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Fengmei Li

New York University, fengmei.li@nyu.edu

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Will Women Return Home? Changing Gender Dynamics in Urban China under the Two-Child Policy

Fengmei Li, *New York University*

Conference Paper (Graduate)

Abstract

Examining online discourses concerning the recent policy shift in China from the One-Child Policy to the Two-Child Policy, this study organizes the online discussions on Zhihu.com and analyses how those posts reflect the changing gender norms in urban China. Data collected from Zhihu.com under the topic of “the second child” address family conflicts and parental concerns stimulated by the policy shift as well as worries about whether the new policy will intensify gender discrimination. Based on the data, the study comes to two conclusions: firstly, the “son preference” tradition is dwindling as generations pass on, and secondly, urban women tend to embrace the notion of gender equality and fight against tradition. Future research in this area may track the promulgation and implementation of supportive policies that are in line with the Two-Child Policy and further examine their influences on gender dynamics both in family environments and workplace of contemporary urban China.

Keywords: gender norms, Two-Child Policy, urban China, Zhihu

Introduction

In April 2016, an old couple living in Liuyang, Hunan province, wrote a seven-page long “ask-for-grandson” letter directly to their daughter-in-law Zheng after their fruitless attempts to persuade their son to have another baby. The letter reads: “Zheng, you two can afford an apartment and a car, why cannot you afford another person? ...Our greatest desire for now is that you two can have another child, a son. But you only told us to wait either for another five years or for another two years—never actual promises or plans...” Not even finishing reading the letter, Zheng cried and told her husband: “Enough with all this! Let’s simply get divorced” (Ling Zhang, 2016).

The headline story recounted above may sound sensational and astonishing, but it is, in fact, just one out of thousands of life stories happening in households across China since its recent fertility policy shifts. China relaxed the One-Child Policy nationwide in November 2013 after enforcing it for more than 30 years, allowing married couples to have two children if either parent is him or herself an only child in the family. Two years later, by the end of 2015, the government officially abolished the One-Child Policy and replaced it with the Two-Child Policy. The sudden change of the policy entails huge impacts on the daily lives of the individuals, bringing forth conjugal conflicts, generational clashes, as well as tremendous confusion about an essential life decision: whether to have a second child.

Along with the family conflicts brought forth by this social change, social norms such as cultural values and gender scripts may as well be subject to change. As explained by Blumer (1969), human society is by no means a fixed product. Rather, it is a formative process of human interactions which requires a lot of "defining what to do" and "interpreting definitions" (p. 110). Therefore, shifting historical circumstances such as the implementation of population policies might modify or even reshape the social norms because people may start to interpret and interact in different ways in a different social context.

Before the recent shift to the Two-Child Policy, scholars in related fields have done extensive work examining how the lives of urban individuals in China underwent huge changes brought about by the One-Child Policy in the past three decades. Particularly, Fong (2004) has argued that singleton daughters have benefited from the demographic pattern produced by the policy because they do not have to compete with their male siblings for parental investment and educational resources in this traditionally patriarchal society (Fong, 2004). Many researchers also believe that the One-Child Policy not only weakened patriarchal social traditions but contributed to the progress towards gender equality in terms of a rising social status of urban Chinese women (Deutsch, 2006; Fong, 2004; Tsui & Rich, 2002).

Now that China gradually shifted its fertility policy again from one child per family to two children per family, it draws our attention to whether or in what way the Two-Child Policy will again alter the gender dynamics in urban China. This topic is particularly worth examining at this point for two reasons. Firstly, as the new policy has just taken effect since the beginning of 2016, this study may help policymakers promptly identify family conflicts and personal concerns that are likely triggered by the new policy and clashing gender beliefs. Secondly, this young generation of parents are mostly the grown-ups of the singletons produced by the One-Child Policy. This study, therefore, can also provide insights into whether previous studies' arguments about the changing gender beliefs in the only children generation still hold true as the singletons grow up and become parents themselves.

China's population policies, the One-Child Policy in particular, have been influencing urban women's social status in this traditional patriarchal society. Previous studies have tried to depict an accurate and panoramic picture of the changing gender dynamics under the One-Child Policy era from different perspectives—gender ratio, marriage bargaining power, educational attainment, employment rate, and media effect. Now that the fertility policy has shifted from the One-Child Policy to the Two-Child Policy, it raises the question how this new social change will again impact the progress of gender equality in this society. Since the official abolishment of the One-Child Policy was only one year ago, it is unlikely that this paper can dig into the long-term impact of the new policy due to its relatively short time of implementation. Hence, I set up this project as an exploratory study of the social shift's potential influence on the gender dynamics in urban China reflected by social discourses emerged online. With special attention to the life of the individual, my core research question is: How does the online discourse about the TwoChild Policy reflect the changing gender dynamics in urban China?

Methodology

This paper qualitatively examines the discussions held online concerning the Two-Child Policy. On the one hand, the qualitative method of analysis focuses on the themes and meanings of the language used in the database rather than statistical inferences from the frequency of occurrence of specific texts. On the other hand, the qualitative method is mainly inductive (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2016), which fits with the current study in that this study is also exploratory at this stage since this relatively new social transition has yet unknown and unclear potential impact or consequences.

Site of Research

The study examines Zhihu.com, a Chinese question-and-answer website, as the site of this investigation. "Zhihu" in traditional Chinese means "Do you know?" This site is similar to the American website Quora, where topics, questions, and answers are all generated by its users. Founded at the beginning of 2011, this website has grown exponentially. By March 2015, its number of registered users has reached 17 million whereas the number of monthly active users hit 100 million. Today, Internet users in China, especially millennials and those with relatively higher education and higher income levels, increasingly resort to Zhihu.com for relatively more reliable knowledge and advice from experts in various areas. ¹

¹ Social and Media Networks Report - China - May 2015

Data Collection and Analysis

Zhihu only shows the viewers the time when a response is either first created or last edited. In other words, once a response is edited by its author, the original time posted cannot be found online. Meanwhile, the time a question is created or edited is not shown. Thus, my data pool only contains the time information when the responses were generated or last edited. The earliest response in my database was posted on Mar. 18th, 2013 while the latest one was on Jan. 10th, 2017, the day before the data collection.

Through analyzing the data, codes, code groups and free codes (codes without a code group) emerged inductively. Some of the code groups were "gender", "policy", "relationships between children." Some of the codes were "the age gap," "the only children," "the second child's surname," "divorce" etc. Some of the free codes were "conflicts," "cultural values," "sarcasm," "Zhihu the platform" etc. The code groups, codes, and free codes then helped categorize the data into individual themes and subthemes, which then formed the units of analysis for this research. All data are in Mandarin Chinese when coded in ATLAS.ti, a qualitative data analysis and research software. The codes, code groups and free codes emerged are all in Mandarin as well. Only the selected quotations were translated into English for the results and discussion section.

Results

Through a close analysis of the posts collected from this online venue, I found that three themes inductively emerged from this database. First of all, it is obvious to notice that there are various kinds of family conflicts brought forth by the policy change. Both conjugal conflicts and generational conflicts are involved in various situations. Secondly, if we focus more on the younger generation of parents themselves, I found that they have their own considerations and confusion in regards to raising two children, which are different from the older generation's concerns. Thirdly, online participants are also concerned with macro-level issues regarding this social change. Namely, many users are giving their own opinions about the reasons and possible impact of this policy change. For the purpose of this study, I will only report macro-level discussions on the topic of whether the new policy will intensify gender discrimination in the workplace.

I. Family Conflicts Brought about by the Policy Shift

The clash of gender beliefs can easily lead to various types of family conflicts. The first two kinds of conflicts that are discussed in this section capture the

tension between the husband and the wife, oftentimes with their own parents backing up each side. Thus, both conjugal conflicts and generational conflicts are involved.

1.1 Wife's refusal to try for a son

The first conflict is about how women refuse to have a second child because they find that their husbands' family wants a son rather than simply a second child. Some of the wives go through a torturous process of deciding whether to compromise to their husbands' family, but they still decide to divorce their husband at the end. Three question posts in Zhihu apparently describe three surprisingly similar cases. All three of these women already had a daughter. Now that the second child is allowed, their husbands and the husband's family have started to urge them to try for a son. In one of the posts, the author describes how her mother-in-law was pressuring her:

'My mother-in-law says: "This (to give birth to a son) is good for you yourself. You will know it when you grow older. Women must have their own children." I challenged her by asking: "How come I don't have a child? Didn't I give birth to my daughter?" She answered: "Although you gave birth to her, she is going to get married and become part of some other family. How can she still be considered your child?" '

Several wives are not willing to give birth to a second child for numerous reasons. The most cited reason is that they do not want to be treated as tools for reproduction. These women are clear that their husband's family wants a son rather than simply "another child." They feel desperate since they fear that once their husband and in-laws learn that the second baby is not a boy, they will be pressured to have an abortion. These women all decide to divorce finally after an agonizing process of making this decision. What makes them suffer the most is exactly the feeling of being treated as a "tool."

1.2 Disagreement on the surname of the second child

The second conflict concerning the surname issue is a completely new phenomenon brought about by the policy shift. According to the Chinese traditions, only males can carry the family line. Thus, daughters are not allowed to be included in family trees traditionally because daughters become part of "other families" when they get married (Branigan, 2011). For similar reasons, children inherit the surname of their fathers rather than mothers. However, with the One-Child Policy in effect for more than thirty years, families who only had a daughter presumably had to resort to their girls for carrying on the family line. Now that a second child is allowed, some wives and their parents now propose that the second child inherit the wife's

surname which contradicts the tradition and thus raises many discussions on this issue.

Three posts describe problems that occur within marriages, and they happen to be surprisingly similar: the clashes all break out right after the first child is born. The wives and their parents in these three stories proposed before marriage that they wanted their second child to inherit the wife's surname, with which their husbands all agreed prior to their marriages. However, all three husbands and their parents regretted their former decisions after the birth of the first child. They were trying however they can to break the agreement because the first child happened to be a girl. The husband's family cannot accept the fact that the daughter will inherit their surname while the second child (possibly a son) will be in line with the wife's family. They, therefore, wanted to change the agreement to have the son inherited the husband's surname whereas they do not care about the daughter's surname.

1.3 First children's resistance to a new sibling

Because of the uniqueness that this generation of second children is the product of a policy change rather than of family planning in the first place, those first children who post on the online forum have already reached their late teenage years or early adulthood. Before the policy change, they grew up to believe that they were going to be the only child in the family because of the urban environment they lived in. Now that the policy suddenly shifted and, thus, changed the current norm of family structure, it stands to reason that this generation of first children are confused about how they should react to a new sibling. The ages of these first children who post online range between 16 and 22 based on their self-report. Most of the posts express the feeling of confusion and reluctance. A few of them are filled with strong emotions such as anger and resistance, while there are also a few responses indicate a willingness to embrace a bigger family.

The most cited reason for the first children to express their unwillingness to accept the second baby is the huge age gap between the siblings. The age gap matters in this case because an age gap of 20 years between two siblings blurs the boundary of generation. For one thing, the late teenagers and young adults claim that they have already passed the age when they need some companionship to grow up. For another, the first children are afraid that it will be their responsibility to take care of the baby and even to support the second child economically. Under the Two-Child Policy, it is very likely that the first child himself or herself is going to have two children once they get married. Enough burden has already been on their shoulders, let alone to add one more sibling who is only a few years older than their own children.

When the parents want to have a second child while they only have a daughter, things become more complicated under the context of the "son

preference" tradition in China. The daughters who are the first children are consciously aware that son preference tradition persists as a tradition in the society. It thus makes sense when they become suspicious of their parents' intention of giving birth to another child. One post is titled "I've read many stories online talking about how parents treat sons better than daughters in every aspect. I'm afraid that this will happen to me as well. Am I overthinking it?" The author who writes this question is a 16-year old girl who studies abroad in the United States. Her mother told her recently about her plan to give birth to a second baby, a "little brother" for the author. The mother sounded very determined for a "son" since she had decided to abort the child once the detection reveals it to be a girl. Because of this conversation and based on what she learned about the son preference tradition online, the daughter now worries that her mother favors sons over daughters.

II. Parents' Concerns about Raising Two Children

In the last section, we learn why some of the parents want a second child or at least how they phrase their intention from the narratives of the first children. The parents in this last group of posts are mainly in their late 40s or early 50s as inferred from the authors' descriptions. This section continues to examine the parents' intention of planning a second child under the new policy, but these posts are mainly from a younger generation of parents. Based on the narratives they provide, most of them were at the stage of planning their parenthood when the policy kept changing in recent years. According to the Sixth National Population Census, the average age for Chinese women to have their first child is 26.24 in 2010 (Fu, Zhang, & Li, 2013). If we take into consideration that urban women's first child bearing age may be slightly later than that of the national average, then authors of posts in this section are very likely to be in their late 20s or 30s. Their main concerns focus on—firstly, they have problems deciding whether a second child is necessary for the family, and secondly, there is a lack of knowledge and experience in terms of raising and educating two children together.

2.1 Whether to have a second child

Forty-seven responses debate the topic of whether it is better to bring a second child into the family, weighing both the pros and cons. One questioner writes: "This is such a torturous decision. Even though I've listed all the pros on the left and all the cons on the right, it's still a hard decision." Most of the popular responses to questions in this section are long and elaborate—arguing against each other either with their own stories as backups or giving suggestions based on what the authors describe in the posts. Their major concerns can be categorized into these following issues: which way (one child or two children) is better for the child's personality development, which way is

better for the maximum use of the family financial resources, and which way fits better with the parents' ideal lifestyle.

Personality Development

The first clash between the two sides is whether having siblings are essentially important for a human being to grow up mentally healthy. Supporters of "having a second child" argue that their own experience of growing up as the only child in the family is so lonely that they do not want their child to experience such loneliness again. However, opponents of "having a second child" rebut that their experiences growing up as the only child were never lonely—they had all kinds of companionship from classmates, friends, parents to neighbors.

Resource Allocation

Another conflict that the debate focuses on is how much money a family should prepare for a child to come to this world. Supporters of two children families argue that once a family's economic status reaches a level that both children can enjoy a reasonable average amount of educational resources, then giving birth to a second baby should not be a difficult decision to make. The opponents state that China is now in an age of "luxury education," meaning that the cost of raising a child is surging exponentially because of the fierce social competition and legacies of the One-Child Policy. Thus, it is better to prepare all your resources for the investment of one child—taking them to piano lessons, getting them into the elite schools, and sending them abroad—rather than dividing the money by two.

A Choice of Lifestyle

The third point that the debate centers on is one's lifestyle choice. One mother user who does not want a second child says that two children will take too much time from her. She wants to have time for her own life, career, and personal habits—that is why there is not enough time for her to take care of two children. Another user gives an opposing view by sharing her own experience of taking care of two children. Her point is that "it's easier, not harder, to raise two kids together" because the two children can keep each other company so that the parents can enjoy more time of their own.

2.2 How to raise two children together

This section gathers posts that solicit advice on parenting techniques of a multi-children family. Questions in this section mainly enter the discussion from two perspectives: (1) How to prepare the first child for the birth of the second; (2) How to manage the relationship between two children. Similar to

the last section, the questioners and respondents in this section are likely to be in their mid-20s to late 30s, based on the fact that, firstly, many of them are right at the time of considering a second child while their first child is still a preschooler, and secondly, for those who have already had two kids, there does not seem to be a wide age gap in between their children. Six questions that focus on the first perspective phrase their questions similarly, such as "I'm now considering having a second baby, how should I guide the first kid to accept this?", "I've already decided to have a second child, how should I explain this to the first child?" Most of the suggestions in the responses are given by parents who have already had two children. They share their experiences while at the same time reflect on what they have done that may have a positive effect on reducing the first child's resistance to the second.

III. Policy's Effect on Gender Equality in the Workforce

When it comes to the topic of raising a child, what should be discussed at the same time are the roles that the husband and wife play during the process of upbringing. The Two-Child Policy has brought changes to maternity leave related regulations as well. In China, female labor protection regulation stipulated 98 days of paid maternity leave. By May 2016, fourteen provinces in China have extended the time to a total of 128 or 158 days. The average days allowed for paternity leave is 15 days while the exact regulations vary by provinces (Laney Zhang, 2016). This begs the question of whether the new policy will further worsen the current situation and solidify male dominance in the workplace since women are now 'expected' to give birth to two kids and enjoy longer maternity leaves.

Zhihu users who post questions that address women's life-career balance or employment discrimination generally phrase their questions more in a broad sense than from the perspective of individual cases. For instance, "Will the open-up of the Two-Child Policy exacerbate discrimination against women in the workplace?"; "Whenever a company hires an unmarried woman, they know that she will probably take her maternity leave twice. Then why do companies hire female staff anyway?" From the way people phrase and describe their questions, we can infer that most of the users assume women were at a disadvantage in the job market in the One-Child Policy era. They are now basically asking whether this gap will be further widened because of the policy change.

An examination of the responses to this type of question reveals that most of the respondents are pessimistic about this issue. Almost all posts indicate, either directly or indirectly, that the authors believe discrimination against women will be intensified due to the population policy change. For instance, one user asserts that a company will not promote a woman if she has not yet given birth to her second child. At the same time, because of this new social expectation, it is very likely that women may have to choose jobs that are

less challenging and less lucrative at the very beginning of entering a career path since she is less likely to secure an ambitious position after her maternity leave.

Discussion

Based on the data collected and presented in the last section, this section intends to discuss possible further conclusions and implications. The results section has presented the data based on the topics and themes that emerged from the content of these online discussions. It is true that the discussions held online are very expansive in scope, covering a wide range of topics such as conflicts in marriage, kinship grudges, parenting skills, costs of education, and work-life balance. However, every aspect of life speaks to the gender dynamics of urban Chinese society from a different perspective. This section will reframe the arguments and supporting evidence in data through the lens of gender. In this section, I argue that: (1) The “son preference” concern is diminishing through the passing on of generations; (2) Urban Chinese women increasingly expect and fight for gender equality.

I. The “Son Preference” Tradition: Mitigating through Generations

The overall presentation of the data suggests that this gender-biased tradition is still influential and prevailing even in urban areas of China. However, a closer examination reveals that this tradition is actually diminishing through the passing of generations since there is a clear distinction between the older generation’s and the younger generation’s concerns about childbearing.

As noted in the data, the notion of “son preference” appears in all subsections under the “family conflicts” section and each subsection discusses this tradition from a slightly different lens. In the section of “wives’ refusal to try for a son,” the discussion shows how eager and stubborn some of the husbands and their families are by insisting on having a son. Here “son preference” refers to how families still put an emphasis on having a son, ignoring the wives’ disagreement and resistance. In next section concerning whose surname to adopt, the “son preference” tradition is reflected in how families insist on having the son to carry on the family name. The section that addresses the first children’s resistance indicates some other aspects such as resource allocation.

To take it a step further, it is not difficult to notice that the older generation is generally more insistent and stubborn when it comes to having a son or a grandson. Take the section of “family conflicts” as the example again. In

cases when the wife and the husband cannot agree on whether to try for a son since the policy allows, it is usually the husband's parents who are constantly nagging and trying to persuade their daughters-in-law. Then in the section about the child's surname, again, the husband's parents are usually the ones who are directly negotiating with the wife, insisting on having a grandson rather than a granddaughter to carry the family name. In the above two sections, some husbands did side with their parents, but in many cases, it is unclear whether or not they really agree with them, or, if they are just too afraid to go against their parents' will since it is considered "unfilial" in Chinese culture. As already argued in the result section, those couples who are newly married and considering having babies are the most likely to be born in the 1980s and early 1990s (in their late 20s or 30s).² Thus, their parents' generation is likely to be born between the early 1950s to mid-1960s, and are likely in their 50s or 60s accordingly.

In contrast, in the section that focuses on the younger parents' concerns when they consider having a second child, it is very clear that they seldom even mention the child's gender as an issue. As shown in the data, this generation of parents' main concerns are (1) what kind of family will benefit the child's personality development the most; (2) whether they have enough time and wealth to provide their children with good education; (3) what kind of lifestyle they want as parents and as individuals. Though it seems that users all held different views on various issues, most of their arguments are addressing "how can I make it the best for my child" rather than being picky about which gender of the child will, in return, benefit the parents themselves the most. By comparing the general concerns from parents of these two generations (couples in their late 40s to 60s and couples in their late 20s to 30s), there is a clear trend that people tend to care less about the gender of the child when the parents are younger.

II. The Expectations for Gender Equality: Increasing among Urban Women

Along with a diminishing trend of the "son preference" tradition as the people in their childbearing age changes in demographics, my data also indicate strong expectations for gender equality among urban women, particularly among the younger generation of mothers. These urban young women today not only pursue lives with more emphasis on a work-life balance but also openly voice and fight against patriarchal norms which the society used to take for granted. To put it in another way, there is a tendency for urban women to take active control of their lives and define how a woman's life should be instead of conforming to traditional gender norms. This section illustrates how they are taking active roles in resisting patriarchal social

² According to the Sixth National Population Census (2010), the average age for Chinese women to have the first child is 26.24.

expectations for women in three ways: (1) they give equal emphasis to their roles as a professional, an individual and a mother; (2) they have the courage to divorce their husband eventually once they realize their husband's family is deep-rooted in "son preference"; (3) they persist in defending their right to let one of the children inherit their own surname because they do not want to succumb to the patriarchal norm that only men are entitled to carry on a family line.

2.1 "I'm not the kind of mom who focuses solely on the child."

As Borisoff (2005) has noted in Hewlett's book *Creating a Life*, the limit on one's time is one of the biggest barriers for women to "have it all" from three aspects: the time clock for developing a career, for establishing oneself and for having children. This clock also ticks for urban Chinese women as the data suggest that they strive to create a balance among the exact three aspects of life. Still adhering to the illusion of "Having it all," many urban mothers in China insist on having only one child against all odds in spite of the policy change.

Almost all young mothers who hold the opinion that they only want to have one child argue that they value their professional development, personal life, and their child at the same time— they are of almost equal importance. Thus, to raise only one child instead of two is a strategy to make the balance among all three.

2.2 "I divorce my husband because I'm NOT a tool for reproduction."

The second perspective that indicates an increasing expectation of gender equality lies in the group of urban women who possess the courage to divorce their husbands once they realize their husbands and their family are firmly entrenched in the "son preference" cultural tradition. My data indicate at least 7 cases in which female authors tell similar stories of how they finally ended their marriages because their husbands were urging them to try for a son, which is clearly a strong theme that emerges from discussions concerning the gender of the second child.

This phenomenon is worth noticing because it is consistent with prior studies in that the urban and the educated women are the most likely to initiate a divorce (Wang & Zhou, 2010) but also provides insights into why the level of education is correlated with the high divorce rate. As indicated by my data, urban women with a high educational level do not tolerate biased attitudes against girls. In other words, this phenomenon addresses how the awareness of gender equality plays its role in serious conjugal conflicts that may finally lead to divorce although the media love to portray willfulness and a rising individualism as the main cause of the surging divorce rate (Yardley, 2005).

2.3 “I don’t mind whose surname my child adopts, but men can’t take it for granted.”

In the section that focuses on the surname issue, none of the women who vent their anger online say that what they actually care about is whether the family line can be carried through the surname adoption. Rather, these women are angry mainly because the husband’s family only cares about the son’s surname while a daughter’s surname is not important. Therefore, the wives in these cases interpret it as gender discrimination and, thus, become deeply unsatisfied. Another reason emerged from a response that claims women act against the patrilineal norm of surname adoption because women believe it should be negotiable rather than taking for granted. Under China’s Marriage Law, a child can take the surname either from the father or the mother’s side (Xiong, 2010). Women now dare to claim their own rights entitled by the law rather than succumb to what a patrilineal society prescribes.

On the contrary, males tend to conform more to the patriarchal and patrilineal social norms in comparison with urban females, even for husbands in the younger generation. As presented in the last section, when the husbands’ family urges the wife to give birth to a second child or when they insist on having a son to inherit the family name, the husbands either stand with their own parents or give very vague opinions on the issue. Very few of them dare to speak for and defend their wives’ position. It is true that Chinese families value the notion of filial piety to a great extent. This legacy of Confucius not only survives in contemporary China (Yue & Ng, 1999) but has become consolidated and even intensified in the only children generation (Deutsch, 2006). By virtue of filial piety, children have the obligation to respect their parents, obey their wills, respond to their needs, as well to provide financial support for them in their old age (Deutsch, 2006). Thus, the fact that the husbands feel reluctant to speak for their wife and daughter may partly be attributed to their unwillingness to argue against their parents’ will.

However, even if filial duty may serve as part of the excuse, the urban husbands still tend to hold on to the traditional patriarchal norms much tighter than that of the urban women. As suggested by the data, the husbands tend to feel uncomfortable and disturbed when women start to challenge the patriarchal system. Their insistence on the surname traditions, gendered family roles and even having a son rather than a daughter for the second child are all typical cases in point. In other words, growing up in a similar social period and under similar social environments, a majority of urban Chinese women are embracing the notion of gender equality while men generally maintain relatively more traditional gender beliefs. The conflicting opinions held by males and females speak to Harding’s Standpoint theory, which contends that the social groups that one belongs to shape the way

people experience the world (as cited in Houston & Wood, 1996). Men and women are obviously accorded unequal status and opportunities in a society that is long considered "patriarchal, patrilineal, and patrilocal" (Hong, 1987). Thus, when it comes to negotiating gender power within a family, it stands to reason that men are not yet ready for challenges from women.

Conclusion

This study aims at exploring the hotly-discussed issues online concerning the recent policy shift in China from the One-Child Policy to the Two-Child Policy and how the online discourses mirror the changing gender norms in the urban areas. As demonstrated in the previous sections, data collected from Zhihu.com under the topic of "the second child" address various family conflicts brought about by the policy change, as well as parents' concerns when it comes to having a second child. By analyzing Zhihu users' narratives and opinions in regards to the policy change, this paper comes to two conclusions: firstly, although still prevailing in urban China, the "son preference" tradition is dwindling as generations pass on; secondly, urban women tend to embrace the notion of gender equality and fight for their rights against tradition, while men hold more traditional beliefs about gender divisions of labor.

Admittedly, this study is restricted by certain limitations. It is worth noting that each online platform has its own community culture and target user group. As addressed in the methodology section, data collected from Zhihu.com are possibly skewed to opinions from Internet users with a relatively higher educational level. Thus, Zhihu.com may provide a relatively more supportive environment for egalitarian gender beliefs compared with other online venues. Another intrinsic limitation of the web-based content analysis is that demographic information from participants cannot be entirely accurate. The researcher has to make educated guesses about the location and age group of the forum participants. In the case of this study, I draw conclusions based on two types of essential demographic information: the age group of participants and the urban-rural divide—both are inferred from the data based on the users' self-reported personal information and the community culture of the chosen online venue.

The findings of this study also provide future research directions that deserve attention from scholars in related fields. One important aspect of the issue that was not fully discussed in this study is gender inequality in the workforce under the Two-Child Policy. Findings of this study have already suggested that urban women today value their career development as much as their roles as mothers and as individuals. Thus, whether China's policies and laws can protect working women's rights and support new mothers return to work may wield enormous influence over people's decisions to have a second child.

Due to the relatively short time of implementation of the new policy, this study only examines online users' opinions on whether the new policy will intensify gender discrimination in employment. Future research should track the promulgation and implementation of these supportive policies that are in line with the Two-Child Policy and examine their influences on gender equality in China's workplace.

Ever since the relaxation of the One-Child Policy in Nov. 2013, the state media started to promote "women return home" as a valuable life choice. While it is true that both men and women should be allowed the freedom to negotiate their roles either in the family or in the workplace, this study suggests that advocating traditional gender division of labor may not be an effective strategy to encourage birth application. On the contrary, women will be more willing to give birth to a second child if they know that their daughters will grow up as happily as their male counterparts, if they are sure that their husbands will share with them the childcare responsibilities, and if they are confident that they themselves can still pursue their career goals after childbirth. To ease women's concerns, promoting gender equality may, in turn, contribute to an increasing birth rate in urban China.

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