

China's One-Child Policy

In September 1979, China's Fifth National People's Congress passed a policy that encouraged one-child families. Following this decision from the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), campaigns were initiated to implement the One-Child Policy nationwide. This initiative constituted the most massive governmental attempt to control human fertility and reproduction in human history. These campaigns prioritized reproductive technologies for contraception, abortion, and sterilization in gynecological and obstetric medicine, while downplaying technologies related to fertility treatment. In the late 1980s, one of the consequences was the reorientation of the rationality of governmental funding for research on human in vitro fertilization (IVF) and embryo transfer.

Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the Party has been concerned with potential problems related to China's population growth and has introduced a series of policies for population control and regulation. The fear of a looming population explosion in the 1970s led to the Party calling for a solution to curb, and eventually halt, China's population growth. The recognition that China's large population might be a threat to the wellbeing of the country resulted from an influx of Western demographical literature as well as CCP's political reorientation.

During the 1970s, the CCP governmental philosophy shifted from Mao Zedong's emphasis on ideological class struggle to an effort to incorporate science into policy making advocated by the Deng Xiaoping leadership team. Informed by a neo-Malthusian population theory that regarded population growth as the most serious problem of the modern world, the leadership began to associate a large population with the many problems that China was facing: poverty, inadequate education, pollution, and unemployment.

In 1974, the Office of Population Theory Research was established in the Beijing College of Economics. Experts on population were commissioned to intensively examine Western demographic studies and the population reality in China, with aims of designing a policy solution with sufficient scientific support to address the impending population crisis. Although available alternatives suggested milder tactics for population regulation, the Party gradually leaned toward a proposal from a group of cybernetics scientists who suggested an immediate and stringent control of China's population.

From the late 1960s to the mid-1970s, western countries witnessed the rise of a neo-Malthusian school of thought that predicted mass starvation as the inevitable consequence of rapidly growing populations. The Club of Rome, a prominent think tank based at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, espoused this alarmist thought. The name Club of Rome thus became synonymous with the neo-Malthusian formulation among Chinese experts versed in population sciences.

Song Jian, a systems engineer who was working in missile and aerospace science at China's Seventh Ministry of Machine Building, was the major mediator who imported the Club of Rome population theory and applied it to China's situation. Together with his associates, Yu Jingyuan and Li Guangyuan, both well trained in cybernetics and mathematics, Song calculated that the hypothetically optimal population for China should be around 650 to 700 million people, two-thirds of China's 1980 population. The calculation implied that the current Chinese population had already passed its carrying capacity. Therefore, a stringent control of population was fundamental for China's continued economic growth and modernization.

Song's group confirmed and legitimized the leadership's concerns with China's population problem. Alternative views offered by dissident social scientists were rejected. Since Song's team held high credentials in mathematical sciences, which according to the CCP leadership were more immune to

ideological influences than social sciences, it was argued that more recognition should be given to Song's conclusions. With further discussions, the National People's Congress issued a letter in the Government Work Report on 7 September 1979 that encouraged one-child families and deterred families from having more than two children. At the same time, the PRC Marriage Law was revised, stating that birth planning was a legal responsibility for both husband and wife.

The central government also suggested concrete means for implementing the One-Child Policy. These means established a reward/penalty system to confine the numbers of children per household. Among the rewards, the government promised free access to birth control supplies, intrauterine devices (IUD), abortive operations, sterilization, and paid vacations for those seeking birth control methods. Health care subsidies, guaranteed retirement income, privileged housing opportunities, and other benefits were also distributed to parents of single children. Parents giving birth to more than two children, on the other hand, had to offer 10% of their salaries as an excess-child penalty for fourteen years for each out-of-plan child.

Over time, implementing the One-Child Policy not only established a well-organized bureaucracy ensuring a confined birth rate, but also transformed PRC into a nation with the largest community-based contraceptive system. The PRC birth control has been embedded in China's healthcare system. In municipal areas, governmentally funded hospitals deliver most contraceptive and abortive services. In rural places, farmers often with minimal trainings provided medical care for rural community and conducted basic operations for contraception and abortion, such as the insertion of IUDs and vacuum aspiration abortions, while referring those with more advanced needs to hospitals.

According to a survey by China's Ministry of Health in 1982, 69% of married Chinese women between the age 15 and 49 were using contraception. The percentage was identical to the US contraceptive rate among women within a similar age range in the same year. However, unlike western countries, where contraceptive pills were more prevalent, IUDs and sterilization played a dominant role in intervening reproduction in China. According to population researcher Pi-Chao Chen, by 1985, IUDs and sterilization constituted 85% of all contraceptive use in China.

In the early 1980s, under the pressure of fulfilling the sixth Five-Year Plan's (1981-1985) goal of confining population growth rate to under 13 per 1000, the enforcement of the One-Child Policy intensified. Instead of encouraging one child per household, the CCP began to restrict every family to one child whenever possible. It also initiated a massive sterilization campaign in 1983, in which couples with two or more children were required to undergo sterilization, while those with one child were encouraged to do so. During this campaign, sixteen million women were sterilized, often through tubectomy. More than four million vasectomies were performed as well.

As the campaign continued, however, important consequences began to emerge: the Anhui provincial Women's Federation found imbalanced male-female sex ratios correlated with stringent birth control policy. Furthermore, foreign reports gradually associated increasing female infanticide with the One-Child Policy. Because peasants, the majority of Chinese population, rely on male offspring to serve as major manual laborers on the family's farm, the inflexible policy that restricted rural households to one child often meant impending poverty, even starvation, for households with a single female child. The 1983 campaign was thus greatly resisted in rural area, occasionally in a subdued, tragic way, such as through infanticide.

Responding to multiple issues associated with the 1983 sterilization campaign, the CCP issued a new birth-planning document, the Central Document 7, in April 1984. The document repudiated the Party's theretofore uniform and rigid implementation of the One-Child Policy and added flexibility to the revised policy. The relaxed rule allowed rural couples that had only one girl to have a second child. This often-dubbed 1.5-child policy was eventually formalized in 1988 and was written into the PRC Population and Birth-Planning Law, approved in 2001. The softened form of the One-Child Policy has been effective well into the first decade of the twenty-first century.

According to the Chinese National Family Planning and Reproductive Health Survey in 2001, the number of children per woman has fallen from 2.9 in the late 1970s to a stabilized rate 1.7 since 1995. Therefore, the CCP and other proponents of strong population control celebrate the One-Child Policy as a major achievement for preventing population explosion and its catastrophic consequences for China as well as for the rest of the world.

According to other sources, the end does not justify the means. Critics often point out the damages to peasants' welfare and to women's reproductive health, the aggravated discrimination and violence to infant girls, imbalanced sex ratios, accelerated population aging, and other social suffering and trauma resulted from the One-Child Policy. Among international critics, the US shifted its focus from indicting the policy as a manifestation of communist coercion incriminating it as a violation of human rights.

Sources

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