions of homes for the elderly and village support, while younger people said that the elderly who have to go to these houses are looked down upon in rural areas. According to a woman in North Anhui, “There is no problem with childless men and women late in life. If they have no children, they go to the government.” A younger woman from North Anhui said, however, “You may go to an elderly home, but you will lose face. If you have children and go to an elderly home, people will laugh at you.”

Community Participation. Voluntary participation in community activities is expected in China. Levels of participation in some community activities were high among women and men in both provinces, including in villagers/women’s committees, family planning publicity activities (e.g., meetings about family planning policies), recreation/sports/travel, and volunteer activities (e.g., planting trees).

Participation in Family Planning Work. A number of women in the FGDs related their progression from being family planning workers (considered a community activity) to becoming entrepreneurs and even village and government leaders. Working in family planning (considered only slightly less arduous than tax collection) gave women a chance to attend social meetings and other community activities and provided a stepping stone to other work. Many women described how difficult family planning was in the beginning of the program, and especially at the beginning of the one-child policy when people’s fertility desires were not yet aligned with the government’s policy. According to a former family planning worker in South Jiangsu, “Women who are around 35 want two children. It was difficult to work on family planning several years ago when couples could only have one child.” A woman in North Anhui said, “Family planning work is the most difficult under the heaven. We don’t mind working hard, but the worst thing is people don’t understand our work.” Many other past and present family planning workers said if a woman in China can succeed at family planning, she can succeed at anything. A woman from North Anhui added that family planning work has become easier. “Now what is difficult is to [help people] get rich.”

G. Individual Psychological and Physical Factors

Satisfaction with Aspects of Lives. The two aspects of their lives with which women and men in both provinces were most satisfied were their marital relationships and their children. The two aspects of their lives with which they were least satisfied were their jobs/income and their housing conditions. Nearly half of all respondents said they were very satisfied with their health. Overall, women in County A in South Jiangsu had the highest levels of satisfaction with all five aspects

of their lives, while women in County D in North Anhui noted the least satisfaction with these aspects of their lives, particularly their jobs/income.

The Perceived Effect of Family Planning on Women's Lives. Women and men said that family planning had a positive effect on various aspects of women's lives, including their health, household work, education, opportunities for and time at a job, ability to earn more income and more time for leisure. Overall, at least two-thirds of the respondents said that family planning was positively related to women's health, household work, education, economic activities and leisure.

In the FGDs, older women talked pressure to have more children -- particularly sons -- and said they regretted not having better access to family planning. Said one older women from South Jiangsu: "If family planning had been available earlier, my future would have been different. That is my life-long regret. Because I had too many children, I had to quit [teaching]." A man from North Anhui said, "I deeply feel that more children are more of a burden. ... I spent almost 35 years with someone in school."

Middle-aged respondents said they were compelled to use family planning, which was not always accepted in the early days of the one-child policy. Middle-aged women related family planning to fewer children and the increased ability to focus on earning money. According to a woman from South Jiangsu, "Family planning is good for health. We are relaxed in comparison to our parents, who were tired. I can have another child because my husband is an adopted son-in-law, but I don't want to. I want more energy to work in the kindergarten."

Younger respondents said they want to wait for marriage until they have accomplished career goals or are at least on sound financial footing. Once they get married, those in South Jiangsu plan to have one child, and those in North Anhui, two. According to a young man in North Anhui, "I'll marry but I don't want children for several years. I want to accomplish something."

China's one-child policy was instituted at a time when the economy was beginning to grow and people were given more freedom to pursue their own economic activities. In addition, the fertility rate had already fallen in the 1970s, indicating that people were not adverse to the idea of having fewer children. Still, while people throughout China welcomed the expanded opportunities for work outside State enterprises and collective agriculture, few had determined in 1980 that they wanted only one child. Now, nearly 20 years later, the one-child-with-exceptions policy is a reality, and most people are reconciled to smaller families. People perceived the benefits of family planning primarily in relation to their ability to spend less time in childbearing and childrearing and more time pursuing economic activities.

V. Recommendations

The fertility policy is more accepted now in the study areas than it was when the one-child program first started. According to one young man from North Anhui, “At the beginning of the family planning program ... people were not afraid of the sky or the earth. They were most afraid of the truck with the loudspeaker ... the family planning propaganda truck. But now it is much better. People are knowledgeable and accepting. Family planning is more regulated.”

Based on study findings, researchers recommended several ways to improve services and address gender issues in the family planning program.

A. *Expand Reproductive Health*

- Family planning programs should extend services to young adults and to older women rather than simply focusing on women of reproductive age. Programs should provide young adults with adequate and accurate information on sex, reproduction and family planning and ensure their access to contraceptive services.
- The government should develop messages on family planning, reproductive health and women’s health (including information from older women) to supplement and complement messages on family planning and the economy (e.g., there are benefits other than just making families wealthy).

B. *Improve Quality of Care*

- Family planning programs should increase access to other contraceptive methods, in addition to the IUD and sterilization. The switch to the newer IUDs such as the copper-T IUD should help reduce unplanned pregnancies. Women should be informed of the differences between the failure rates of the steel ring IUD and the newer IUDs so they can have more confidence in the IUD as a contraceptive method.
- Programs should provide special counseling for postabortion women on preventing future contraceptive failures.
- The government should provide information on reproductive health and family planning through various media, such as television and radio.
- The government should reconsider the quarterly “women’s tests.” The tests use a considerable amount of women’s and providers’ time that could be better spent for counseling and other reproductive health services. Requiring women to have these tests four times a year (and fining them if they do not attend) cannot be justified on the grounds of quality of care, the underpinning of which is voluntarism. Providing screening for reproductive problems is

laudable and educating women on the need to take care of their reproductive system is beneficial, but should not be tied to mandatory visits to the family planning or MCH clinic.

- Programs should educate men about the safety of vasectomy and make the provision of male sterilization a priority for the program.

C. *Update Training for Providers*

- Programs should incorporate “pioneer” family planning providers’ and users’ experiences into current provider training.
- Programs should offer training for providers on quality of care and gender issues.

D. *Increase the Value of Daughters*

- The status of women is rising -- more women are working and contributing to the family economy. More women are involved in decision-making in the family. Some families desire girls over boys, but the vestiges of son preference remain and continue to exert a powerful influence in most families. Girls receive strong social messages about their worth. Many grow up knowing their families and society consider them less desirable than boys; girls are less valued and less likely to be born than boys. Women do not carry on the family line, do not inherit property; they leave home upon marriage and carry the double burden of working and taking care of the children and household. The government must address these social issues which translate into skewed sex ratios of boys and girls -- and the social problems those sex ratios are creating. For example, who will the excess men marry?
- The government should revise inheritance laws.
- The government should undertake a national publicity campaign to promote the value of girls.