



## To Have or Not to Have a **Second Child**

By **WANG NAN**

**T**HE modification of China's birth control policy which allows couples where either parent is a single offspring to have a second child came into force at the end of 2013. Although many young couples are indeed eager to have a second child, there are also plenty who are not. For many, whether or not to give birth a second time is a weighty decision.

### **Avoid Only-Child Loneliness**

Guo Qian, 30, formally announced her intention to conceive and give birth to a sibling – with luck a sister – for her son at a birthday dinner for her mother-in-law in a Beijing roast duck restaurant.

Guo's son Dafeng is five years old. After coming home from kindergarten

he spends most of his time playing on his iPad. Since he began to watch the TV show *Where Are We Going, Dad?* with his mother, Dafeng has taken a shine to Cindy, one of the characters in this program, who recently bought an Ultra Egg toy for her younger brother. This impressed Dafeng sufficiently to plead with his mom to give birth to a sister for him.

Guo Qian was born in 1983, after the "single child" family planning policy had come into force.

Upon its founding in 1949, the population of New China was 540 million. By 1954 it had grown to more than 600 million, and by 1969 had topped 800 million – a huge burden on what was then a poor country. Measures to control the population growth, therefore, were imperative. By September 1982, family planning had been legislated as

a fundamental state policy, and was strictly enforced during the succeeding 10 or more years. By 2005, an additional 400 million births, which could have included younger siblings of Guo Qian, had been avoided.

More than half of Guo's generational contemporaries are single children. "I don't want my son to suffer the loneliness I experienced as a child," Guo Qian said.

Guo's husband is similarly keen for Dafeng to have a sibling as a companion. This was impossible until the recent relaxation of the family planning policy, whose coming into effect presages major changes in the couple's family life. Guo and her husband's economy drive in preparation for a fourth mouth to feed entails, among other savings, giving up membership of the local fitness club.

"It's sad for an only child never to

experience the happiness and companionship that comes from having siblings," Guo Qian said. She recalls how silent her home seemed when her parents worked overtime. Toys, and the TV cartoon characters the Blue Smurfs and Mole, were her sole companions in an empty apartment.

"A second child will help solve the problem of a spoiled only child and create a healthier family environment," Guo said.

Many young couples share Guo Qian's sentiments. In a 2010 *China Youth News* Social Survey Center web survey on parenting, 77.5 percent of the 6,000 participants said that, government policy allowing, two children would be an ideal family.

According to research by the National Health and Family Planning Commission on fertility desires, 15 million to 20 million people will be affected by the policy that "allows a couple to have a second child if one of them comes from a one-child family." Network data from Renmin University of China show that 60.5 percent of respondents opted to have second child and 27.2 percent not to, while 12.2 percent were undecided.

Apart from wanting two children to avoid inflicting loneliness on a single offspring, many Chinese people, especially rural residents, also hold to the tradition of "bringing up sons to support parents in their old age." Consequently, when local governments formulated local regulations on population control and family planning in the 1980s and 90s, they were comparatively lenient with regard to rural residents.

Guo Qian's parents are of a generation born in the 1950s, when almost every family had two or more children. Guo still remembers how, when her grandfather fell ill, her aunts and uncles came to take care of him. "Although my father was not in town, his brothers and sisters took responsibility for caring for my grandfather. They could rely on each other," Guo said.

As a single child, Guo Qian dreads the approach of her parents' old age.

Apart from the worry of being too busy to take care of them singlehandedly, her main concern is the absence of spiritual familial support.

"Looking after four parents is an onerous responsibility for couples where both partners are single children. Having two children will double our old age guarantee but, more importantly, make our lives more fulfilling," Guo said.

From the point of view of an only child, a sibling is a playmate and companion for life. However, in netizen Lao Mao's view, it amounts to much more than that. "The relationship among brothers and sisters is one of mutual support and help. If one of them should need help, the other will give it without hesitation. This knowledge greatly alleviates life pressure," he said.

Since the first generation of only children reached the age of marriage and childbearing, a growing number of "4-2-1" (four grandparents, one young couple, and one child) family units have sprung up. Inevitably there are also many empty-nest families, where children have either left home or the only child has died. The 2010 *China Health Statistical Yearbook* released by the Ministry of Health shows an annual death rate of at least 40 per 100,000 people in the 15 to 30 age range. In other words, 76,000 families in China each year lose their only child – more than one million people in total.

The new policy will encourage the "4-2-2" rather than "4-2-1" family unit. This will expand family manpower resources and hence the capacity to take care of aging parents in the future.

### Higher Costs

Chen Wenwen and Zhang Kai, born in 1985, are both single children. They married two years ago.

With a yearly income totaling RMB 160,000, before marrying Chen and Zhang planned to have two children if their economic situation allowed. Less than a year after their wedding, however, their massive mortgage forced them to give up the idea of a second child.



Children having fun in Qionghai City, Hainan Province.

"Living in a big city entails considerable cost and high work stress. People like us who are single-offspring must also take responsibility for our parents' old age," Zhang Kai said. "It would of course be better to have two children rather than one. But economic reality has forced us to compromise."

Wang Xinyu, 33, has a three-year-old son. The relaxation of the one-child policy has made no difference to her outlook on family life. "Whether or not I'm eligible, I do not intend to have another child," Wang said.

Economic pressure is a main reason in China today why people choose not to fulfill their dream of having a second child. Although giving birth is not in itself costly, raising a child is. To most people, the decision to have another child is not a matter of willingness but of economic capacity. The rising cost of living generally has made Wang decide not to have more than one child.

Wang and her husband each earn around RMB 5,000 a month. Out of this, RMB 2,000 pays the mortgage and RMB 1500 is earmarked for milk formula and diapers for their six-month-old baby. A further RMB 500 or so goes on toys and clothes. Once the child enters kindergarten, they need to pay out



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ation to this question. One point of view is expressed in the humorously modified lyrics of an old song by Chinese actor of Wang Zhiwen, that: “to have a second child is not an easy thing, and demands much courage.”

Li Ya works in a large automobile trading company. She has a six-year-old daughter. Because both Li and her husband are busy at work, her daughter’s grandparents pick her up from school each day. On coming home, she either plays on the computer or watches TV. “We want her to have a companion,” Li said.

Since China allowed couples where at least one parent is an only child to have two children, Li’s parents-in-law, who have the traditional preference for sons over daughters, now want Li to have a son. However Li, now 33, is keen to pursue her bright career prospects. A second child would mean giving up the chance of promotion.

Li has been pondering the possibility of having a second child for some time. “I would like to have another child in a few years when my career is stable, but am worried that my age by that time will limit my chances of conceiving. But even if I do sacrifice my career and have

a baby now, raising and educating it will cause financial problems. This is why we can only make this decision after thoroughly thinking it through.”

Although it seems a pity not to have a second child now that the policy has been relaxed, it is an endeavor that demands sacrifice. This is why many young couples who relish the thought of a second child nonetheless have financial misgivings. Liu Ying, born in the 1970s, must bear a main practical difficulty in mind if she decides to have a second child — that of age. Liu is 38 and has a 12-year-old daughter. As her husband yearns for a son, Liu’s instinct in view of the relaxed family planning policy is to have another child. Yet she is hesitant about taking this step because of the problems an older mother faces.

People have many and various views and ideas about the revised family planning policy. A second child demands heavy financial expenditure and boundless energy to an extent that might affect the living standard of the whole family. For many families, therefore, having a second child is a difficult decision.

Ideals are no match for hard reality. For young couples who must find the means to buy an apartment, raise a child and care for two sets of aging parents, today’s economic pressure is immense. Some couples admit that they find it hard to imagine how they could possibly raise another child. Others that tend to look on the bright side of things, however, say, “After a few more years of enjoying our life, if our parents are happy with the idea, we’ll have another kid.” ■

a further RMB 700 per month. There is simply no money left for another baby. Many young parents shoulder such heavy economic burdens.

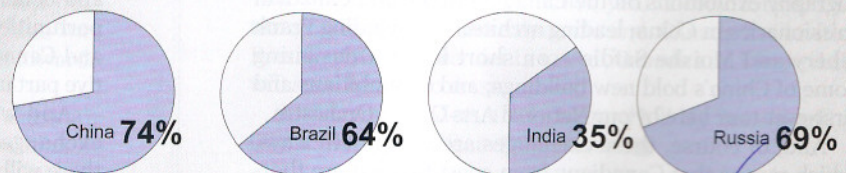
“It is not easy for the average family to support four seniors and one child. How can we guarantee another child a decent life?” Wang also worries about her child’s future. “In addition to money problems, we will have to deal with the doubled pressures of children’s school enrolment, employment and even marriage if we have two,” she said.

Another point to consider is that most of today’s young parents are from one-child families. As they were raised alone they tend to be self-centered. But after a week of hard work, they must spend weekends playing with their children and taking them to and from tutorial classes. They thus have little time for themselves. A second birth would mean devoting all their time to work and child rearing. Many young couples, therefore, are in two minds about having another child.

**Two or One?**

Deciding whether or not to have a second child, or whether or not two children are better than one is not easy. Many couples are giving deep consider-

Women’s Employment Rates in the BRIC Countries



From The Global Gender Gap Report 2010.