

rate of women aged 15-19 was as low as 8 per 1000—a clear indication of the effectiveness of the “wan-xi-shao” policy, but it had risen to 19.88 per 1000 in 1987, a rapid increase of 149%. The early childbearing phenomenon was also shown by the change in the fertility rate of women aged 25-29 at the peak of childbearing age. In 1980, the fertility rate of women aged 25-29 was 194.28 per 1000, about 1/3 higher than that of women aged 20-24 at 147.86 per 1000. However, in 1987, the fertility rate of women aged 20-24 was about 1/4 higher than that of women aged 25-29. The general fertility rate also rose by 12.16% from 75.69 per 1000 in 1980 to 87.85 per 1000 in 1987 (Table 3). Moreover, the average childbearing interval dropped from 4 years in the 1970s to 2.2 years. Obviously the “wan-xi-shao” population-control policy had become ineffective.

The “1-child-per-couple” population-control policy in the 1980s, which was stricter than the “wan-xi-shao” policy in the 1970s, turned out to be less effective. Because the policy was divorced from people’s views and due to changes in the overall situation caused by economic reforms, family planning restraints were weakened. Not only did the central government fail to make further progress with its population-control success in the 1970s, it also unintentionally encouraged out-of-plan births. From 1980 to 1988, within-plan births accounted for only 54.15% while out-of-plan births for 45.85% of total births.⁸ The rebound in the fertility rate was a major feature of population control in the 1980s.

The Impact of the Emergence of a Market Economy on Fertility

In the 1990s, both the natural growth rate of the population and the birth rate resumed a declining trend as in the 1970s, although the decline was relatively slow. In fact, the change began in 1988.

The beginning of the decline in the birth rate coincided with a readjustment in the population-control policy. As early as 1984, realizing that the rise of the birth rate was out of control and that the implementation of the “1-child-per-couple” policy was very difficult in rural areas, Beijing issued *Document Zhongfa*

no. 7 to relax the conditions for the birth of a second child, but out-of-plan births of the second child or more children remained strictly prohibited.⁹ However, the birth rate continued to rise in 1988 because cadres responsible for the implementation of the new policy either did not fully understand the contents of the policy or did not conscientiously implement it. In March 1988, the State Family Planning Commission submitted an Outline of the Report on Family Planning Work to the CCP Central Committee, re-emphasizing that the current family planning policy was “late marriage, late childbearing, and having fewer but high-quality children”. A couple was urged to have only 1 child, but rural households with only a daughter would be allowed to give birth to a second child 4 years after the first child was born. This policy, referred to by the mainland people as “opening up small holes but stopping up big holes,” was to give some peasants the hope of having a son while vigorously carrying out other birth control regulations. In 1991, by issuing a “Decision on Strengthening Family Planning to Achieve Strict Control of Population Growth”, the State Council emphasized that the current family planning policy had to be thoroughly implemented to ensure its stability and continuity.

As the fertility policy moved closer to people’s expectations, it became relatively more acceptable. Thus, strict implementation began to bring the birth rate down. In addition, the phenomenon of “early marriage and early childbearing”, which contributed much to the rise of the birth rate in the 1980s, was brought under control in the early 1990s. The average first-mar-

Table 3. The Fertility Rate of Women by Age Groups

Age group	Unit: per thousand	
	1980	1987
15-49	75.69	87.85
15-19	8.00	19.88
20-24	147.86	227.99
25-29	194.28	172.06

Source: Compiled from the data of the 1982 fertility sampling survey of 1 per thousand of the PRC population and the 1988 fertility and family planning sampling survey of 2 per thousand of the PRC population.