

Yige Haizi:

The Effect of China's One Child Policy on Women

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Today China is the most populous nation in the world. In order to attempt to curb this expansive growth, an aggressive population control plan was put into place in the late 1970s. Often referred to as the “One child per family policy” (tichang yidui fufu zhi sheng yige haizi)¹ or “single child policy,” the policy in actuality has been a series of varying policies that have varied according to region and enforcement. For the most part, however, population growth has been restricted through the use of birth control, abortion and sterilization. The one child policy, as it will be referred to in this paper, has been highly controversial globally due to its seemingly repressive nature.

This paper will focus on the effects of the one child policy on women. Factors to be considered include the demographic impact of the policy including female infanticide, enforcement of the one child policy and use of birth control by women.

Background and the One Child Policy

After the communists came to power in 1949, China began pursuing a pro-natalist policy, as Mao Zedong promoted a large population as a testament to China’s power. According to a speech made by Mao in September 1949, “It is a very good thing that China has a big population. Even if China’s population multiplies many times, she is fully capable of finding a solution; the solution is production.”² It was considered a woman’s responsibility to bear children (tianran yiwu) and not doing so was seen as a shirking of this responsibility.³ Thus despite early concerns that the Chinese population would grow too large to be supported by the nation, population growth was encouraged

¹ Cecilia Nathansen Milwertz, *Accepting Population Control: Urban Chinese Women and the One-Child Family Policy* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 1997), 55.

² Thomas Scharping, *Birth Control in China 1949-2000: Population policy and demographic development* (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 29.

³ Harriet Evans, *Women and Sexuality in China: Female Sexuality and Gender Since 1949* (New York: Continuum, 1997), 122.

by Mao Zedong and few publicly disagreed with him. Some discussion amongst Chinese leaders of the introduction of birth control measures was made in the 1950s, but ultimately belief in the positive impact of population growth, the continuance of pro-natalist old family system beliefs and a general taboo about public discussion of abortion and birth control kept this discussion quiet.⁴

While the birth control conversation was restricted in the 1950s, mortality rates in China also began to decline. The result of the encouraged procreation and lower mortality rates was a huge population growth; in 1949 the Chinese population stood at around 559 million, but by 1970 it had grown to 820 million.⁵ Family planning continued to be a concern of top Chinese leaders such as Premier Zhou Enlai and Party Vice-Chairman Liu Shaoqi, but it was not until 1970 that the Politburo formally recognized the overwhelming importance of birth control in the context of food and economic prosperity.⁶ Still, it was not the late 1970s after Mao's death in 1976 that the one child policy came into existence.

The one child policy grew out of the earlier wan-xi-shao policy of the early 1970s, in which later marriages, longer intervals between children and fewer children in general were promoted. The result of the wan-xi-shao policy was a significant decline in the fertility rate; in 1970 the total fertility rate was 5.82, but by 1979 that rate was 2.75.⁷ This decline was not enough, however, and in order to prevent a continued population increase reaching more than a billion Chinese citizens by 2000, controls were tightened as government shifted to the one child policy.

⁴ Scharping, 30-31.

⁵ Milwertz, 38-39.

⁶ Scharping, 32.

⁷ Milwertz, 49.

As mentioned earlier, the one child policy is actually a rather complex series of policies beginning in October of 1978 when birth control bureaus were set up across the country. In a September 25, 1980 open letter from the Party Central Committee to members of the party and the Communist Youth League, a cap was set of 1.2 billion citizens by 2000; many took this to mean a strict call for a one-child policy, however it is possible to obtain special permission for a second child if the couple could prove they suffered great difficulties from having only one child.⁸ Those who take advantage of this loophole reside primarily in rural China.

Childbearing is strictly regulated under the one child policy. After a couple marries, they then must apply for a share of the annual national birth quota as well as the woman's work unit to confirm that she has reached the proper age. Once she has these certifications, she may become pregnant.⁹ Though the 1980 Marriage Laws set the age of marriage at 20 for women and 22 for men, couples are encouraged to wait for "late childbearing," when the woman is 24. Women who become pregnant at a younger age are often penalized and encouraged to have an abortion.¹⁰ In a study of women, 82.2 percent of those surveyed had their child within the first two years of their marriage; a large majority of women give birth soon after they are married.¹¹

While aspects of the one child policy focus on authorizing births to meet the national quota, the majority of the policy is intended to prevent further births. After a woman has her first child, she is most often counseled by a birth planning cadre to use birth control. The most common form of birth control is the IUD which is preferred as it

⁸ Scharming, 50-54.

⁹ Milwertz, 98-103.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Milwertz, 104.

is a long-term method of birth control, cannot be removed by a layperson and is very effective.¹² Additionally, a couple is encouraged to register their child for a one-child certificate as they are eligible to receive material benefits such as a monthly bonus, funds for health-care and other stipends with the certificate. These bonuses are often paid jointly by the work units of both parents; as a result, the couple is monitored yearly to ensure they are abiding by the one child policy. If a second child is born, the certificate must be handed back and financial benefits repaid.¹³

Support of the one child policy in China is almost universal. While many in the international community consider the tactics to be unnecessarily harsh, the Chinese people believe the government needs to intervene in such a fashion. As such, there has been little internal unrest in China pertaining to the policy. Similarly, the universality of the policy also means that there is little corruption, as it is enforced by the community as well as cadres.¹⁴

Impact on Women

The primary goal of the one child policy has been to curb the size of China's population; the Chinese population today is around the 1.2 billion capstone set in 1980. Proportionally, one in five people are Chinese.¹⁵ Beyond this policy objective, however, there has also been a demographic shift.

Chinese society is patrilineal, and as such having a male heir has traditionally been very important. Prior to the one child policy, families would simply continue to try

¹² Milwertz, 107.

¹³ Scharping, 126.

¹⁴ James Z. Lee and Wang Feng, *One Quarter of Humanity: Malthusian Mythology and Chinese Realities, 1700-2000* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 134.

¹⁵ Lee and Wang, 6. Interestingly, the proportion of the Chinese population to the world population has decreased in the twentieth century from one in every three or four to now only one in five people are Chinese.

having children until they had a son; with the advent of the policy, however, couples are limited in their options. If a daughter is born first, often rural couples will try for a second child, hoping it is a boy.¹⁶

A result of this desire for a son is, sadly, often infanticide. According to Vivian Lin's research, girls under the age of one are more likely to die of drowning, mechanical suffocation and homicide than their male counterparts. "The pattern appears to support anecdotal reports about female infanticide, especially in light of China's one-child population policy."¹⁷

Additionally, an increase in ultrasound machines since the early 1980s has made it easier for peasants to determine if their unborn child is a boy or a girl; if it is a girl it is quite simple to seek out an abortion instead of carrying the child to term. This process of sex selection accounts for the fact that more later born babies are male. While the sex ratio for first born children is nearly on pace with international ratios, the sex ratios for later born children are a lot more skewed; in the instance of fifth-born children in China, there are more than 125 boys born for each 100 girls.¹⁸

Aside from the traditional view that values a son over a daughter, the impact on women is a demographic change that has occurred. More male babies are born in China; in 1992 the sex ratio was 118.5 boys to every 100 girls.¹⁹ As these children grow up, the men will continue to outnumber the women and a large percentage will be unable to find wives. For women, though, the ramifications are unknown. Will marriage practices be

¹⁶ Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl Wudunn, *China Wakes: The Struggle for the Soul of a Rising Power* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 227-230.

¹⁷ Vivian Lin, "Women's Health Status Differentials in China." Working Papers, (Michigan State University, 1996), 9-10.

¹⁸ Kristof and Wudunn, 227-230.

¹⁹ Ibid.

liberalized as women have an increased choice of husbands or will more women be forced into marriage due to a lack of brides? Either way, women are certain to be impacted by this demographic inequality.

Similar to the idea of sex selection in one's child, eugenics has been prominent since the advent of the one child policy. The "superior births" aspect of the policy provides that couples with some type of disorder may not be able to reproduce. Mental defects, hereditary blindness, manic depression and schizophrenia are among some of the reasons a couple may not be allowed to reproduce. As such, this eugenics law can impact who a woman is able to marry. In the premarital exam, marriage certification may not be extended if she or her partner is unhealthy in such a manner.²⁰

One of the primary impacts of the one child policy, however, is the lack of control a woman has over her own body. The institutionalization of the child-bearing process strips from a woman the decision of when to become pregnant and how to proceed through her pregnancy, in addition to limiting her family size. While many women support the one child policy and pursue contraception on their own after childbirth, some women do have to be convinced to undergo the IUD procedure.²¹ Other birth control methods such as condoms are limited and not recommended as strongly as the IUD; one woman only had the insertion procedure after pressure from her work unit.²² The use of an IUD is incentivized, as is sterilization and force is prohibited in the application of both,²³ but there are still stories of women unwillingly subjected to such procedures.

²⁰ Evans, 151-153.

²¹ Milwertz, 107.

²² Milwertz, 109.

²³ Kristof and Wudunn, 237.

Likewise, a woman may be deemed not fit to marry and reproduce for eugenic reasons. If such a condition surfaces in a premarital exam, a woman can have little chance of overcoming the verdict and actually reproducing. A woman has little protection against coercive sterilization or abortion procedures under the Law on Maternal and Infantile Health Care passed in June 1995. Thus she may be subjected to such a procedure for eugenic purposes and have little say in the matter.²⁴

Finally, a last impact of the one child policy on women is the policy's enforcement. In addition to sterilizations and IUDs, women faced a number of incentives to remain in line with the one child policy. First of all, the financial incentive of the one child certificate that encouraged many parents. By simply agreeing to an abortion should the woman become pregnant again, a couple with a certification qualifies for a monthly cash payments and other subsidies, such as a milk subsidy for a child up to age 2.²⁵

Unfortunately for those who decide to have another child, thereby forfeiting the one child certificate, all bonuses must be refunded. In one instance a grade school teacher was found in violation of the one child policy and assessed a fine of several thousand dollars, more than his annual salary. Unable to pay the sum all at once, he was set up on an installment payment plan, forfeiting 4/5 of his annual salary to repayment.²⁶ Women are similarly punished for violations of the one child policy.

Couples who give birth to an illegal child are also subject to destruction of their property and loss of their possessions. In the city this might mean loss of furniture and other possessions, whereas in the country it can mean farm animals and other means of survival, as well. In one instances, a family's home was destroyed and their cow taken

²⁴ Evans, 152.

²⁵ Milwertz, 91.

²⁶ Kristof and Wudunn, 237.

away; though it was somewhat easier to rebuild the house due to the fact that this was a rural family, the loss of the cow was significant and impacted several generations living together at the time.²⁷

In addition to financial losses, those who fail to comply with the one child policy are also victim to intense scrutiny by their neighbors. It is these neighbors who will inform on her if she becomes pregnant again; their responsibility is community policing to ensure that the policy is enforced.²⁸

China's one child policy is an internationally controversial series of birth control measures aimed at curbing the excessive population growth. Such growth had become an economic burden as it meant providing food, education and jobs for an explosive number of children; even as quickly as jobs were added in some years they did not meet the number of births for the year.

For women, the one child policy in China means a lack of choice. Women do not have express control over their own bodies and are instead subject to the bureaucratization of the childbearing process. They must file paperwork to earn the right to marry and become pregnant and are then often subjected to contraception in the form of an IUD or sterilization. Women do not have the freedom to plan their family as they do in the West.

Additionally, with the advent of ultrasound technology, it is easier now for parents to choose the sex of their baby. As such demographic shifts are leaving a lower proportion of female infants. As the children born under the one child policy grow up, certainly its effects will become even more pronounced, especially for women.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Milwertz, 96.

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