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BIRTH PLANNING IN RURAL CHINA:
A CULTURAL ACCOUNT

by

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Abstract: This paper describes birth planning policy and its implementation in a rural village setting in Guangdong Province, People's Republic of China, during the years 1979-1984. The significance of policy and its implementation and the villagers' responses to them are analyzed from a cultural point of view to expose the implicit assumptions about human relationships that are being enacted. The paper describes the contradiction between the extraordinarily pronatalism of Chinese culture and more strictly rational analyses of the relationship between population and resources; both sets of ideas are actively present. Cultural forces are currently in the ascendant, with potentially devastating results.

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BIRTH PLANNING IN RURAL CHINA: A CULTURAL ACCOUNT

There are few human processes that touch us more closely than the process of giving birth. Yet birth, like marriage and death, is far more than a merely physical process. Its importance has caused a wealth of meanings to accrue to it. And, although birth is universal, the meanings of giving birth are not universal, but culturally specific. A birth must touch us, but it touches us in vastly different ways, depending on our experiences, and the contexts in which they have been acquired. Like giving birth, preventing the process is inevitably replete with cultural significance. To these social actions, Chinese culture brings an immensely complicated set of shared assumptions. They are unexamined assumptions, existing as a basis for thought, rather than as a conscious plan of action. They are difficult to grasp, because they are culturally specific ways of understanding universal experiences, and it is hard to understand and easy to reject assumptions one does not share, about matters so important, as merely alien. The intellectual discipline responsible for explaining divergences in thought that run as deep as this is cultural anthropology: the cultural anthropologist has the task of bringing the hidden attitudes forth, examining them, showing their relationship to social structure, and placing them in a comparative light.

The purpose of this paper is to describe birth planning in rural Guangdong Province in the years 1979-1983, and to present a cultural analysis of it. The data on which my analysis is based were gathered jointly by myself and Jack M. Potter during an eight month period of intensive field research in 1979-1980, and in the course of brief return visits in 1981 and 1983. Our field site is Zengbu Brigade, Chashan People's Commune, Dongguan County, Guangdong Province. In order to present a cultural analysis, I shall be talking about meanings, rather than about numbers. My discussion starts from the premise that the meaning of having a child is culturally specific, and so is the meaning of interrupting the process. Having children is so fundamental a matter that it raises issues of the deepest importance: such issues as the social definition of what it means to be a person, and the nature of the appropriate relationships between individuals, their families, and the power of the state. Because birth planning evokes these highly significant issues, the process of implementing birth planning policy emerges as a drama in which the most deeply held values are socially enacted.

Social values find their expression in public morality. Villagers in Zengbu believe strongly that they are moral people, acting in a moral society. They believe that the social changes they have witnessed are evolving changes, taking them in the direction of greater social morality, and that the claims of Chinese society in general to be an exemplar of social morality are higher than the claims of any other society. They believe that those who act in opposition to public morality are not acting rightly. They are not open to the potential value of systems or forms of behavior unlike their own; they are not relativists, and they dislike social deviance. When they explain social action, they do it in terms of shared values and social morality. There are two levels of social structure which

organize morally valid social action, in their eyes, the government and the family and these structures themselves take on an intrinsic moral significance. In practical terms, people know that both the family and the government may do harm as well as good, and be resented, but in terms of ideals and morality, respect for these institutions is a fundamental quality of the social order. The government must have a demonstrable moral legitimacy, and public policy is always presented and explained in moral terms. When policies are changed, or even reversed, the moral justifications for them are modified, and different principles may have the primary emphasis, but a moral justification is always made. The family, being the other important repository of social morality, has associated with it a whole complex of social and behavioral forms that are regarded as appropriate ways to demonstrate moral worth in action. Since the issue of birth planning is so important to the national government and so important to the family, the differing interests of the two levels of structure produce contradictions between two highly valued sets of moral principles.

The central government takes the position that birth planning is not only a practical but also a moral necessity, given China's inordinate population size, the impossibility of meeting the needs of such a population with the resources available, and the human suffering that will inevitably ensue if effective action is not taken at once. This position is explained and supported with statistical evidence so overwhelming that no dissenting interpretation could rationally be brought forward.¹ The central government has been at pains to emphasize the extreme importance of birth planning by labelling it a matter of "strategic significance." This is a culturally encoded political phrase meaning that birth planning is critically important to the safety and continuity of China as a whole, and that it is, in effect, a national security issue. The government's long-term commitment to the implementation of birth planning has also been emphasized, by describing it with the phrase "basic state policy." This phrase sets birth planning in a special category, above the shift and flux of interpretation and implementation that frequently characterize Chinese policy in matters regarded as less fundamental. The phrase defines birth planning as a continuing policy to be enforced over time, rather than a transitory measure. The Chinese government has chosen its strongest expressive language to convey the acuteness of the problem, its devastating implications, and the long range importance of finding an effective solution.

Chinese familism approaches the question of birth planning from a different angle. From the point of view of the family, children are the means of its highly valued continuity, the basis of its prosperity, and the only valid source of interpersonal help and care. The patrilineal Chinese family claims the right to require, with all of the mighty moral force at its command, that young women who marry in produce sons on its behalf. There must be sons, not only daughters, since daughters do not carry lineal continuity, their labor is not defined as equally valuable--in spite of the fact that they can be demonstrated to earn and produce more in Zengbu--and they marry out, to live and work in another family. There must be a large enough number of children to make it seem reasonable that they will be able to care for their parents and grandparents in their old age.

The problem of caring for the aged has two aspects, the aspect of the economic realities, and the aspect of the cultural realities, and the problem cannot be understood without considering both. From a purely economic point of view, Chinese peasants (unlike urban dwellers) have no retirement pensions. (There may be some rare exceptions to this generalization, and a figure as high as 10% for rural communes with pension plans has been quoted,² but even allowing for this most optimistic estimate, 90% of peasants are pensionless.) In Zengbu, instituting a pension plan has been discussed but seems less attractive at present than letting each family keep the use of the money that would have to be invested. Under the present system, the brigade does not have the financial resources to finance a pension plan itself without requiring contributions for the purpose. It is written into the marriage law of 1983 that all children and grandchildren are responsible for the support of their aging parents and grandparents, both patrilineal and matrilineal. So, both in practice and in law, old peasants depend on their children and grandchildren for financial support.

If there are no children, old peasants may receive the state's "five guarantee" support. In 1979-1980, old people in Zengbu on "five guarantee" support lived in pitiable circumstances, in decrepit dwellings, with barely enough to eat, a tiny allowance of a few yuan a month (1.5 ¥ = \$1) from their teams, and tattered and inadequate bedding. They were dependent on the goodwill of their neighbors for water from the well and fuel to burn. The introduction of the production responsibility system and the weakening of the team could only reduce this already exiguous support system. The inadequacy of the "five guarantee" system is officially recognized, and a provincial level official commented, "We want to intensify our work on this problem." But, in any case, the recipients of "five guarantee" support feel humiliated in accepting it and ashamed of the inability to work that forces them to do so, because being unable to work suggests that one has no right to receive. One old lady said, "I do not like to accept this; I have my conscience, and other people are working hard." According to the villagers' cultural values, the only right and appropriate way for the aged to receive care is in their own homes, from their own sons. When Happy Homes for the Aged were tried in Chashan Commune during the Great Leap Forward (1958) they were a failure because the old people were miserable in the role of recipients of care given by outsiders.

This idea of the appropriate care of the elderly is a cultural construct of the most complex kind: that it should happen is taken for granted; when it fails to happen, it is a matter of great sorrow; and the meaning of it, when it does happen, is replete with the expectation of happiness, the burden of obligation, and feelings of ambivalence and despair. The needs of aging parents are great. Indeed, they are conceived of as virtually insatiable. This sense of the insatiability of a parent's needs is traditional, and the most apposite demonstration of this is in the Book of Filial Duty (trans. Chen 1909). In this text, a series of sons make superhuman efforts to meet parental needs that have no limits and no end; sometimes they are unable to meet these needs without supernatural aid.

Furthermore, the moral force of parent's needs supercedes all other considerations, however urgent. It is felt that the satisfaction of parents' needs would be impossible without extraordinary human resources. This is why no finite number of sons seems like enough, and the village proverb says, "The more sons, the more happiness." The happiness implied by many sons is a particular kind of happiness, a happiness based on knowing that appropriate care will be provided in one's old age; this is a happiness that signifies an economically secure, culturally approved state of recipient dependence. Children, especially sons, are the means to this most desired end.

The idea of limiting the number of children, or contenting one's self with daughters rather than sons, raises the possibility that, in purely practical terms, the aged will not have their basic needs satisfied. At the same time, it raises the possibility of moral failure, a moral failure that would be very deeply felt. In cultural terms, when a family has many children, security and happiness are possible for them because the manpower and the resources to care for the aged will not fail. But a family with a limited number of children is more unlikely to find the kind of happiness they seek. If they fail in practical terms, they fail in cultural terms as well, and their sense of security cannot be solidly grounded.

The villagers assume that it is the old, rather than the young, whose need to be cared for is most legitimate and that the young bear the obligation to care for the old. The Western assumption that parents bear an important moral obligation to be a source of security for their children is reversed, and children are thought of as the source of future security for their parents. Objectively, care is needed both in childhood and in old age, but in the West, the moral emphasis is on the importance of caring for children, and in China, the moral emphasis is on the importance of caring for the old. Child care is a means to an end, a form of long range self-interest. The contrast between Western and Chinese values can be brought out clearly using literary sources; compare, for example, the Book of Filial Duty and the Pirates of Penzance. In the Pirates of Penzance, even people as lost to conventional morality as pirates sympathize with the plight of an orphan who is deprived of care by the untimely death of both parents. In the Book of Filial Duty, there is an analogous story about a group of bandits. Even these bandits display some remnants of moral decency, however, because they are moved by the plight of a poor old lady who will be left helpless in the world if they kill her only son. In these two stories, the weight of sympathy is distributed analogously, but in opposite directions. To have children is to be protected from the pitiable situation, analogous to being orphaned, of being left without care in one's old age. When villagers speak of having children so that old people may be taken care of, they are invoking a whole complex of cultural ideas embodying a definition of happiness resting on dependent security. This cultural complex is inseparable from the family system itself. In examining this complex, the relationship between family structure and cultural assumption, as they work in an integrated way to become social organization in process, is easily seen.

An idea at the level of a cultural assumption is pervasive and appears at every level of society. The central government policymakers are cultural beings and family members as well as administrators with a clear interest in seeing the importance of national issues and the interests of the nation as a whole. It is inevitable that central policy will draw on cultural assumptions and, in doing so, produce a confusion of direction that tends to affirm the importance of the family point of view and to weaken, however unintentionally, the stated position of the state. The primacy of culture over political theory is clear, for example, in the system of production responsibility by households. This system is plainly based on the traditional cultural assumption that the peasant family, with all of its members working together, is an economic unit likely to produce prosperity. (Chinese history provides considerable evidence that this is not necessarily the case.) Although, in formal terms, the policy comes from the central government, it actually draws on the assumptions of familism and is congruent with the belief that more children provide more labor and, thus, contribute directly to prosperity. The household responsibility system is a policy that makes population increase appear to be the social solution it was traditionally, rather than the social problem it is now. It has been implemented at a time when the central government is most acutely aware that in the wider context, and from any point of view larger than that of the family, more children and the cumulative population increase that they imply nullify hard-won economic gains and make prosperity impossible in the long run. So, the central government's overt message stands in opposition to the covert message implied by an economic policy based on the cultural assumptions of traditional familism. The policymakers are the bearers of their own culture and cannot stand aside from it in spite of the unambiguous logic of their own analysis of the significance of China's rising population.

Peasants also perceive both points of view simultaneously. However narrowly familistic they may feel, they have seen the private plots become smaller over the years as Zengbu's limited land supply is distributed among increasing numbers of villagers. Some villagers have concluded that they should have more children so that their families can control more of the tiny plots, an involuntal solution that intensifies the problem it recognizes and tries to solve. The villagers have seen available house land built over so that new houses must be built in undesirable outlying locations; the deliberations of the committee that assigns housebuilding land are tense. Everyone can clearly see the intrinsic opposition between the interests of the villagers as a whole, the limited resources available, and the legitimate needs of the family as the family understands them.

In this social context, where the claims of the family and of the government are so pervasive, the private interests of the husband or wife, or of the couple together, have never been regarded as important; indeed, they are scarcely relevant. Marriages in Zengbu are not formed on a basis of personal emotion, and children are not born to provide their parents with emotional fulfillment. An emotional rationale for such important social actions would strike the villagers as flimsy and insubstantial at best, indecent at worst. Rather than emphasizing the relationship between husband

and wife, people think of marriage as the taking of a daughter-in-law to help continue the family line, and the husband's parents, rather than the bride and groom, are congratulated at the wedding. Marriage is to create family continuity, and the explicit purpose of marriage is to have children; this is the pattern of human existence. When a child is born, its importance lies in its social relationships. It exists in relation to the family, as one who is carrying on the line (if male) or as one who will help to carry on the line of another family (if female). The child also exists in relationship to society at large, and so the government's interest in births, which is based on the aim of administering morally so as to produce prosperity, is understood as a direct and legitimate concern. But a child is not thought of as having validity or importance in isolation from its social context. Social experience is valid experience; isolated experience is insignificant experience. The social aspects of the person are relevant; the separate aspects of the person are not relevant. Valuing a child as a "human life," in isolation from its significance to the family and to society, is a senseless abstraction in terms of Chinese ideas about what it means to be a person.

For these reasons, the Chinese do not have a concept of birth as legitimately the personal decision of a woman about her body. They are not "pro-choice"; rather, the importance of a birth to levels of society greater than the individual legitimizes the intervention of these levels in the process. It is interesting to make the comparison between Chinese assumptions and the U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Roe v. Wade*, January 22, 1973. According to the decision,

We recognize the right of the individual, married or single, to be free from unwarranted governmental intrusion into matters so fundamentally affecting a person as the decision whether to bear or beget a child. That right necessarily includes the right of a woman to decide whether or not to terminate a pregnancy.

In Chinese thinking, primacy is given to the fact that the birth fundamentally affects the family and the state, and whether it fundamentally affects the person is a less important consideration. By contrast, the U.S. Supreme Court regards the fact that birth fundamentally affects the person as the validation for superceding the claims of the state, and by implication, in the phrase "married or single," of the family as well. Yet, the fact that the Chinese are not "pro-choice" does not at all imply that they are "pro-life." Both the family and the state understand a birth in purely instrumental terms, as it affects the welfare of the family unit or of the polity. The idea of valuing an unborn life in and of itself, without regard for its social significance, is alien and irrelevant in Chinese social thinking. So, the paired opposition, "pro-choice" vs. "pro-life" reflects specifically American cultural concerns. Attempting to impose these categories on Chinese birth planning leads only to misunderstanding.

The people of Zengbu, living a social life based on these assumptions, inhabit a social world in which no normal adult remains unmarried, for the

social meaninglessness of a single life is unthinkable, and no married couple remains childless by choice, for a childless marriage is a tragic inability to fulfill cultural expectations, rather than a personal sorrow or a private decision. In 1979, when we began to work in Zengbu, these cultural assumptions existed in conjunction with the general principles on birth planning formulated by the upper levels and with specific regulations implemented by the brigade. At this time, birth planning was not yet a matter of strategic significance or a basic state policy, but it had been explained by Chairman Mao and was clearly understood as a goal of appropriate social change. As Women's Federation leaders from the county level said, "We are instructed by Chairman Mao himself that birth planning is closely connected with the national economy, the Four Modernizations, health, the development of science and culture, and prosperity. It protects women's health and liberates them from the burden of having too many children. It also protects children's health and education and helps to nurture them well." In this formulation, the emphasis is primarily in terms of the nation and secondarily in terms of the people whose exploitation is legitimized by the traditional family system: 1) women, urged to produce child after child in order to fulfill the wishes of their husbands' parents, and 2) children, brought into the world as means to the end of the future comfort and satisfaction of others, rather than as beings with important claims or interests of their own. Mao's formulation links the interests of government with the interests of those exploited by the traditional family.

More specifically, the policy was, as it had been for several years, to encourage one birth, strictly control second births, and resolutely prevent third births. But this gnomic formula was variously interpreted and implemented by the different levels of government. Furthermore, its significance and implications were quite different in rural and urban areas. It must be remembered that "rural" and "urban" are birth-ascribed statuses belonging to differently organized social and economic sectors of society. The distinctions are not merely analytical, but are legally maintained and enforced (Potter 1983). In urban areas, the policy was implemented as the "one child family," but there is not, and has never been, a one child policy implemented in Zengbu. It is solely for urban residents. In rural areas, such as Zengbu, policy was filtered through a complex bureaucratic process which produced entirely different regulations. Tracing the different interpretations of policy from level to level demonstrates the kinds of modifications that are made as the policy moves farther from theory and closer to implementation; it also illustrates the extent to which the lower levels are free to act independently. Any preconception of Chinese society as a series of subordinate levels carrying out with unthinking obedience fiat from above is a considerable distortion of the Chinese political process.

There were several important regulations bearing on birth planning being implemented in Zengbu in 1979. The first of these was the required late age of marriage. Peasant men were not permitted to marry until they reached the age of 25 and peasant women until they reached the age of 23 unless hardship could be demonstrated. A legitimate hardship would exist, for example, if the parents of an only son were extremely old and infirm and could be better

cared for with the help of a daughter-in-law. In no case, could a marriage take place if the man was younger than 20 or the woman younger than 18. This regulation was the administrative responsibility not of the brigade but of the Civil Affairs Office at the Commune headquarters, one level up, which issues marriage licences. According to their figures, 93% of all marriages in the commune were between men over the age of 25 and women over the age of 23. The relationship between this regulation and birth planning is that it tended, in the long run, to reduce population by lengthening the time between generations. People saw this as an acceptable regulation because it involved no direct intervention and imposed a wait to bear children, rather than a prohibition. It was consistent with the interests of the families of adult daughters because these women are prodigious earners in Zengbu. Since their earnings were paid to the head of household, their families retained control of a significant economic contribution. The young women themselves preferred to marry late because the life of a daughter-in-law is indubitably harder and less pleasant than that of an adult daughter.

The brigade level was responsible for enforcing the other regulations affecting birth planning. They received general principles from the higher levels, rewrote them into specific regulations taking "local conditions" into account, and transmitted them to the villagers. "Local conditions" can be decoded as the tremendous pressure of traditional familism to have many children and hope for many sons and the degree to which this exerts its influence on the brigade's capacity to implement and enforce. The regulations bearing on birth planning in 1979 stated that each married couple in Zengbu Brigade was allowed four births without paying any penalty at all in the attempt to have at least one son. Each child received a ration of grain at the artificially low state-supported price of 9.80 ¥ per 100 catties (5.9¢ per pound), rather than the normal off-ration price of 25 ¥ per 100 catties (16.6¢ per pound). So the rule was actually providing a life long food subsidy to up to four daughters per couple. This rule is in dramatic contrast to the "one child policy" applied in urban areas; because 80% of the Chinese population is classified as peasants, the impact of such rules as this is enormous. It is interesting, also, to compare this rule with the position of the Catholic Church in favor of births: the Catholic Church makes a moral case for having children, but it also provides alternatives to marriage, and it does not provide life long food subsidies for up to four children of parishioners under parallel condition. Such subsidies as this modify the relationship between a family's economic circumstances and a decision to have more children. They reduce the economic deterrents to having children by having society, rather than the family, shoulder the cumulative financial burden, which, in capitalist systems, remains the family's own.

When we expressed surprise at this rule, the women's leader of the brigade, who is the person responsible for birth planning work, said that "local conditions" were an important factor. She added, "If people here were not allowed to try for a son, there would be trouble." If a couple had children after the fourth daughter or had more than two children including at least one son, these children would not be subsidized, and rice would have to be purchased for them at the unsupported price. Versions of this rule have been misunderstood by the Western press in China; lack of access

to a ration of subsidized grain has been interpreted to mean that excess children would receive no grain at all, rather than that they would have access only to unsubsidized grain. In any case, from the local point of view, the rise in the price of rice for children over the subsidized number was not a deterrent. The women's leader said, "Most families think it is worth it."

Another rule regulated the spacing of births. The first child was permitted to follow immediately upon marriage and, for every fertile couple, did. Subsequent children were supposed to be born at intervals greater than four years. If the interval between children was less, grain for the child was to be purchased half at the subsidized price and half at the unsubsidized price. Such complex compromising rules as this, in which a situation with two aspects (that the child was within the permitted number, but violated the permitted spacing) is dealt with by a regulation with two aspects (grain shall be half subsidized and half not subsidized) are entirely typical of local level administration in Zengbu. There are many parallels: the calculations of payment for work, for example, or the formula for selling pigs fatter than the required quota to the state. Such rules were also used historically in the distribution of lineage resources. From the point of view of the villagers, these rules are a fair way of dealing with factors that are present simultaneously and have conflicting implications.

To make it possible to observe these regulations, all couples of childbearing age were expected to practice some form of birth control. The women's leader was responsible for providing birth control supplies to all the married women in the brigade. She knew which methods were used by each of the 701 couples still in their childbearing years. The methods were as follows:

<u>Method</u>	<u>Women</u>	<u>Men</u>	<u>Couples</u>
Pills	101		101
Sterilization	19	2	21
Ring-shaped loops	424		424
Injections	3		3
"Own methods"			69
Legitimate non-users			
a. Recently married	57		57
b. Recently gave birth	26		<u>26</u>
			701

We asked what "their own methods" would mean in practice, and the women's leader replied austerely, "I never asked them." It is most likely that this category includes the methods for which the husband is directly responsible, condoms and withdrawal, about which a women could not appropriately ask; in Zengbu, these matters cannot be discussed between people of opposite sexes.

Abortion was used as a back-up method of birth control if other methods failed, and there were modest incentives--15 days rest, 30 ¥ (\$20), and continued work points while resting--to encourage the use of abortion to end an unplanned pregnancy rather than letting the child be born by default. If these incentives did not appear sufficiently attractive, the pregnancy could continue, and the penalty would be in the price of rice.

So, birth control methods were a subject of public record. This may be resented as an intrusion inimicable to the family's interests, but it is not thought of using the Western category, "invasion of privacy"; it follows logically from the legitimacy of the state's interest in births. Similarly, the husband's parents are thought to be legitimately concerned in a couple's decisions about birth control. For example, one commune level women's leader commented, "If there are only two daughters, the husband's mother will not agree to birth control for the daughter-in-law." This demonstrates how decision making, if it is not in the hands of the state, is in the hands of the family and not in the hands of the individual. Because the individual interests of the husband and wife are not defined as socially significant in Zengbu, the concept of privacy, which validates these interests in the West, does not exist to be invoked. Indeed, as the distinguished Chinese thinker Zhao Fusan has pointed out in a more general context,³ the concept of privacy is impossible to translate into Chinese without conveying connotations of crass lack of respect for the needs of others and the claims of society as a whole. Attempts to act on a concept of personal privacy would appear antisocial in a Chinese cultural setting. Since the concept of privacy does not exist and, hence, is not present in people's thinking, when birth planning policy is resented, the resentment is conceptualized in other terms.

As well as being the person to implement policy into practice, the women's leader also had the job of educating people about the importance of birth planning from a more general perspective. She tried to make people see the importance of population control in principle and urged the villagers to limit themselves to two children. (She herself had had two children, a son and a daughter, and then underwent a tubal ligation.) Her message was generally received as an irksome and uncongenial matter of little practical importance, since it was not enforced; people did not like hearing the subject discussed. They tended to think of her as the personal agent of policy, so she was the recipient of considerable criticism, some silent, and some overt. Since she is herself a villager, extremely concerned with behaving rightly, and finely attuned to the social pressure applied by her fellow villagers, bearing the criticism was a bitter form of labor that was part of the job. It was an added source of difficulty to have one's mother-in-law as one of the silent critics. The women's leader indicated that, should her mother-in-law become a vocal critic, it would be impossible to continue doing the job and also maintain a sense of being a culturally appropriate daughter-in-law. The more vocal critics in 1979 would say things like, "If you want to have just two children yourself, that's fine, but why don't you let other people be, so they can do what they want?" But the women's leader defended herself on ethical grounds,

affirming that, in her opinion, population control was of first importance to the country as a whole. In her social role as the structural mediator between levels, she was criticized by familistic fellow villagers and defended her position by citing the importance of the needs of the country. In dealing with the upper levels, she was called upon to put the other point of view and to explain that "local conditions" made it impossible to enforce regulations more stringent than the ones in place. She was unable to satisfy either side with these explanations. She carried out an extraordinarily demanding social role, and in 1979, she carried it out alone. In terms of practical support, and in terms of political emphasis, other issues were regarded as primary. This could be gauged by the attention devoted to birth planning at the Three Level Meeting, a political ritual of affirmation and reintegration which is held twice a year. Leaders of the commune, the brigades, and the teams attend the meeting. People compare the bad old past with their bright hopes for the future, and publicly bear witness to the experience of good that their beliefs have made available to them. (The quasi-religious quality of these meetings cannot be missed.) The Three Level Meeting is also the time for introducing and explaining new policy measures. At the Three Level Meeting in the fall of 1979, birth planning received a single mention in passing on the third and final day, as a state goal which would, it was to be hoped, be achieved successfully in the indeterminate future. In spite of the theoretical importance of birth planning, in political context it was not, in 1979, the central focus of attention it was shortly to become, and no particular resources beyond the personal dedication of women's leaders were allocated to the process of implementation. There was a clear disparity between the formal importance of birth planning and the actual degree of attention given to it at the local level. It was an issue that local level leaders preferred to handle as little as possible unless they were required to intervene. In 1979, with "local conditions" being given the greatest consideration and with the subsidization of four daughters per couple, it was clear that birth planning policy was dramatically pronatal in practice and that the forces of traditional familism were well in the ascendant.

By June 1980, however, concern with birth planning had intensified, and the brigade put out a new set of regulations. As before, these regulations were formulated in specific terms at the brigade level, on the basis of general principles handed down from above. The regulations were based on economic incentives and penalties that were intended to be more significant than the previous penalties related to the price of rice. The incentives were stated first. Couples who agreed to limit themselves to one child would receive an incentive of 100 ¥ (\$67) annually. No couple in the brigade regarded this as a rational choice. The brigade was unable to offer the further incentives that are offered to one-child couples in urban areas, such as special high-quality schooling, free child care, and access to better jobs, because these benefits do not exist in the countryside and are not available to peasants. Another urban incentive, more living space, was meaningless in the countryside, since peasant houses are privately owned and built. The negative economic sanctions were to fine couples who had a third child 250 ¥ (\$166) annually; there was a retroactive fine of 150 ¥ (\$100)

for couples who had already had a third child. Village families could generally afford these fines. The brigade also stated that no private plots, litchee trees, or collective income were to be distributed to children born in excess of the rules. Under the collective economic system in use in 1980, this would be a serious loss of future income, and it would require the family rather than the collective to absorb the economic disadvantages of population increase. Furthermore, no housebuilding plots would be provided to the parents of supernumerary male children on behalf of these children. (Housebuilding plots are not provided for female children in any case.) This too was a serious sanction. Since houses are privately owned in Zengbu, much of a family's economic effort is bent to accumulating the money necessary to build a house for each son on a building plot distributed by the the collective. The house is the most important form of villager property, and young men without houses have difficulty in finding marriage partners.

The brigade also ruled that people who did not observe the required interval of four years between births would be fined 10 ¥ (\$6.67) per month until the interval was up. These fines, and all other fines, were to be paid to the teams. The "combined teams," the new administrative unit equivalent to the natural village, would adjudicate violations. Finally, the concluding rule stated, "Everyone is equal under these regulations." This rule reflected the villagers' concern that if Good was to be Limited, as George Foster (1965) would put it, no one should receive an unfair advantage. This is a crucial element of the villagers' definition of justice. They will accept an unpopular policy if the hardship appears to be equally shared. If, however, they think that some people are receiving privileges denied to others, they will resent it so much as to threaten the possibility of enforcing the policy.

Early in 1981, a series of important changes took place that altered the institutional constraints on birth planning and introduced new elements. First, and most importantly, the new system of production responsibility by households was brought into use. This system distributed economic resources to households in such a way as to make the brigade's economic sanctions of the previous June meaningless because families now had a lasting claim on resources, rather than receiving distributions that were reevaluated from year to year. The economic power of the brigade was vitiated and, thus, its political power as well. The production responsibility system provided apparent advantages to households with larger numbers of laborers, and this increased peasant motivation to have more children.

At the same time, the national marriage law was changed. Although the language of the law was to raise the minimum age for marriage, it imposed no legal delay on marrying, and at the local level, late marriage policy was no longer enforced. The effect of the change was to lower the permissible age of marriage for peasants to 22 for men, and 20 for women. Everyone who became eligible to marry under the new law married as soon as possible. In the long run, this would have the effect of increasing population by shortening the length of time between the generations. Coming into effect

when it did, the new law enlarged the category of young people eligible to marry just as an unusually large demographic cohort was entering that category in any case. As a result, the number of births that were culturally imperative because they followed new marriages also increased. The brigade, in a renewed effort to find an effective economic sanction, announced that it was planning to raise the penalty for having a third child to 400 ¥ (\$266) annually. In the light of this, some peasant families concluded that they should try to have another child immediately, rather than waiting for the approved interval only to pay a higher fine.

At this time, early in 1981, a new birth planning policy was introduced by the upper levels. It was based on abortion as a means for preventing excess births, rather than continuing to rely on the economic sanctions that were ineffectual in practice. Under the terms of this policy, as it was implemented at the brigade level, couples who already had two children including one son were called upon to have an abortion if the wife became pregnant again. If both children were daughters, the abortion was not urged. To understand this policy, it is important to understand the cultural meaning of abortion in China, and to do this, it is necessary to stand aside from the emotionally powerful connotations that abortion has in American society, particularly at the present time. The American association of abortion with sex, guilt, violence, and the question of the relationship between being female and the necessity to assume the social role of motherhood are profoundly beside the point to the Chinese. Devereux has pointed out in his book, A Study of Abortion in Primitive Societies (1979), that "we are culturally conditioned to assume that an abortion is an extralegal act, whose purpose is to conceal the dereliction of a woman" (p.133). He adds that "we may hope to overcome our ethnocentric bias ... most effectively by examining in detail those instances of abortion which are imposed upon the women ... in a more or less public and legal manner." Chinese policy is certainly such a case. The use of abortion has a long history in China. According to Alan F. Guttmacher (1973), "The earliest medical manuscript extant, a Chinese herbal 5,000 years old, recommends mercury as an abortifacient" (p.164). It is reasonable, then, to assume that abortion is indigenous and traditional. A county level leader stated the current cultural view of abortion, saying, "In our opinion, abortion is not cruel. It would be much more cruel to let the population continue to grow, and to let the future generations suffer. If we don't stop the population from growing, there will be what we call a human explosion calamity. People will be reduced to eating people. There will be no land and no houses." She is thinking of abortion in pragmatic and instrumental terms, as a trivial evil compared with the horrors of mass starvation. And starvation is not an abstract concept in this context; every villager in Zengbu over the age of forty has actually seen people starve, and younger people have known shared hunger.

The second point that needs to be understood is what it means to be "called on" to have an abortion. In this nonrelativist system, people either share the system's values or are defined as incorrect, and the solution is to persuade them to change their minds by the use of example, explanation, and discussion. This is a traditional solution, rather than an

innovation since 1949, as Jerome Cohen and Sybille Ven der Sprenkel have shown (1968:98). Persuasion of this kind is considered an appropriate and legitimate way of dealing with an erroneous outlook. Family visits are made by local level leaders to carry out persuasion; if repeated visits fail to change a person's mind, leaders of higher and higher rank are brought in. This simultaneously respects the importance of the dissenter and makes the social system one in which dissent is more and more difficult to sustain as the process continues. At the same time, fellow villagers begin to fear that the dissenter will succeed in avoiding the sacrifice that they themselves have already made. They apply social pressure by indicating the resentment they will feel if the sacrifices are not clearly equal. The cumulative social pressure is so strong as to be virtually irresistible. A distinction is made, however, between social pressure and physical force, the use of which would be wrong. Indeed, the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee sent out a letter, dated September 25, 1980, reminding local level leaders engaged in birth planning work to "avoid any forceful methods." A county level leader explained the position by saying, "A good leader won't force an abortion. They rely on education. An effective leader would repeatedly educate a person who was in violation of the rules. Leaders at the brigade, commune, and team levels would come again and again to the person's house, and yell at her constantly. If they discovered a person trying to escape, they would mobilize all of her relatives [to help persuade her], and check out all her sisters. Usually nothing can be done if the woman absolutely refuses. They just fine her." This shows the intensity of persuasion permitted, as long as it remains verbal, and the way in which the person's relatives are drawn into the persuasive process, rather than being defined as separate. The reason for checking out the woman's sisters is that, in this strongly patrilineal society, they will have married out, and be difficult to trace, so it is easier to hide among them or other matrilineal relatives. These remarks also indicate that the failure to persuade, or the use of physical force, imply failure of leadership.

In implementing birth planning policy then, local level leaders were permitted to apply persuasive social pressure and forbidden to apply direct force. Fellow villagers would apply social pressure as well, as long as the policy was seen to be fairly applied and effectively carried out, but if the policy were perceived as variably enforced, the villagers would cease to pressure for universal compliance and start to pressure for the chance to be one of the exceptions. This gave the holdouts a tremendous political significance, and presented local level leaders with almost insoluble problems. By 1981, the brigade women's leader in Zangbu was being helped in her task by the other ten brigade level leaders, rather than working alone as before. This was a clear indication that the importance of birth planning was much greater than it had been. From the point of view of the women's leader, the problem lay in implementing an unpopular policy in a way that would be perceived as perfectly fair. She emphasized to the villagers that there were to be no exceptions whatsoever, "even leaders." At first, villagers were not sure if the policy was really firm. Some families resisted the pressure to have an abortion in the hope that they might

outwait the leadership. The political significance of these families was very great. If villagers were told that they were being called upon to have abortions and yet saw that others, who refused to comply, were allowed to bring their pregnancies to term, the policy ceased to have any meaning. The women's leader said, "With these pregnancies, neighbors pressured the couple, and watched them, and gossiped. The gossipers said, 'If the leaders allow this birth, why can't we have more children?' We decided that either we had a policy, or we didn't."

One woman who was pregnant at this time described the effect of policy on her as follows: "I preferred to have two sons and one daughter, and I was trying for a second son. Well, actually, I was using an IUD, but it failed. I chose to be fined and have the third child. But then the campaign started at the upper levels, and the local level leaders had to follow. The women's leader said, 'Now the campaign has come. You have one son and one daughter, you must go get an abortion.' At first, I refused her request. Later, the head of the Women's Federation at the commune level came to see me. She told me not to give birth. She said it was unfair of me to try to have more children than other people. She said, 'You must carry out the abortion. If you refuse to do so, and try to give birth, leaders of higher and higher levels will come to educate you, and you will be fined.' I didn't want to be fined 400 ¥ for the third child, so I got an abortion."

In Zengbu brigade, there were two crucial test cases in which the pregnant women and their husbands' families did not concede to mounting social pressure. One case involved a couple from the village of Sandhill, who had one son and one daughter when the wife became pregnant again. Leaders tried to persuade this couple to have an abortion, but they refused. They left the village and concealed themselves among the wife's matrilineal relatives. The Zengbu leaders sealed up their empty house and went to look for them, but could not find them. The woman gave birth to a daughter away from the village. When she returned, the brigade leaders imposed a fine of 1,000 ¥ (\$667) plus 400 ¥ (\$267) annually for life. This was reduced to 200 ¥ (\$134) annually when the woman agreed to have a tubal ligation. The woman's leader commented that the initial 1,000 ¥ did not even cover the cost to the brigade of the unsuccessful search. Public reaction to this case was to call the woman twice a fool: first to give birth to a daughter rather than a son, which is culturally defined as being her own fault, and second, to give birth at all when the penalty was to pay such an exorbitant fine. Yet this case also raised the possibility that people who could hide successfully would not be bound by the same rules as the others.

The second test case involved a woman from Louhs' Home Village. She and her husband had two daughters and one son already. She would not agree to have the abortion, in spite of efforts to convince her to do so by the brigade women's leader and other leaders from levels as high as the county. Ten days before the baby was due, the couple left the village in hopes of giving birth elsewhere. The brigade leaders closed up their house and

nailed a sign to their door. They urged the husband's brothers to get the couple back. They said that in three days the husband's brothers' houses would be sealed as well. This reflects the cultural assumption that the acts of family members can be thought of as linked and inseparable, and that it is reasonable for a man's brothers to share in his punishment. The brigade leaders met with the wife's mother and the wife's mother's brother. (The latter is the traditional mediator in cases involving conflict between the lineage and a woman who married in.) In meeting with these relatives, the leaders made the cultural assumption that the couple was likely to have turned to the wife's matrilineal relatives. In this meeting, the brigade leaders told the wife's relatives that the land which had been distributed to the couple would be taken back, both private plots and production responsibility land. This would leave the couple with no share of the village resources with which to make a living. At 8 p.m. on the second day, in time to avoid having the husband's brothers' houses sealed, the couple returned. The abortion took place on the following day, using the injection method. The brigade women's leader explained that the injection method would not necessarily kill the baby at once. She said that, if the child were born alive, it wouldn't live more than two or three hours. In this case, they paid no attention to the child and took no measures to save it; the child died as a result of deliberate inattention to its perinatal distress, which was presumably the result of the method of abortion. The women's leader could not tell this story without evident distress of her own, even after an interval of two years. She repeated the justifications for the brigade's actions: "Everyone in the village was watching this case. The leaders felt that if she had her baby, the whole policy would become unenforceable. If we had let her go freely, it would have had a very bad effect on everyone else." In spite of the validity of these justifications in her mind, her distress indicated the presence of another point of view, the family's point of view, existing simultaneously, and recognized as valuable. Several years earlier, in explaining her reasons for becoming politically active, the women's leader had described the extreme poverty of her bleak childhood and the abusiveness within her family that was the direct result, in her opinion, of the economic circumstances of the surrounding society. Her idea of socialism was that it would provide prosperity and economic justice and that, as a direct result, there would be social justice and harmonious family life as well. Socialism was the natural, complete, and far-reaching solution to the problems of family life and the exploitation, particularly of women, inherent in the family structure. Her political goals included the presupposition that it was important to make family life less sordid by making it closer to cherished ideals. What was socialist and what was most valuable and validly Chinese were linked in her way of thinking. Her own social idealism and her ways of being kind and considerate to others were expressed using the formula of socialist theory. Now, by carrying her principles through to their logical conclusion, she served her goals in the long run, but in the short run, she injured the family interests of some fellow villagers. Respect for the principles of the state conflicted with respect for the principles of the family, with the essentially tragic result that people on either side of the question could no longer define themselves as essentially good, because they

were inevitably in conflict, if not with one, then with the other aspect of their own valued principles.

This second test case demonstrates that letting the neonate die is regarded as socially legitimate when the reasons are compelling. In this case, the compelling reasons were those of the state. But the question can also be raised of under what circumstances might it seem legitimate to the family to let the neonate die? Clearly, given the importance of a male rather than a female child, families would be more motivated to let a female neonate die. Female infanticide existed in traditional China. It has been reported and deplored in the national press as an immoral act; the state takes the position that all children appropriately and legitimately conceived should be protected. It is only if the couple violates the legal restrictions on numbers of births that the child can be allowed to die. According to the brigade women's leader, there has been no infanticide of female babies in Zengbu, in spite of the clearly displayed assumption that males are more important and more fully human than females. Since all pregnancies are monitored and their results known, the statement of the women's leader is to be accepted. Families, although wishing strongly for sons, are not sufficiently desperate to make female infanticide seem legitimate. Women's leaders at the commune level say that there has been no female infanticide in Chashan Commune, although they have heard that it does sometimes happen in "remote areas." The phrase suggests that it is more characteristic of people in less civilized areas, and, by implication, that it is not really a civilized thing to do. At the county level, birth planning leaders report one case of attempted infanticide in their experience. (It should be remembered that the population of the county is more than one million.) In this case, a young woman tried to abandon her female baby "on the hillside" but her fellow villagers found it and brought it back. At the provincial level, a birth planning leader reported that infanticide exists in certain remote islands along the coast that are difficult to control. Presumably, limitations on pregnancy are also difficult to implement in such areas, so stringent policy enforcement and female infanticide would not logically be linked. The leader affirmed the official position that once appropriately born, the child must be protected. She said that in her opinion, the amount of infanticide in Guangdong Province must be negligible since the sex ratio for newborns is well within the bounds of the normal. According to Li Chengrui, the Director of the State Statistics Bureau, as quoted in an article "Sex Ratio of China's Newborns and Infants" in Women of China (August 1983), a normal sex ratio for newborns is defined as "about 100:105, with a margin of 103 to 108" for males outnumbering females (p.11). Li gives Anhui Province as an example of a locale with an abnormal sex ratio with 100 girls to 111.12 boys. It is interesting to compare these modern figures with historical ones. For example, under the old regime, in the village near Shanghai studied by Fei Hsiao Tung, the sex ratio was 100 girls to 135 boys (1939:34). So it would not be reasonable to suggest that state birth planning policy has precipitated female infanticide by families in the part of Guangdong Province we studied, and probably elsewhere as well.

The villagers did not like the policy of using abortion as the focus of birth planning implementation; by comparison, the former policy, which had been disliked in its day, appeared preferable. We asked one male villager, "What did the people think about the leadership calling on them to have abortions?" and he said, "The attitude of the villagers is that leaders should fine people, rather than requiring them to have abortions." If the policy were to exist at all, however, public opinion supported universal enforcement. In the second test case, for example, they supported the leadership's actions on the grounds that it would have been unfair to permit the couple to have their baby when other people could not.

We also asked the women's leader about the feelings of the women who had the abortions; she said that if the child would have been a son, the women were really upset, but not if it would have been a daughter. This exchange reflects, in the question, the Western assumption that an experience takes its meaning in an important way from the emotions of the person having the experience. In the answer, it reflects the Chinese assumption that a person's response to an experience will reflect its social implications--in this case, the importantly differing significance of having a son rather than a daughter.

The policy based on abortion can be understood more clearly if it is looked at in perspective and in the light of some interesting comparative figures. In evaluating the degree of completeness with which the policy was implemented, it is worth noting that, according to the provincial level, in the province as a whole in 1982, 19% of all births were third or higher order births. This bespeaks a very considerable gap between policy and implementation, suggesting that many areas had leaders whose efforts were weak or ineffectual in comparison with Zengbu's leaders and that many supernumerary pregnancies were brought to term. Rather than suggesting a high degree of successfully enforced compliance, the figure indicates that, in the province as a whole, there was a wide disparity between theory and practice. This does not surprise the leadership because they think of policy as a goal, an ideal to be approached, rather than a law. As Vivienne Shue puts it, in discussing the Land Reform period (1949-1956), "they were prepared for only partial fulfillment of goals ... they did not expect or insist on perfect compliance ..." (1980:5). This distinction between policy and law is critical and complex and produces a socially specific and distinctive attitude to social control.

In considering the qualities of the policy in comparative perspective, it has been easy for the uninformed to assume that such a policy would produce a number of abortions that could be considered excessive or shocking in international terms. A comparison with abortion figures for the United States is surprising and instructive. Using the format of the Statistical Abstracts of the United States produced by the U.S. Census Bureau (1984), abortion figures are quoted in terms of the numbers of abortions per 1,000 live births. In the U.S. as a whole in 1980 (the most recent figures available), there were 428 abortions per 1,000 live births, in a range between Utah's 97 and the District of Columbia's 1,569. In New York, the

figure was 780, and in California it was 598. In Guangdong Province in 1982, using figures provided by provincial officials, there were 523 abortions per thousand births. (Leaders provided the most recent complete figures for an interview in August, 1983, and did not rehearse the data for earlier years.) In Dongguan County in 1982, there were 816 abortions per 1,000 births. In Chashan Commune in 1981, there was a ratio of 727 abortions per 1,000 live births, based on actual figures of 656 births and 477 abortions. In 1982, 605 births and 370 abortions yielded a ration of 612 to 1,000. For the first six months of 1983, there were 213 births and 96 abortions, yielding a ratio of 450 abortions per 1,000 live births. The average for the entire 2-1/2 year period is 640 abortions per 1,000 live births. In Zengbu brigade, where the women's leader provided figures showing 150 abortions and 257 births in the 2-1/2 year period, the ratio is 584 per 1,000. These figures indicate clearly that, at the height of the policy emphasizing abortion as a method of population control, the figures remained well within a range currently found in the United States. Since this policy created an extreme number of abortions for a Chinese social setting, the more valid cross-cultural comparison is with the extreme cases in the United States. The highest number of abortions (the 816 per thousand of Dongguan County in 1982) amounts to only 52% of the ratio for Washington, D.C., for example.

The policy of relying on abortion only yielded temporary results, since a woman who had an abortion under the policy might soon become pregnant again. Its cost was high: financially, in terms of funding many abortions; in stress, because it forced people between the jaws of two conflicting sets of principles and then required them to act, and in administrative difficulty. Under this policy, only the people whose refusal to respond to the claims of the wider society was most adamant, determined, and wily would be rewarded with a supernumerary child. The policymakers raised the issue that repeated abortions were harmful to the health of women, signaling a change in the official attitude, and the policy was discontinued. It was necessary to construct a new policy that would be exquisitely fair in equalizing the sacrifices, that would be effective in reducing population growth, and that would be within the capacity of local level leaders to enforce.

In 1983, the state formulated a new policy for peasants, requiring those who had given birth to two children and were demonstrably at risk for having a third, to undergo sterilization. This policy was intended only for the rural areas, not for the cities, where the "one child policy" was the rule. As one provincial level leader explained, "There is no sterilization policy in the city, where people have only one child. We will never ask couples with one child to undergo sterilization because that would prevent them from having another if their child died." The sterilization policy for peasants with two children was a state policy, and provinces were encouraged to adopt it, but it was not mandatory. Rather, provinces that adopted the policy would sum up their experiences and a mandatory policy would be formulated later. Guangdong Province and four other densely populated provinces--Sichuan, Hebei, Shandong, and Henan--adopted the policy.

Guangdong Province leaders spelled out the meaning of the policy from their point of view in great detail. Peasant families could give birth to a second child if and only if the first was a girl, which would, it was felt, constitute a hardship in household based agriculture. But one son, or two children if the first was a girl, was, from the province's point of view, to be the limit. Exceptions were carefully described. A deformity or defect complete enough to make the child incapable of working in later life would permit the birth of another child to compensate for the incapacity. Families in debilitating occupations, such as mining or fishing, could have extra children. So could people in remote mountain areas or small islands and minority peoples. A remarriage renewed the right to have children; a provincial leader said, "We must remember that the purpose of marriage is to have children." Children born in multiple births resulting from approved pregnancies were unquestionably legitimate exceptions to the ordinary limitations. In effect, the policy rationed the right to have children. Because of this, it became important to prevent people from exceeding their ration. Sterilization was to be the means whereby this was to be ensured, and it was to be used in cases where the risk that a couple would exceed the ration was apparent. Thus, if a couple had two children already and the wife became pregnant again, she was to have an abortion, and one member of the couple was to be sterilized. (If the wife was over forty, however, sterilization was not required, on the grounds that her fertility was almost over in any case.) If the couple had two children and were not using any contraceptive method, one of the couple was to be sterilized. If the couple had violated the four-year spacing rule by having two children since 1979, one of the couple was to be sterilized. Finally, if the couple used contraception, but the wife had had an abortion since 1979, indicating contraceptive failure, one of the couple was to be sterilized. The decision to turn to sterilization as a last resort was the result of a long term experience of repeated contraceptive failures. A provincial level leader said, "In the countryside we've had a lesson. Contraception is not effective. The peasants are not used to condoms, the side effects of contraceptive drugs are strong, the rings and other IUDs have many failures, and repeated abortions harm the health of women." In conjunction with the sterilization policy, there was a new propaganda emphasis on raising a "healthy superior child." This new emphasis marks an attempt to make an important shift in underlying attitudes: the shift from the expectation of large numbers of children, with the failure to thrive of one or another of them a matter to be endured, to the expectation of fewer children, each more important, and each to be nurtured with resources formerly spread thin.

The sterilization policy differed from previous policies in that it required a permanent rather than a temporary measure to be taken. It also differed from previous policies by requiring a measure that has extremely serious cultural implications. Traditional values attribute far more horrifying significance to sterilization than to abortion. (By comparison, in the United States at the present time, there is significant religious feeling that abortion is a wicked and immoral procedure, yet there is no comparable outcry urging the prevention of sterilization procedures on moral grounds.) According to these traditional values, the social worth of a

person depends on the ability to work and the ability to carry on the family line. These abilities are believed to be linked, and men are believed to possess them to a higher degree than women. The assumption is made that people who are sterilized have their capacity to work permanently damaged, and this, as well as the loss of the capacity to reproduce, damages the meaning of their relationship to the family. Because work, reproduction, and the family are as one and inseparable, sterilization is understood as damaging all three. Sterilization is regarded as even more damaging to men's greater capacities than to women's lesser ones, and many people regard the idea of a vasectomy with horror. Tubal ligation for women is thought of as the less damaging alternative, so, faced with the choice, many women accept sterilization themselves, rather than letting their husbands be sterilized. It is a reasonable inference that this policy would not have been implemented, or even formulated, if the provincial leadership did not think of it as the only remaining possibility in a situation where the consequences of failing to act were worse than the consequences of acting.

The county level modified this policy in such a way as to permit more children. A county level leader said, "Central policy is that, if you have a son first, you have to stop, but our county lets the peasants have a second child, even if the first child is a son." This decision freed 100% of peasant couples to have two children, instead of limiting 50% of them to one child; in so heavily populated a county (the population is over a million), the practical implications of this decision are very great and would produce a much higher birth rate than implementation of the provincial level policy. But, a county level leader said, "While the upper levels were scolding us, we agreed to what they said, but when they had gone, we did what we thought was right." Nonetheless, the county level's liberalized policy was still painfully restricted by peasant standards.

At the commune level, at a Three Level Meeting devoted to the topic in May, 1983, the local leaders heard the policy explained and found themselves confronted with the problem of implementing the sterilization of everybody who fell into the categories called the "four yardsticks." The four yardsticks measured couples who already had two children and defined which of them must now be sterilized. As at the provincial level, the commune required sterilization if the wife was pregnant again, if the couple was not using any form of contraception, if the second child had been born after an interval of less than four years, or if the wife had had an abortion since 1979. Couples who had used contraception effectively would not have to be sterilized, a powerful implicit incentive for future contraceptive use. In implementing this policy, the commune emphasized that the force of example was even more important than persuasion, and the local leaders were told that, if they fell into the categories, they had to be sterilized first. The women's leader of the brigade said, "When the leaders heard this, they couldn't understand it in their minds. They looked around at one another. They were told, 'If you don't take the lead in this drive, how can you get the peasants to follow you?'" Both of the brigade level leaders from Zengbu who fell into the categories underwent vasectomies. In its social context, this was undoubtedly impressive. Only when the vasectomies had taken place did the brigade present its own modified version of policy to the villagers.

Brigade policy respected the urgency of the cultural preference for a son by saying that couples with two daughters, who would otherwise have fallen into the four categories, were not required to be sterilized. This modification reduced by 25% the number of couples who would otherwise have fallen into the commune's category for required sterilization. There was a clear implication that, in the future, these couples could have a third child in trying for a son, and pay a fine. Brigade leaders felt that their ability to implement the policy at all hinged on this crucial provision and that, without it, they could not succeed in getting the villagers to comply. The brigade also announced that, since they had not previously enforced the four-year spacing rule, they would not sterilize couples who had violated it. Brigade leaders felt that the sterilization of couples who violated the four-year spacing rule would leave those couples unable to replace children who might not be viable; children born since 1979 were still too young to make it reasonable to assume that they would survive, it was argued. The argument shows that at the brigade level, people still lived in the expectation of high infant mortality. The brigade announced that it would, however, enforce the four-year spacing rule in future.

The villagers' reaction to the policy was predictably strong. One man commented, "We preferred abortion to sterilization, because then, if a child died, it could be replaced." Another man said, "I oppose it! You must have a son to carry on the family name. If you don't have a son, you won't have anyone to worship the dead parents' souls. [This in spite of the fact that ancestor worship was forbidden from 1949 to 1981.] It will cut the generations, there will be no ancestors. You raise sons, sons support you in your old age. It is impossible for daughters to take care of the aged, because they marry out. The men believe that the strength of the man is in his sperm. They fear the weakening of the body through sterilization. The men must go out to work. If the man dies, the family will be destroyed." A male leader, speaking of his daughter-in-law's sterilization, said sadly, "It is easy to agree to the necessity for sterilization in an open meeting, but it becomes very hard when it is a member of your own family."

To make the situation as acceptable as possible, commune level leaders hired highly qualified doctors from the medical school in Guangzhou; this was to allay fears that the operations would not be competently performed. The brigade offered financial incentives of 200 ¥ (\$134) to those who had the operations immediately. There were 216 couples in the brigade who fell into the brigade's sterilization categories. In the two weeks following the announcement of the policy, 187 sterilizations, including 8 vasectomies, were performed. This took place in the second two weeks of May 1983. The rest were to be sterilized in June or, if they were ill, in September. In August 1983, the brigade women's leader said, "At first they didn't understand. But no one refused the operation, and no one ran away. Their thinking changed. In the beginning, they shouted at us. Everyone was watching the main trend. They saw the others were doing it, so they got caught up." By using the force of example, explanations, incentives, the hiring of special doctors, and the momentum of social pressure, the leaders succeeded in implementing their version of the policy.

Over the short span of the last four years, Zengbu Brigade has seen four birth planning policies: 1) the refusal to subsidize supernumerary children; 2) the imposition of fines; 3) the policy relying on abortion; and 4) the policy relying on sterilization. These policies have evolved from partial subsidization of traditional values toward a comparatively active and painful rejection of these values. Yet by December 1984, there were signs that policy was retrenching. Provincial level officials had been told that there should be more emphasis on research, and less on the practicalities of implementation and enforcement. Some leaders had lost their jobs in the wake of the 1983 campaign. The conflict continues between the values of familism and the needs of a nation burdened with the most overwhelming population on the face of the earth. There is a recognition that the cherished values embodied in familism have become agents of destruction to China as a whole. Yet it is overwhelmingly difficult to reject beliefs as beloved as they are dangerous, even in the certain knowledge that such a rejection is the only possible alternative. If the extraordinary pronatalism of traditional culture is overcome, then what it means to have a child in China and to be a child in China will change completely, yielding dramatic new cultural and structural forms. There will be the resources to provide decently for those who are born and to care for them so that they can indeed be healthy and superior. If the extraordinary Chinese pronatalism is not modified, future generations of Chinese children will suffer increasingly until they are destroyed by the weight of their own numbers.

NOTES

1. For recent studies of China's population as a whole, in demographic terms, see, among others, H. Yuan Tien's "China: Demographic Billionaire," Population Bulletin, vol. 38, no. 2, April, 1983, and Nathan Keyfitz, "The Population of China," in Scientific American, vol. 250, no. 2, February, 1984.
2. Reported by Deborah Davis-Friedmann at the Regional Seminar in Chinese Studies, University of California at Berkeley, October 27, 1984.
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