

**THE CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL ENVIRONMENT OF THE  
RECENT CHINESE FERTILITY DECLINE**

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**ABSTRACT** China has experienced substantial fertility decline recently. The determinant that is behind this decline is regarded mainly as the stringent government policies. My argument is that the unusual success of the government population policies is due to the fundamental cultural and political structure of the Chinese society. Such a structure is identified through two basic dimensions, the clear cultural consensus dominance and profound penetration of the Communist Party and its government into the lives of the common citizen. A multivariate model is used to illustrate the operational mechanism of these two basic characteristics.

**I. INTRODUCTION**

For more than a decade, China has experienced a substantial fertility decline. Most researchers agree that at the macro-level, the Chinese fertility decline was induced more by stringent government policies than by modernization factors. My argument is, however, that although government policy was a major driving force behind the decline, it is the structural characteristics of the Chinese society that were ultimately responsible.

In this paper, I will first briefly review the current state of research on Chinese fertility transition. Then I will identify two basic characteristics of the Chinese society, namely, the dominance of cultural consensus and a profound government control. Finally I will illustrate their relevance to the recent remarkable fertility decline.

**II. CURRENT STATE OF RESEARCH ON CHINESE FERTILITY DECLINE**

In the literature on fertility decline, there are four distinct approaches. The first is archival. It resorts to a descriptive compilation of various socioeconomic practices to account for fertility transition. The second school emphasizes anthropological inquiry, arguing that the comprehension of determinants lies in the disentanglement of the micro-environment in which couples live. The third school stresses the "demand and supply" formula, seeing the final reproductive outcomes as resulting from the balancing of various costs and benefits of children for either the parents per se or the extended family.

One common short coming of the above three approaches is their lack of macro scale cultural, political and socio-economic generalization. A fourth approach, which takes into account these factors, is a political economy perspective, argues that fertility transitions are historically specific, and attempts to understand political, social and economic institutions at various levels that the reproductive couples act in.

Most studies of Chinese fertility have so far fallen within the first three approaches. In these, cultural structures are often regarded as so unique in such a fashion that a reasonable generalization is deemed impossible. I claim that this understanding of culture without comprehension, creates confusion and prevents the Chinese experience from being compared with either the past experience of the developed nations, or the rest of the developing world.

### III. THE STRUCTURE OF CHINESE SOCIETY

Two elements of Chinese society are extremely relevant to understanding the fertility decline. They are, first, that China is a consensus ruled society, and second, that the Communist Party and its government have had a profound influence upon the lives of common citizens through their overwhelming control over the national economy.

The proposition that China is a consensus ruled society has multiple dimensions. First of all, it is the ultimate principle at all levels of Chinese politics. Second, this consensus dominance is hierarchical. It exists not only at the level of national politics, but also at provincial level and so on, all the way down to the level of local communities and the family. Third, its dominance is above all a cultural phenomenon. It is a way of life, and such pervasiveness provides the basis for the government to exert effective pressure on the lives of common citizens to ensure compliance. Fourth, not every citizen, not even every working unit has an equal vote in the establishment of such a consensus at certain level. The Communist Party and its governmental agencies hold a monopoly of power.

Nowhere is the manifestation of consensus dominance more obvious than in the government's tactics in the implementation of its population policies. This is well documented in academic literature as well as in many forms of popular entertainment such as novels, movies, and plays. Tactics for attaining consensus include holding regular conferences and meetings on national, provincial, county, and lower level. On these occasions, outstanding working units and their leaders are commended and laggard units brought under increasing pressure to catch up with the rest. Individually, the most common technique is the so-called "heart-to-heart" talk, in which cadres make personal visits to homes of people who are reluctant to vow compliance with the policy, and launch rounds of conversation mixed with propaganda, promises, persuasion, and threats. Administrative and coercive measures, such as quota and target setting, are also a major means of implementation. But they almost always serve as a complementary and backup measure in case the consensus building fails. Both as its pre-condition and necessary outcome, success in this type of implementation strategies requires a powerful government as well as a compliant citizenry.

The disproportionate importance of the ruling party and government is not surprising, since politics and general social life in most third world countries have such a character. What is surprising is the widespread compliance, even enthusiasm, among the common citizens toward such established consensus. Three explanations exist. One, culturally and historically, the Chinese are an obedient people. Two, nationalist emotions are at play. This may partly be the result from propaganda of the Communist Party itself, but indeed a large majority of the population is truly convinced by its historic achievements, such as the expulsion of foreign forces and the building of power by China in the international community. Finally, the compliance is a result of the unprecedented level of penetration of the Party and government into daily operation of every corner of the national economy and local community life.

In addition to the consensual element, a second fundamental character of the Chinese society is that the Party and the government have an extremely profound influence upon both the private and public lives of common citizens. The basis for such penetration is the state's control over the national economy.<sup>1</sup> But it is not limited to economy. It actually includes all major aspects of social life, especially the mass media.

It is not an exaggeration to say that in China, there is no working unit, or any formal social group at any level anywhere in the country that does not include the Party. Every person is subject to its "direction" on all issues, private or public. This system dates back to a tradition established in the Red Army and its affiliates during the anti-Japanese and civil war periods before the People's Republic. However, its power is by no means erased by the recent economic reform campaign, if they are weakened at all.

Various Party organs certainly have great psychological power among the workers or members of other social organizations. But their impact is far beyond a mere psychological one. It basically means a final veto power in all decisions made by management in any regard, including those that gravely affect individual lives, such as career and salary promotions, welfare, and housing allocations. Such a control over the economy enables the Party to express their aims through some much more substantial channels than physical coercion or superficial propaganda and persuasion.

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I would like to point out here that state ownership is diminishing with the deepening of the economic reform. Holton et al (1992) found that by the end of 1980s, the state owned sector was producing only about forty percent of total national income. This trend is likely to go further. However it has to be stressed that, the state owned sector has a far wider impact on the social lives of the common citizens than the percentage may imply, especially in cities, and that, most part of the fertility transition has happened when this percentage was much higher.

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The above two characters of consensual culture and overwhelming power of the Party and its government compose the framework of the "distinctive social structure" built by the Communist Party since the establishment of the People's Republic. They define the general external environment, as well as the internal practice of the influences of all socio-economic determinants, the most prominent being the Party and government's population policies.

There appears to be a general agreement among researchers that, unlike the experience of the developed countries, the main causes of the Chinese fertility decline are the government policies rather than societal modernization. Many believe that the effects of the stringent government policies largely override those of modernization.

Such sentiments are apparently reasonable given the disparity of China's fertility level, which stands equal to those in developed countries, and its development level, which is in the middle range even among the developing countries if measured by per capita national income. Indeed, it is obvious that the distinctive social structure described above, dictates a highly efficient implementation of government policies. However, in recent years China has experienced tremendous economic growth. For years, its GDP growth rates matched those of the newly industrialized countries in East Asia (Holton et al, 1992). Western life styles are becoming more and more popular as foreign investments grow larger and larger. Based on such evidence, I would have to say that, at least in some areas, societal modernization should play a significant role. Consequently, the overriding effect of government policies becomes less apparent. In what follows, I shall attempt to show that the effect of government policies are to a large extent decided by the structural characteristics of Chinese society.

### IV. MODEL AND INTERPRETATION

A multivariate analysis was performed on the urban population of China. The dataset is based on the 1989 edition of Yearbook of China Urban Statistics, published by the China State Statistics Bureau. It includes demographic, economic, educational, and other social indices for all 450 cities in the country. A general description of the quality of demographic data issued by the Chinese government may be found in Banister (1987), who considers statistics recently released as highly reliable. In this study, demographic as well as other indicators for this particular year are taken as acceptably accurate.

A sample of 131 cities, slightly above one fourth of the total, is constructed. The sample is selected with a systematic sampling method. First of all, I attempt to perform a multiple linear regression on the data. The numerical results will be relied on to point out some general directions of the relationships latent in the published statistics. I used fertility rate as the dependent variable and ten other indices as independent variables. The independent variables may be classified into three categories according to their respective nature: [1] educational; [2] economic; [3] of living standard.

The model seeks to show how fertility varies with the socio-economic indices across the cities. Since government population policies are regarded as uniform, their effect is considered latent in the constant term of the model. All the independent variables are commonly accepted by researchers as related to fertility decline in normal situations. Therefore, those that are not significant are the ones that either reinforce government policies or are overridden by them, and those that have significant parameter estimates are thought to be representative of unique forces standing above the effect of government policies. The following table gives statistical reports about the model. Evaluation indicates that the regression model thus generated holds statistically.

Standard Analysis of Variance Table for the Linear Regression

	DF	S.S.	M.Sq.	F-val	Prob>F
Source	10	2.7361	0.2736	3.111	0.0015
Model	118	10.378	0.0880		
Error					
Cort.	128	13.114			
Total					

Coefficients of determination:      R Squared = 0.2086  
Adjusted R Squared = 0.1416

The model is as follows:

FERT = 0.680961 \*\*  
- 13.326266 ASPR \*\*  
+ 44300 ELEM \*\*  
- 3.666806 CLEC \*  
- 0.198567 FORE  
- 0.089265 LIGT  
- 0.002826 GNI \*\*  
+ 0.203103 PRIM  
+ 1.258045 TERT \*\*  
+ 0.00005192 DENT  
+ 0.045734 MORT

\*\* = significant at 1% level;

\* = significant at 5% level.

Similar relationships are found among all three variable groups. Inspection of part of one group suffices to demonstrate the mechanism in which basic social structure operates. Here, only the relation between CLEC, TERT, LIHT, and PRIM of the economic indicators group and the dependent variable fertility rate are examined.

CLEC stands for the percentage of collectively or individually owned economy in the cities, as opposed to the state owned. It has a significantly negative relation with the fertility rate. In other words, distinct from the overriding effects of government policies, a high percentage of private enterprises drives down the fertility rates across the cities. Generally such enterprises are strongly market oriented. In a society which fundamentally favors the state owned sector, this orientation inevitably takes on a strong opportunistic flavor. Based on various personal experiences, it seems the private enterprises have many important characteristics relevant to this study. Among the private enterprises themselves, there is little consensus guiding their behavior except for market signals. In fact, more often these private enterprises are bitter rivals trying to beat one another. As to their relationship with the external environment, there seems to be pervasive resentment against intervention from the Party and government. Often the Party branch in a company is subordinate instead of superior to the management. This clear independent spirit and practice erodes the tight control by the Party and government in this sector of the national economy. That is, I would argue, the primary reason for this variable to exhibit unique explanatory power in the model. The point is not that the ownership changes human reproductive decisions, but rather, it provides a new environment in which other more direct socio-economic factors may act. Interestingly in this respect, the correlation between CLEC and FERT is a negative one. This is consistent with the almost universal finding about the relationship between economic development and fertility decline. It says that such an environmental change favors those factors that encourage couples to have fewer children, but to provide themselves with a better quality of life.

TERT stands for percentage of tertiary or service industry output in the total urban economy. It also has a significant influence over government policies on fertility decline. But unlike CLEC, the correlation is positive. Service industries have always been neglected under the government's highly skewed industrialization policies. They are similar to the collectively and individually owned enterprises in their lack of tight Party and government control, and of the strong rule of consensus in working places. But such a similarity results from negligence on the part of the Party and government, not of active self-development. Consequently, along with the lack of government control, the welfare system is not well developed, and employees are not well educated. These more immediate determinants seem to exert a positive influence on fertilities, which is indicated by the correlation.

The other two variables examined in this category, LIGT, and PRIM, stand for the percentage of output from light industry and primary industry as opposed to total urban industrial output. They are not significant in displaying differential influence upon fertility rates. This insignificance would be completely incomprehensible if we disregarded my earlier discussion and only considered the importance these sectors have in terms of income and employment in the Chinese urban economy. A brief examination of the forty years of Communist administration shows that all these sectors have had extremely advantageous positions, as opposed to collectively and individually owned enterprises, service industries, and agriculture in the government's industrialization policy. Enterprises in these sectors are the ones that receive the most attention from the Party and its government. Of course, the party and government's penetration and control are also unmatched by those in any other economic sectors. This is one reason why government policies are especially effective in these sectors. In addition, as a result of their advantageous positions, such enterprises are usually very large. There is a well observed convention for the construction of such large state owned enterprises, namely that all employees of the same working unit should live in the same residential community. Under such

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circumstances, the working and living environments of the workers are often fused with each other. The social networks thus constructed strongly reinforce the cultural rule of consensus, and this creates the basis for the most efficient implementation of government policies that attempt to regulate private lives, the most prominent of all being its fertility reduction policies. It is therefore not surprising that however strong influence a high percentage of these industrial sectors may have on the fertility transition must be swamped in the uniform determination of the Party and government population policies.

### V. CONCLUSIONS

The basic argument in this paper is that all of the fertility determinants function within a distinctive macro social structure, which is related to historical condition but above all to those created by the Communist Party and its government since the establishment of the People's Republic. Among other things, it supports the extraordinarily efficient implementation of the government population policy. Some supportive numerical evidence is found among the results of quantitative analysis on the Chinese urban population.

The distinctive social structure is identified by two fundamental characteristics of the contemporary Chinese society. Those are the clear cultural dominance of consensus, and the profound penetration of the Party and its government into the common citizens' lives. I hope that, by the identification of the social structure, a fuller comprehension of the unprecedented Chinese fertility decline may be achieved.

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