

The Gender Dimension of the One-Child Policy and its Influence on China's Development

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Abstract

China's one-child policy is an essential subject in the quest to understand the contemporary Chinese society, its future social development perspectives, but also in order to determine how population control policies impact both men and women. After providing a short overview of the policy and discussing its consequences amongst men and women, I focus on the economic future of China with respect to the abovementioned policy and also try to answer the question on the stringency of such a harsh initiative. I argue that this policy has had some rational incentives at its core but impacted women in a harsh and inhumane way and might severely cripple China's future development goals.

Keywords: China, Development, Gender, One-child policy, Women

Introduction

China's recent history has undoubtedly generated a great heap of debate amongst both foreign and Chinese scholars. The hectic modernization of the Chinese society has proved intriguing for the international agenda but burdensome for the Chinese people. This abrupt transition from an agrarian republic to a modern one has brought benefits but also dire consequences for the population, including famine, environmental hazards, but more relevant to

this study, overpopulation. This latter issue has generated a political measure that is unprecedented in both its scope and in its outcomes: “the one-child policy”.

This paper aims to acknowledge the complex gender impact of this policy, underlining the unfortunate consequences it had on women but also the somewhat overlooked effects it had on Chinese men. Furthermore, the paper also focuses on the social and economic development issues pertaining to this policy, more specifically how gender imbalances shape regional development. The last section of the paper will once again delve into this policy, arguing that such an unprecedented measure, while extremely harsh and immoral, has had some historical and economical arguments at its core.

Historical background

The Chinese population has fluctuated aggressively throughout the centuries. While most ancient thinkers and rulers considered that demographics could bring about wealth and prosperity, some were closer to a Malthusian perspective (Yuesheng, Zhangling, 1987). Thus, the Chinese population increased from less than three million during the incipient years of the Tang Dynasty (618-907) to more than fifty million in 1623, only to be devastatingly reduced to a mere ten million thirty years later during the Qing Dynasty. However, the later years of the Qing Dynasty have witnessed a spectacular population increase, reaching more than four hundred million people in 1840. Wars, oppression, natural calamities and famine are among the causes for these violent historical fluctuations (Yuesheng, Zhangling, 1987).

These dramatic changes were by no means put to a halt in modern times. In 1949, when The People’s Republic of China was founded, its population was estimated at around 540 million (Yuesheng, Zhangling, 1987; Ebenstein, 2008), most of which resided in poverty-stricken rural areas. This was one of the incentives for the Communist regime and Mao Zedong to deploy industrialization and modernization policies. The consequences of these policies quickly became apparent: better access to education, better healthcare, but also a staggering demographic boom. Therefore, in just three decades,

from the early 1950's to the late 1970's, China's population had reached more than eight hundred million people (Ebenstein, 2008). Mao's "Great Leap Forward" (1958-1962) (Huyck, 1987; Ebenstein, 2008; Pascu, 2011) ended in almost inestimable casualties, thus deepening the previously mentioned demographic fluctuations; however, it was followed by even higher fertility rates.

This accelerated growth has raised concerns amongst Chinese officials who sought to establish population control policies. However, these policies mostly came in the form of recommendations. The most important initiative of this kind, prior to the *one-child policy*, was *wan-xi-shao* (later, longer, fewer), "meaning later marriages, longer periods between births and fewer children" (Momsen, 2004; Pascu, 2011). It is important to note the fact that Mao himself was not inclined to adopt more draconian population control measures, a more permissive view being the official Party policy until his demise in 1976 (Momsen, 2004).

The One-Child Policy

Pressured by the alarming rate of population growth, the Chinese Communist Party under Deng Xiaoping adopted the one-child policy in 1979. It was an initiative aimed at restricting booming birth rates and limiting the Chinese population to 1.2 billion people until the year 2000 (a goal that has been achieved). Chinese officials sought to convince its people that having only one-child had numerous advantages for the national economy and for families as well. The policy was very strict within its first years, with local officials resorting to forced abortions and sterilizations (Pascu, 2011; Nakra, 2012).

However, in some cases, exceptions were permitted. Some ethnic minorities were bestowed with the right to as many children as they desired and, in a few provinces, families could take a chance at another child provided that their firstborn is a girl (Ebenstein, 2008; Pascu, 2011). In recent years, this policy became much more relaxed, with parents having the possibility to pay a fine for every subsequent child.

The Impact on Chinese Women

From a gender-oriented perspective, it can be argued that this policy has had a lurid effect especially on women. These problems arose out of several reasons, but mainly because of the traditional Chinese preference towards having a boy. For example, this is because boys were expected to ensure additional labor, an invaluable asset for poor peasants from rural areas. Also, it was customary for girls to go live with their husbands in the house of his parents, therefore leaving her elderly with no support and losing her family name. There were also economic incentives apart from the cultural ones (Ebenstein, 2008; Pascu, 2011).

The consequences of this policy can be seen clearly in contemporary China. Most of the gender issues pertaining to the one-child policy derive from this bias against girls, that has led to a disturbing sex ratio. Statistics show that, in 2005, 118 boys were born for every 100 girls (Ebenstein, 2008). Some estimates even speak of 120 boys for every 100 girls (Momsen, 2004; Nakra, 2012), while the common sex ratio is 103/107 boys to 100 girls (Pascu, 2011). Although it has been claimed that some natural causes like hepatitis are to blame for this gender gap, some scholars (Bulte, Heerink, Zhang, 2010) argue that the one-child policy can be held accountable for at least 15-20 million missing girls and women. In addition, in 2009, reports show that China has reached the highest gender discrepancy ever recorded, with 33 million more men than women (Pascu, 2011). This shocking imbalance has paved the way for many other issues.

As I have previously mentioned, the bias against girls forced desperate parents to resort to harsh measures. In the wake of the one-child policy, most of the Chinese population had no access to ultrasound technology, so when faced with having a girl, most parents would refuse to register their child in order to get another chance at the birth roulette. Some estimates claim that 30 to 40 million girls are “missing”, raising justifiable questions as to what happens with these missing girls. One answer would be that these girls are sold as prostitutes or as workers on the black market, or if “lucky”, immigrate to other countries. Moreover, the probability for girls to die under the age of

five is 45% greater than for boys in China (Bulte, Heerink, Zhang, 2010; Pascu, 2011). Thus, it can be speculated that girls, even if registered by the family, are sometimes severely mistreated.

Preference towards boys is not the sole reason for numerous abortions, but also the sterilization campaigns initiated by the state during the early phases of the one-child policy. In order to meet the planned population quotas, many women were forced to go through with abortion, even if this meant a huge risk for their own health. Moreover, women with one-child were forcefully sterilized. Having to cope with virulent international reactions, the Chinese officials eventually relinquished these inhumane measures (Ebenstein, 2008; Pascu, 2011), but the damage had already been done. In recent years, 84% percent of Chinese couples used sterilization as a contraceptive method, and even though men were also getting sterilized, their number was very low (11%) (Momsen, 2004).

Other specific impacts on women include, as it has been previously stated, *human trafficking*, but not only with unregistered Chinese women, but also smuggling women from Vietnam and North Korea and selling them on the black market in China (Ebenstein, 2008), but also *mistreatment from Chinese men and rape* (Momsen, 2004).

Some scholars argued that the one-child policy also had some positive outcomes for women and girls. A potentially positive aspect is less time spent with childbearing (Hong, 1987). This can translate into women having the time to seek better career prospects and invest in self-development thus gaining access to jobs previously only available to Chinese men. Furthermore, according to Lee (2011), the one-child policy has provided improved opportunities for Chinese girls regarding education and career prospects. Using data from *China Health and Nutrition Survey* (CHNS), Lee argues that only-child girls have more years of schooling and higher incomes than only-child boys. An explanation could be that only-child girls are not subjected to gender biases coming from parents, at least not in their early years, possibly because there are no male siblings in the household. Moreover, single children in general fare better when it comes to median schooling years than children

with siblings. This is mainly because single children do not have to compete with siblings for household resources. A downside to this what has been called the Little Emperor Syndrome, an issue that will be discussed in the following section.

The Impact on Chinese Men

After discussing the most common issues women have to face as a consequence of the one-child policy, it is also important to highlight some of the issues pertaining to men also. It is very likely that these gender-oriented issues are indivisibly linked to one another. Therefore, the extreme gender imbalance has deep implications for men too. The aforementioned gender imbalance and the difficulty of finding a wife can lead to *severe mental health issues*, but also *disruptive behavior and sexual diseases* (Bulte, Heerink, Zhang, 2010). Moreover, this social anxiety may be one of the leading causes that triggers *erectile dysfunctions* amongst half of the Chinese men that are over 40 years old (Momsen, 2004). Another specific problem related to men is the *Little Emperor Syndrome*. Even from the 1980's, concerns regarding this potential side effect have been expressed (Huyck, 1987). Chinese boys with no siblings, besides having received the best possible education, were frequently subjected to inflated care and attention both from their parents and grandparents. This overprotection made children spoiled, selfish, but also more prone to obesity (Pascu, 2011; Nakra, 2012). In addition, some scholars are concerned that this particular generation will not adjust well with leading a responsible adult life.

Apart from the obvious psychological and social implications, these issues must also be viewed through the economical and political lens. In light of this idea, the difficulty of finding a wife is also mirrored in the way one seeks employment. Thus, having a well-paid job and high social status typically makes an individual a better candidate for finding a suitable wife. This can raise market competitiveness and performance that in turn can trigger anxiety and depression. Furthermore, an increased number of men in Chinese society also meant an impetus for the faster industrialization of the country,

contributing to establishing China as an essential economic power and major exporter of goods. This in turn gave rise to steep global environmental issues.

Lastly, the abovementioned struggle to find a wife has determined many Chinese men to immigrate to other countries, too much of the opprobrium of the target countries (Pascu, 2011), thus giving rise to xenophobia and stereotypical portrayals of Chinese men.

The Impact on Chinese Development and Future Prospects

Ironically, the one-child policy was established in order to decelerate population growth and increase economic performance, but this policy can also have negative effects upon China's present and future development. After analyzing the one-child policy through a gender perspective, I will now briefly focus on the way in which the one-child policy is affecting China's economy.

Aging Population and unequal distribution of wealth

This problem is believed to affect China's both short-term and long-term goals. As economists point out, in 20 years, more than 400 million Chinese people will be over 60 years old. The number of working people will slowly decline throughout the years (Pascu, 2011; Nakra, 2012). This problem has been suggestively called the *4-2-1 problem*, meaning that an only child has to take care of his two parents and four grandparents (Bulte, Heerink, Zhang, 2010). This harsh reality places a great burden on young people representing the labor force and having to pay taxes, thus providing for the pensions.

China's fervent pursuit of economic growth, urbanization, industrialization and modernization but also adopting a form of state capitalism has had a consequence somewhat peculiar for a self-described communist country, namely unequal distribution of wealth. The discrepancies between the rural and urban inhabitants are visible in Chinese society and the one-child policy has contributed to widening this gap because it greatly affected China's rural settings. Urbanization has also resulted in *less and less skilled laborers, but also a shortage in cheap work force*, the rural parts of China having been already

“drained” of this particular kind of resource (Nakra, 2012). Another problem inherent to urbanization is *heavy pollution* (Nakra, 2012), but also the advent of mega cities and overcrowded slums.

A final consideration on the topic is also necessary. The fact that wealthy families can afford to pay fines for subsequent children while poor rural families do not constitutes an even bigger social injustice.

Was the One-child Policy Avoidable?

In order to reach a balanced conclusion, it is imperative that the positive aspects regarding the policy are also presented. While the means employed in order to curb high fertility rates are understandably harshly criticized, it is of key importance to note that, without this policy, the Chinese population would have now reached 1.7 billion. This means that the one-child policy has prevented a subsequent number of 300/400 million births. Upon instituting the policy in 1979, China was home to about 25% of the total world population, but living on just 7% of the world’s surface (Bulte, Heerink, Zhang, 2010; Nakra, 2012). Thus, overpopulation would have posed its own challenges.

Furthermore, as some researchers have pointed out (Li, Zhang, 2007), increased birth rates can negatively affect economic growth. Featuring case studies conducted in 28 Chinese provinces, they were able to demonstrate that birth rates alter economic growth, and that the one-child policy could have indeed contributed to the aforementioned growth. China has the second-largest economy of the world, having a steady economic growth of 10% in GDP per annum (Nakra, 2012).

In addition, better healthcare and better education were also made available. This is a very important feature because of the large amounts of people living in rural areas, with no access to basic health services or schooling. A study (Zhu, 2007) argues that the one-child policy has contributed to higher education opportunities even for Chinese girls.

Chinese officials have committed to revising the policy, aiming towards a more humane perspective. This is mainly because experts estimate that in the next decade the Chinese population will begin to shrink and potentially derail the state-driven economic growth previously mentioned. This is most evident in Dongbei, a north-eastern region of China with the lowest birth rates in the country and marred by poverty and workforce migration to other more affluent Chinese regions (Kuo, Wang 2019). The long-awaited changes to the policy came into effect in 2016, with the most important change being that families can have two children without having to pay any fine.

Conclusion

China's one-child policy is undeniably the biggest and most important policy of its sort, having both a positive and negative impact upon China and the whole world. Devised as a countermeasure for increased population growth, it provided tragic results. Women were the most affected by these measures, having to face strong repercussions in case of refusing abortion or sterilization. All of these issues had dire effects upon men as well, making the future of China economically unpredictable. This paper aimed to determine the specific problems pertaining to both men and women and how these problems shape Chinese development. It can be concluded that gender issues represent a vicious circle and are interdependent. These unhealthy and mostly man-made gender imbalances will certainly affect China's future development. Although is an economic superpower and will continue to be so, it will suffer because of its ecological crisis, aging citizens, and its sex ratio. The policy was heralded by Chinese officials as inevitable but it had led to forced abortions and sterilizations, infringement upon basic human rights and inhumane attitudes against girls and women. As China is struggling with an aging population and is facing an abrupt population decline in the next decades, plans by Chinese officials to reverse the effects of the one-child policy could be as coercive and authoritarian as the one-child policy itself.

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