Journal of Women, Politics & Policy ›

Volume 29, 2008 - Issue 3

Free access

Original Articles

Investing in the Future: The One Child Policy and Reform

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Pages 365-393 | Published online: 11 Oct 2008

Cite this article https://doi.org/10.1080/15544770802206077

Abstract

Since the One Child Policy was implemented in 1979, it has been examined closely for both its perceived developmental benefits and the negative effects it has had on women. To ensure compliance with the policy birth planning officials have used both incentives and punitive measures, with different results in urban and rural areas. In the urban sector, the policy has effectively reduced population growth, with suggestions that a lasting change has occurred in terms of attitudes on family size and the value of daughters. To illustrate these changes a cohort analysis of 292 women in Beijing is used, offering insight into changing family dynamics, sex ratios, and human capital investments as a result of the One Child Policy. This article then analyzes the current state of the policy and questions its continued implementation on the basis of the numerous exceptions allowed to the one child rule and the declining worker to retiree ratios that threaten the economic stability of China's aging population. The trends uncovered raise important questions about the role of the policy in China's long term

Keywords:

China | economic development | family planning | population policy | urban population

Investing in the Future: The One Child Policy and Reform

The One Child Policy (1979) has been controversial for its detrimental effects on women's health in China as well as on the status of women and human rights more generally. In the early stages of implementation, sex selective and coerced abortions, infanticide, and forced sterilization disproportionately affected women by making them responsible for bearing sons and for suffering the consequences when they failed to do so (Bauer et al. 1992; Croll 2000; Johnson 1996; Kristof and WuDunn 1994; Milwertz 1997; Summerfield 1994). However, in recent years the policy has allowed greater flexibility, permitting additional children under special circumstances and using less direct violence to ensure compliance.

With less draconian enforcement, there are some unexpected economic gains related to the One Child Policy experienced by young women, most notably in the urban setting. Some of these changes include increases in educational opportunities for women and greater or more equal value assigned to women as workers, both of which reflect the larger human capital investment families are willing to make in girls (Greenhalgh 2001; Hung 1995; Meng 1993; Parish and Busse 2000; White, Howell, and Xiaoyuan 1996). However, the effects of the policy have been uneven and while things may be getting better for some urban women the same does not necessarily hold true for rural women. In spite of these economic “benefits,” there are reasons to be concerned about the continued implementation of the policy and its costs to women remain high. First, the One Child Policy is more than just a population control mechanism used by the state to assist in economic development, and it has clear gendered implications seen in the large burdens placed on women for family planning and the lack of reproductive control granted to women. This treatment of women as second-class citizens causes them to be seen as resources and undermines their social, political, and economic status.

Second, the policy was intended to assist economic development by limiting population

such that the policy's effectiveness has lessened rather than increased with its continued implementation. Often the notion of “development” is characterized as modernization, focusing on Western notions of liberalization with an emphasis on growth and prosperity in economic terms. However, modernization rhetoric raises alarm bells among scholars who argue the term development is more complex than just measuring relative GDP. Thus, I argue the Chinese state needs to be focused on this more holistic and richer understanding of development that includes advancements in terms of social, political, and economic policies. This more nuanced notion of development cannot be obtained if the state continues to focus only on liberalization and capital accumulation, yet even in this limited sense of development it is clear that the One Child Policy is not as effective as it once was in restricting population growth.

As China becomes more prosperous, fines or withholding state benefits are trivial punishments to the wealthy, who can readily violate the policy without much of a burden. Additionally, the state's willingness to grant numerous exceptions to the one child rule, indicate a decreasing need and role for this policy. The continued implementation of the policy cannot fix some of the pressing demands being placed on the state in terms of trying to provide an adequate pension or retirement system and managing a rapidly aging population. In fact, the policy makes these problems even more difficult to solve with lower worker to retiree ratios, and the large financial burden aging parents are placing on their children and grandchildren. Thus, the policy is no longer serving the long-term development needs of the state. The dilemma is how the state can bring economic and social policy together in a way that helps the state reach a higher level of overall development without undermining its own power or the power of women. After examining a brief history of population control policies in China, this article discusses the gender differentiated effects of the One Child Policy, analyzes survey data on the attitudes of Beijing women on family and children, and then argues for reform of the One Child Policy as a way for the state to better invest in its long-term goals.

POPULATION CONTROL IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The origins of population control policies in China predate the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 and according to some scholars (Himes 1936;

During the Communist Era, the unease with high population growth stemmed from Malthusian assumptions on unsustainable demographic trends. Although pronatalist policies were adopted by the state in the early 1950s, the population pressures began building rapidly and the emphasis switched from promoting to limiting population growth.1 High fertility rates and a large population were hindering development in China, and the state was concerned about its ability to feed the population. Thus in the mid 1950s, several efforts were made to curb rapid population growth, with “family planning” campaigns being promoted throughout China, encouraging women to limit family size.2 These policies were in contrast to those implemented in the early 1950s, when the state had adopted a pronatalist stance and birth control was restricted from women. From 1957 to 1973, fertility declined from 6.21 to 4.51 children per woman in China and in more developed urban areas like Beijing the decline was even more pronounced from 6.07 to 2.55 children per woman (Scharping 2003, 267).3

By the 1970s there was also pressure on the state to examine the environmental consequences of development, with international scrutiny placed on developing states with large populations. Although a natural progression through the demographic transition is expected as states experience economic prosperity, pressure has been disproportionately placed on developing states to limit population growth. The One Child Policy emerged in the context of both these international and domestic trends, where social concerns were placed secondary to the state's economic growth. Hershatter (2007) notes that “The government argued that if drastic steps were not taken to limit fertility, the needs of a burgeoning population would not be met, national development strategy would be undermined, and terrible suffering would result (Potter 1985; Croll 1985, Tien 1985, 1987; Bianco and Hua 1988; Potter and Potter 1990; Greenhalgh 2003)” (27).

In 1978 Deng Xiaoping revisited the concerns linking economic growth, the environment, and birth rates and began pursuing reforms that would fundamentally change the Chinese economy (Chinese Government White paper 1995, 386). The One Child Policy (1979) initially set modest population targets and simply encouraged families to set a one child limit, offering a variety of incentives for compliance. In Beijing, incentives included a bonus of approximately 60 Yuan annually until the child turned fourteen years-old and they also provided preferential treatment in education, health, housing, and job assignment.4 By 1982 the national goal was to reduce fertility rates to 1.7 children per woman (Ching 1982, 209), a number later modified to 1.6 in

Tianjin (Attane 2002, 110). However in the mid-1980s, clear and large differences in local implementation emerged, with provinces offering different incentives and punishments to enforce the policy. Although many of these population targets and means of enforcement started in the 1970s, their effects did not become readily apparent or documented until the 1980s.

As population growth began to stray further from the targets in the 1980s, authorities moved away from incentives to more Draconian measures to ensure compliance. Severe fines, ration restrictions, and the denial of registration for higher order births (with implications for health, education, housing) were all used to persuade families to have just one child. Moreover, births were to be planned with the permission of one's work unit, which had the authority to give out birth permits dictating who was eligible to give birth in a given year. Births outside of the plan were not allowed, and strict measures were taken to avoid any embarrassments to one's work unit, village, or local family planning authorities. Although the disincentives were designed to discourage couples from violating the one child limit, Shen argues that the state “took for granted that women were solely responsible for reproduction and targeted women's fertility as if that was the problem” (Shen 2003, 81). Some of the measures taken by local authorities or work units to keep tabs on birth planning included mandatory IUD insertions, regular birth control and menstrual checks, forced abortions, and, in the case of repetitive violations, forced sterilization. In each instance it is clear that women were disproportionately targeted for punishment, and “of the four-fifths of a billion operations (male and female sterilizations, abortions, and IUD insertions and removals) performed from 1971 to 2001, 95 percent were performed on women,” with proportions appearing to increase over time (Greenhalgh and Winckler 2006, 256).

The coercive nature of the policy extended beyond pressure from the state or local work units to include propaganda as disseminated via the All China Women's Federation, Family Planning units, Communist Party committees, the Youth League, and Neighborhood Committees. Moreover, studies publicizing the superior intellectual capabilities of only children began to emerge to help promote the value of limiting childbirth (Ching 1982, 210). However, strict enforcement of the one child limit created a related gender differentiated problem, skewed sex ratios. Since the one child policy's implementation, sex ratios have been reported as high as 145 boys per 100 girls in places like Shaanxi Province (Shen 2003, 81), and concern has been growing over rates of female infanticide and foeticide as sex selective technology has become more

Chinese numbers reflect an artificial distortion from sex selection. With traditional beliefs favoring sons over daughters, there was pressure to avoid “wasting” the one child allocation with a daughter. Thus to help counter some of these beliefs, special attention has been given to encourage families to value girls as much as boys with laws designed to treat women more equally in terms of marriage and property laws. Moreover, the use of ultrasound B machines, “originally intended for monitoring pregnancies and checking IUD insertions,” have been banned for their use in prenatal sex identification (Scharping 2003, 226). Despite these efforts, sex disparities have been prevalent and estimates claim as many as 30 million girls are “missing” today in China as a result of strict enforcement of the One Child Policy (Seager 2003, 40).5

By 1984, many problems surfaced and couples were not convinced that the costs outweighed the benefits of violating the policy. To address some of these concerns, the state introduced a series of exceptions that could allow couples to have more than one child. Scholars note that some of the exceptions include: parents who have a disabled child, families with only sons for generations, couples whose first child is a girl, couples where both partners are only children, ethnic minorities,6 permission for a second child if sufficient time has passed between births, and if the parents claim to experience “significant hardship” by having only one child (Attane 2001; Attane 2002; Hesketh, Li, and Zhu 2005; Liang and Li 2006; Shen 2003; Short and Zhai 1998). These special exemptions did not mean enforcement of the policy was any less draconian, with late term abortions and forced sterilization continuing as methods of “birth control.” Even with these modifications, by the early 1990s the policy resulted in a 62.9 percent reduction in population growth rates compared to the 1960s (Correa 1994, 16). Consequently, China went from a fertility rate of 2.8 children per woman in 1979 to 1.78 children per woman in 1995, with Beijing moving from 1.41 to 1.11 children per woman during that same period (Scharping 2003, 267).7 While the economic motivation behind population control policies to limit growth in exchange for greater development and better resource distribution was clear, the continuation of the policy raises several concerns about the hidden objectives of the state.

LIBERATION OR SECOND-CLASS CITIZENSHIP?

In contrast to some of the clearly negative effects examined in the previous section,

have made for women in the public and private spheres. First, it has been argued that the One Child Policy helped liberate urban women “because the state took control rather than letting the families and husbands,” make decisions about reproduction (Greenhalgh 2001, 869). Arguably, this is not a true liberation, where women are in control of their own bodies and reproductive health, but it has reduced the burden of endless childbearing on women. With birth limitations, women are not allowed to continue having children until they produce a son, which has helped reduce sex preference for some couples, most notably in urban areas. The fact that 30 million girls remain “missing” in China is still problematic, the result of many years of strict policy enforcement. However, distinctions must be made between the harsh periods of enforcement in the 1980s, which have contributed to the large number of daughters missing today, and the last few years when enforcement has been less stringent. Furthermore, indifference with regard to the sex of a child does not necessarily hold true for rural areas where traditions have continued to place emphasis on bearing sons.8 It is primarily in the more developed urban areas that we see the quest for a son is becoming less prominent. Since the majority of China's population is rural as opposed to urban, the number of missing daughters is higher when numbers are aggregated for China as a whole, and even within particular provinces with large rural populations. Thus Greenhalgh's arguments on reproductive liberation must be understood within this context. These findings still do not negate the fact that individual choice has been co-opted by the state and that personal desires to have more children exist in both urban and rural China. I would argue the real question is to what extent son preference still exists within these constraints.

In Milwertz's survey on the effects of population policies on women in Beijing and Shenyang, she found that “the preference for a boy was, it turned out, clearly linked to a family or parent-in-law interest, while the majority of women themselves were… generally unconcerned as to the sex of their child” (1997, 140). In spite of this preference among family members, she reported that the majority of women (82.3 percent of her 857 respondents) were not feeling pressured to have a son (Milwertz 1997, 142). Instead families have come to terms with the child limitations and have focused on the “cultivation of the perfect only child,’” where all of the family's energy and finances are spent in the child's development regardless of sex (Milwertz 1997, 122).9 Zhang, Feng, and Zhang (2006) further support these claims that couples increasingly do not have a strong son preference when it comes to children, and argue

in their one child, it has meant opportunities in education and employment have arguably improved for many young women. Second, the market changes that have occurred increasingly provide job opportunities that target young women. Although some of these occupations focus more on appearance rather than skills, it is producing a generation of more confident young women who are socially mobile (Greenhalgh and Winckler 2005; Zhang Zhen 2001). Thus in terms of labor, limiting couples to one child has given many young women more prospects for greater human capital investment and jobs, thereby producing higher expectations and motivation with regard to their position in society.

Son preference in urban China does appear to be changing, and researchers have found in larger cities like Beijing and Shanghai satisfaction levels with regard to daughters are just as high as they would be for sons (Scharping 2003; Shanor and Shanor 1995). My own survey work with Beijing women in 2001–2002 further develops this point, where women indicated that a child's sex was less important and daughters were equally desired by couples. One Beijing woman explained, “When children grow up they are expected to take care of the parents. One child means one opportunity” (Personal Interview, 22 June 2002). The assumption is that if you only get one child, a boy or girl will be beneficial as long as you make the proper investment in his/her education and life chances. Although sons have traditionally been responsible for caring for their parents in their old age, the one child policy has forced parents to see their daughters as part of their aging safety net. Thus a couple's investment in their child is for the child's future as well as their own, and sex is less relevant to the equation. The importance of the aforementioned studies is that they provide greater insight than aggregate statistics can offer. Even though the campaigns have made discussions of son preference socially unacceptable, researchers conducting micro-level analyses have found in interviews and surveys that women do readily report an indifference to sex preference.10 These attitudinal shifts again must be examined with caution, applicable primarily to the developed urban areas, and the trends discussed in this study indicate the process is still rather slow.

In addition to the changes to son preference, another outcome of the policy is that fewer children per family means working women will likely spend less time on maternity and childcare leave and can be seen either as more productive public sphere workers or as less burdened private sphere workers (Kerr and Delahanty 1996, 37). With the full-time housewife a rare occurrence in the Chinese context, where most women work in

to pursue other interests and to enter the labor market (Brinton, Lee, and Parish 1995, 1,100). Although labor force participation is already quite high for Chinese women, fewer domestic demands arguably change how women allocate their time. With a lighter household burden, women may have more time to devote to the development of a career (Perry 1998, 280). Moreover, the one child policy has helped transfer childcare duties to grandparents, making it “easier for young mothers to remain in the workforce” (Parish and Busse 2000, 214). Grandparents become relevant because they have adjusted their lifestyles and residence to respond to their family's needs, reflecting a social exchange across different generations (Chen 2005, 143). Young working women do not have to immediately rush home to care for children when grandparents are contributing to childcare, giving women more hours to devote to their public sphere work. My own survey data supports these claims and are discussed in the next section, where the childcare duties of older women that reflect care for their grandchildren is discussed. Therefore, the policy has given some women more choices and control in how they can invest in public sphere employment as well as leisure time.

The unexpected social and economic outcomes of the policy that have been discussed here, should only be examined as part of a system currently in place and should not be mistaken as a call to strengthen or advocate the policy's adoption elsewhere. Moreover, any “benefits” to the policy are best understood as unintended side effects rather than intentional efforts to assist the status of women. It is also important to note that the economic gains discussed here refer primarily to young urban women, and must be examined in the appropriate context. While the policy does have some positive effects on women's economic status in urban areas, the negative effects of the policy are still quite numerous: singling out women for differential treatment from the beginning, making them responsible for birth control, and punishing them for not upholding the one child limit. Moreover, the burden the one child policy places on women treats them as resources and second-class citizens, who the state can control and use as needed to further its long-term economic goals.11 With these different perspectives on how women have been hurt or helped by the policy, and the enormous diversity of experiences that exist for women in China (on the basis of age, ethnicity, rural/urban status, etc), it is difficult to generalize on how women have fared under the one child policy. More detailed micro-level data is needed to assess both how women and their family choices have been affected by the policy, and provide valuable insight into how attitudes are changing.

URBAN ATTITUDES – THREE BEIJING COHORTS

To get a better sense of the effects of the policy and the trends that are starting to emerge at the micro-level, I draw on survey data I collected from 292 Beijing women in 2001–2002. The women were all selected on the basis of their age (20 to 60 years old) and urban residency according to their official household registration in Beijing. They were asked a series of questions on public and private sphere life, family dynamics, and their impressions of local and national reform.[12] The effects of the One Child Policy can be seen in the different family patterns across the three cohorts of women. Women in the oldest category (ages 46 to 60) were the most likely to have multiple children, women in the middle category (ages 33 to 45) frequently had only one child, and the youngest group (ages 20 to 32) had only one child, if any at all. The survey data are then used to evaluate the effectiveness of the policy in Beijing and whether urban women have changed their attitudes on family size and the desired sex of a child. Their assessments of the policy also provide insight into whether it is still deemed necessary for Chinese economic development and what purpose or role the policy serves in future reform.

One indicator of son preference would be to examine the male to female sex ratios of children. The state's National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) reported Beijing's sex ratio in 2001 as 108 boys to 100 girls, but has indicated a steady decline since that time to approximately 103 boys to 100 girls in 2005 as reported by the All China Women's Federation.[13] Meanwhile the sample reported an overall ratio of 85:100 in favor of girls. The national data and the sample are difficult to compare directly since the state reports birth rates for a single year and the sample ratio reflects an aggregation of several years. However, these numbers do reveal two important findings. First, according to the state, the sex ratio in Beijing appears to be approaching the more normal global distribution of 103:100, indicating that son preference is clearly less prevalent than it was in the past. Second, data from the sample reveal that there can be a lot of variation within a large urban area, and the size of Beijing is such that studies of specific districts help us better understand how national rhetoric and micro-level behavior can suffer a disconnect. In this case, the sample shows that son preference is even less than what the aggregate data of the NBS reveals and that daughters actually outnumber sons for this subset of the Beijing population. Therefore, son preference is not immediately evident among first order births for women in the

An additional factor of concern when examining sex ratios is how higher order births are affected. Typically higher order births suffer from even more skewed ratios in favor of boys. If a couple makes an appeal for a second child exemption or chooses to give birth to another child without permission, the assumption is that the intent is to have a son rather than a daughter. However, again in the sample we see that a larger percentage of girls rather than boys were born. These ratios held true for women who gave birth to additional children both before and after the policy was implemented. Among those who reported having additional children in violation of the one child policy, generalizations on higher order births are difficult to make given the small size of the sample.[14] However, the rationale for their decision to have additional children in spite of the policy provides insight into their attitudes on sex preferences.

Sex ratios alone at the national or local level are inadequate because they only tell us about births and do not tell us about the other factors that may influence a woman's decisions about childbirth.[15] To better understand the policy's effects on women requires a more in-depth examination of women's attitudes. Specifically, did women have a son preference motivating their childbirth decisions and did economic factors affect their choices?

When asked about sex preferences the women did not place significant personal emphasis on the sex of the child. For the oldest cohort, they were not strictly bound by the same birth restrictions as the younger groups and although some indicated feeling pressure at the time to have a son, there was still the ability to try again. Several of these women reported feeling relief at the birth of their sons, knowing that they had met their obligations to the family line. A sense of personal and financial security came with the birth of sons, and the sex of any additional children would have less pressure attached to it. Women with daughters first reported they knew they would have more children, but if their second child was a daughter they would not necessarily continue until they had a son. The women did not indicate a strong personal preference on the sex of their child, but their reflections may also be affected by the fact their children are now grown so sex has become less relevant to them now as opposed to at the time of their pregnancy.

One key difference between the oldest cohort and the younger two is that their childbearing years were influenced primarily by their families, but not by strict state regulations. Consequently, the traditional expectations on son bearing, combined with

greater senses of urgency to produce a son rather than a daughter. Yet women in the middle cohort overwhelmingly revealed they had no personal sex preference and that their families had not really pressured them. Some women in this cohort did violate the policy and have more than one child, but the driving force was not linked to sex preference. One woman revealed that she simply wanted to have more children and did not care about the sex of the child (Personal Interview, June 28 2002), whereas another woman indicated she decided to try for a third child because she knew she could afford to have one (Personal Interview, June 3 2002). Although not all of the women with additional children indicated it was a planned decision, the penalties inflicted by the state also did not explicitly deter them from violating the policy. The few women who had multiple children had varying economic backgrounds, so for both the wealthy and less affluent the penalties were negligible compared to the personal benefits they would receive from larger families.

For the women with only one child in both the middle and youngest cohorts, again most indicated they were not concerned about the sex of their child. While some women acknowledged a desire for a boy originally, they claimed it was less of a reflection on their personal choice and associated it with the perceived expectations of their husbands, parents, or other family members. Still they claimed this was not pressure as much as it was about conveying well wishes for a son. Women without children also did not specify a sex preference with regard to their plans for children in the future, and saw no real advantage to one sex over the other. However many of the women without children were unmarried, hence they would not be experiencing any pressure yet from their spouse or family members about the sex of a child. Yet for the middle and younger cohorts the overall trend was a general feeling of indifference in terms of sex and most of the women expressed greater concern about making sure their child got into the right school and had a good life. These findings are consistent with other studies that indicate urban families have less skewed sex ratios compared to rural areas and that sex preference is relatively less important in the urban context despite stricter implementation of the one-child policy in these areas.

In terms of the economic factors motivating women's choices, the women in the survey reported that the financial variables weighed heavily on their reproductive choices. With the increasing competition in schools and for jobs, parents appear to be more focused on resource allocation and factors they have greater control over. When discussing their children the women frequently raised their concerns over which school

another, and how he/she would perform on his/her entrance exam. The limited availability of slots in “prestigious” schools has created intense competition at all levels of schooling for boys and girls alike. In Beijing, where average annual income was approximately 20,000 Yuan, one woman reported paying 10,000 Yuan per exam point that same year for her child to get into a good junior high school (Personal Interview, December 26 2001), not including the high tuition fees. The high costs of raising a child under these conditions have led women to dismiss the idea of additional children as financially unfeasible. In addition there seemed to be a competitive spirit among the women when they discussed how many extracurricular activities (sports, music, computer/language instruction, etc.) their children were involved in to round out their “academic experience.” Even women without children expressed the desire that someday their children would have a childhood either equal to or better than their own in terms of quality of life factors. Their own financial situation and their awareness of the increasing competition in both education and employment have changed how women see their children and the opportunities they can provide for them.

On the basis of family pressure, personal desires, and economic factors, women in the Beijing sample did not report a strong sex preference when it came to the sex of their child. As one women with a daughter said, “After the birth of my child, the (child's) sex is not important. All I can think about is how to be a good mother” (Personal Interview, May 25 2002). Even when asked if they would like to have more children without the restrictions in place, the women in the sample did not express desires to have larger families with more boys. Similar studies in Shanghai have found that “with equal educational and professional opportunity for girls and boys the traditional reasons for male preference are no longer applicable,” (Nie and Wyman 2005, 329). Given the current state of reform it comes as no surprise that women reported financial pressures as more prevalent than sex preference where children were concerned. A frequent point raised by women in the sample was some variation of the “4-2-1” problem, where one child supports two parents, and four grandparents. Although many of the reasons for having fewer children involve the high costs of raising them, equally alarming to the women is the impact a deteriorating social safety net will have on their sense of economic security. Rising costs of living, limited incomes, privatization, and the instability of the State Owned Enterprise (SOE) sector are increasing competition for already scarce resources, and women across all three cohorts reported high levels of dissatisfaction with deteriorating living conditions and a standard of living that does not

increased, the women complained that household income has not managed to adjust accordingly. Meanwhile the state has not offered any immediate solutions to these problems despite expressing concern about the slow pace of reform and instead encouraging residents that the trickle down benefits will eventually reach them. While the survey data demonstrate urban attitudes on family size and sex ratios are in sync with the policy's efforts to both reduce family size and increase the value of girls, the real impact on attitudes appears to be related to economic reform and the high cost of raising children. Therefore, the question is whether a restrictive birth planning program is still needed or if the economic changes we see in urban China can successfully encourage lower birth rates, revalue girls, and satisfy the state's economic goals.

THE NEXT STAGE OF REFORM

Analyzing the different reforms that have taken place over the last 28 years, the contemporary challenges facing China cannot be identified as simply a population problem, because they are increasingly a distribution problem. One of the biggest challenges for the state has been providing for the growing needs of the population, which have intensified with economic reform. Promises of trickle down benefits are not enough to appease the new generation of Chinese who have embraced Deng Xiaoping's reform era slogan “to get rich is glorious” and are seeking faster and better results. The One Child Policy is simply one part of China's grand strategy for economic development, designed to limit population growth and reduce the pressures on infrastructure, employment, and resources. As the previous section illustrated, the policy has already been effective in limiting most families to one child. The problem is that the policy should be seen as a short-term program, implemented to give the state a chance to catch up with its economic goals and help institutionalize values on smaller families, and not a long-term solution to economic pressures. Critics of the policy have long argued for its repeal, given the harmful effects it has on women and the implications it has on human rights. Nevertheless, the state has continued to place modernization ahead of the rights or interests of women, and the policy remains in effect for the foreseeable future.

However, several economic and social problems are emerging that suggest the time is right for widespread changes to the One Child Policy. Currently, the degree to which

state's ability to maintain the present level and pace of reform. Already there is evidence of social unrest related to labor and pension protests throughout China, signs of resource distribution problems facing the state (Currier 2005; Howell 2000; Hurst and O'Brien 2001; Perry 1995; Tang and Parish 2000). Although this unrest is seen primarily as an economic challenge, the aforementioned problems have both economic and social implications. While the state has tried to downplay the importance or significance of this growing unrest, the resource and labor problems are placing increasing pressures on the state to adjust the path and pace of reform. The One Child Policy is relevant to these issues in the sense that some of the inequalities and pension problems are actually made worse by the policy's continued implementation. Worker to retiree ratios are increasing financial burdens on younger and older generations of workers, couples of all ages are struggling with the 4-2-1 problem, and the varied implementation of the policy according to wealth draws attention to growing inequalities and the privileges awarded to the upper classes of urbanites. Each of these problems places pressure on the state to alleviate economic inequalities while maintaining the economic targets promised under reform. However, to understand how change can occur, it is necessary to examine how the Chinese have generally approached the question of reform and how the state sees its role in the process.

One of the strengths of the Chinese system has been the controlled nature of reform and the gradualist policies adopted by the state. Rapid and potentially destabilizing change has been avoided with the state managing the reform process, although it no longer has the same control it did under the planned economy. As problems emerge, the state attempts to correct them before moving onto the next stage or allowing other areas to adopt similar policies. Hence, reform has been slow and calculated, involving a smaller role for the state in each successive stage. This gradualist strategy can also be seen in how the state has managed the One Child Policy. Like economic reform, the policy has been implemented unevenly, with different conditions in rural versus urban areas and across the provinces. Over the years the policy has been periodically revised to adjust to problems that emerged in different stages of implementation – using incentives, then punitive measures, but moving generally towards less state control. This liberalization that has occurred in terms of social policy parallels the economic reform process, and is arguably a sign that “China is facing up to its increasing inability to control couples' private lives” (Attane 2001, 86–87). Even the basic practice of seeking permission from local birth planning authorities to have children has been

further retreat from managing the private sphere and to focus more on providing for the people's basic economic needs in the public sphere, which is becoming difficult as privatization exacerbates inequalities.

Marketization has already changed economic and social life, creating a more competitive labor force, housing market, and education system, each offering economic motivation for limiting family size. The loss of the iron rice bowl, the uncertainty and insecurity in employment, the struggle to find affordable and ample housing, and the growth of competition in education and the labor force are giving families a sense of future financial insecurity. A couple's children are an investment in their own economic well-being, as the social safety net continues to erode under reform. Thus families are investing more of their time and money into cultivating the perfect only child and having more than one child would be a financial challenge for most (Attane 2001; Hesketh, Li, and Zhu 2005; Mcloughlin 2005; Tsui and Rich 2002). Sport lessons, music lessons, after school tutoring, or FasTracKids programs have become a growing part of everyday life for urban Chinese children and families are quickly realizing they do not have the disposable resources to afford additional children.16 The Beijing women interviewed reported they were content with having one child, even without the policy in place, and similar surveys have found that urban women generally want fewer children (Hesketh, Li, and Zhu 2005). In the case of the Beijing sample, the women were influenced by both time and money. Others have argued the dilemmas of space are also problematic in places like Beijing, where Shanor and Shanor claim, “the most compelling reason for urban couples to have only one child is insufficient, cramped, and inadequate housing” (1995, 47). At the present time urban life is not suited for large families. While women may want more children under other circumstances, their current economic situations limit these possibilities.

In terms of time allocation, interviews with the Beijing women indicated that children had very demanding schedules filled with extracurricular activities throughout the week. Couples work together to manage their child's time and activities, with both parents and grandparents heavily involved in the childrearing process. This is particularly true of women in the youngest cohort, who increasingly rely on their own parents or other family members to help care for their children (43 percent), transferring childcare responsibilities from younger to older generations of women. This better enables young women to balance work and home life, with older women taking on larger childcare burdens as a result of caring for grandchildren. In both cases, the

development and devote more time to economic production and older retired women become “reemployed” as caregivers for grandchildren. For example, one Beijing woman remarked, “My mother is at home taking care of my daughter. I know someone is looking after her while we work so I don't worry about staying at work late” (Personal Interview, 1 July 2002). Meanwhile the state is not being forced to provide more childcare facilities, and older cohorts who may have been pushed into early retirement are occupied with family responsibilities, while younger generations remain active in the labor force to support the pension system.17 Thus, the state has been able to utilize the policy to serve a larger economic and social purpose, altering household structures and labor market dynamics while diverting attention from its economic inadequacies. Rather than providing more jobs, more childcare, or a more sustainable pension scheme, the state is using the One Child Policy as a temporary fix and to postpone these developments.

For the few that can choose to have more than one child, the economic punishments used in the past such as withholding subsidies or access to public services, are no longer compelling with the decline of the state sector, and a return to physical coercion would not be tolerated at the local level or within the international community. The economic inequalities that exist within the urban setting as well as between urban and rural areas have become more pronounced with marketization (Khan et al. 1993; Knight and Song 1999; Lu and Sit 2001; Meng 2000; Riskin, Zhao, and Li 2001; Y. Wang 1995; S. Wang and Hu 1999; Yang 1999; W. Zhang 2000). Many of the exceptions or ways around the One Child Policy favor those with resources and exacerbate the differences between the rich and poor in Chinese society. Privatization has allowed the wealthy or resourceful to take advantage of the opportunities offered by private companies to ensure their children still have access to schooling or healthcare and often of higher quality than those offered by the state. The state has tried to develop plans to punish these violators, but its inability to impose harsh penalties is a sign of how weak state control is in the private sector. One proposal includes imposing even heftier fines on the wealthy, which currently stand at a few hundred to a few thousand dollars (USD), recording their names on an official bad credit list, and disqualifying them from any awards or honors from society (Guan 2007). However even the levying or collection of fines is not regularly enforced (Short and Zhai 1998, 380). These efforts are still rather modest and are unlikely to serve as a significant deterrent to those who can afford to break the rules, only bringing greater attention the growing inequalities in the urban

since the policy can only truly be enforced on the latter. The wealthy can seemingly operate with greater freedom, given the state's inability to regulate their increasingly privatized economic lives.

As more children become “little emperors and empresses,” another major concern is how the state will be able to meet the expectations and high standards of a more demanding generation of only children who are being transformed by a new materialist and consumer-driven society.[18] These expectations of the younger generation include the ability to find adequate employment opportunities that they can use to support both themselves and their parents in their old age. The state has argued that the One Child Policy is necessary to reduce the pressures on an already oversaturated job market and to better allocate its limited resources. However, the state's modernization goals are becoming increasingly difficult to fulfill since the One Child Policy is also reducing the worker to retiree ratio and is placing greater pressure on the state to provide a new social safety net as the population begins to age. With children traditionally serving as a form of social security, and economic liberalization and privatization eroding the security formerly provided by the state, the challenge to the state is how to satisfy the economic needs of society without adopting more repressive policies.

If one of the underlying problems facing the state is resource distribution, reforming the One Child Policy would be a step in the right direction towards the state's long term economic development goals. Even though a smaller population will help decrease infrastructure pressures and competition for resources (jobs, housing, health, etc), children also traditionally serve as a built-in social security network and alleviate some of the pressure on the state to provide old-age support. In Chinese society, children are expected to help care for their parents as they age, but the 4-2-1 problem has magnified the burden placed on younger generations. Although the state is working to offset this problem by developing elder care facilities, these are still relatively underdeveloped, limited in number, and found primarily in the most developed urban areas like Beijing and Shanghai. The social security challenge presented by limiting childbirth is not a new discovery and has posed an obstacle to the state from the beginning. The problem is that more than twenty-eight years after implementation of the One Child Policy, the state is no further in providing a viable social security system. Family structures have already changed, with grandparents taking a larger part in childrearing, and family size becoming smaller. But a lasting change to family size will

not emerge unless the state can ease the fears of the older generations that there is economic security after retirement.

In many urban areas, fertility is already at below replacement levels and an aging population means that a “reduction in the number of children and youth cannot make up for the additional number of people in old age who will have to be supported by the active population” (Scharping 2003, 328). Lutz, Scherbov, and Sanderson argue that Asian states can expect their elderly proportion of their population to probably quadruple, with China's projected to reach nearly 40 percent by 2100 at the current rate (2003, 125, 133). In Beijing, recent estimates (2005) place the elderly population at 13.1 percent and growing by 4 percent each year (People's Daily Online). Mcloughlin notes that these trends are “especially grave since fewer than 40 percent of urban retirees have any pension; in rural settings, the proportion is so low as to be negligible” (Mcloughlin 2005, 308). The downsizing of State Owned Enterprises under reform has pushed many older workers into early retirement and is restructuring labor opportunities in favor of younger workers. But this labor shifting was arguably done too quickly, and it has created large burdens on younger workers. The number of retirees in urban China are increasing “from 10 percent of the urban total in 2000 to 13 percent in 2010,” and “the ratio of employees to retirees in SOEs has already fallen to about 2:1” in major cities (Hurst and O'Brien 2002, 353). In addition, Hurst and O'Brien point out that labor restructuring for older generations of workers has been exceptionally hard given their limited resources and little chance of being reabsorbed into the new market economy. Members of this cohort are also more likely to engage in protests and demonstrations, as they become “contentious pensioners,” since they have the free time to devote to these activities with little to lose and a lot to gain in the event of success. Whereas one of the big concerns has been how to provide enough jobs for China's youth, a new dilemma is how the state can keep labor unrest at bay and boost the declining worker to retiree ratio when it is simultaneously pursuing policies that advocate forced early retirement and birth limitations. The One-Child Policy is further complicating this situation as the population continues to age and progresses through the final stages of the demographic transition with lower birth and death rates.

The One Child Policy was effective as a temporary fix for the state to pursue its economic goals, creating a better skilled and educated population of a more manageable size that can lead China into a new era of development. However, the policy's uneven implementation and exacerbation of declining worker to retiree ratios is

rather than helping solve them. Reducing the population size in the short-term was a useful strategy, but without a long-term social and economic program in place that offsets the declining role of the state in job placement and social security, the artificial restrictions threaten the sustainability of the current path of reform. Presently, quality of life differences have become more pronounced in urban and rural areas and the social safety net has eroded but has not been replaced with an alternative that meets the needs of the less affluent portion of the population. Both of these issues fuel the dissatisfaction over inequality in Chinese society and place the state's development goals and stability in jeopardy. Although physical coercion is no longer a useful means to ensure compliance with the policy, socioeconomic factors are serving as an effective deterrent to large families. With only one child, both parents increasingly focus their attention and limited resources on their child's development as a top priority, regardless of sex, and strive to cultivate the child's talents to the best of their ability. One child is a necessity to provide for one's old age, but two is economically difficult. Nevertheless, the One Child Policy cannot fix the emerging economic and social problems that are facing the state, and the state cannot continue to enforce it in lieu of more advanced social and economic reforms if it wants to maintain its development course.

With numerous exceptions allowed for additional children, “the reality is that there is no national practice of a single-child policy, rather one child per family is a goal to which the nation aspires” (Mcloughlin 2005, 308). Currently 19 provinces, accounting for 52 percent of China's population, have institutionalized policies allowing for two children (All China Women's Federation 2007).19 World Bank estimates show that population growth rates have already decreased in China, from 1.0 percent from 1990–2003 to an estimated 0.60 percent from 2003 projected through 2015 (World Bank). These lower percentages are in spite of improvements to health care that expand life expectancy and the more relaxed enforcement of the one child policy, both of which should contribute to population growth over time. Therefore with population growth rates declining, several exceptions allowing more couples to have additional children, and the gradual erosion of state control in private sphere life, the time appears to be right for widespread changes to the One Child Policy.

CONCLUSION

The limiting of couples to just one child is an outdated social and economic policy that cannot be sustained in the modern era. The original intent of the policy was to decrease population growth to allow China a chance to pursue meaningful economic reform and reach a higher level of economic development. Moreover, several unintended effects have emerged over time to increase the human capital investment placed in women and bring higher value to the birth of daughters. However these changes have not occurred on their own, and over the past 28 years the state has periodically revised the policy to reflect the needs of society. Examining the changes that have already occurred in terms of attitudes towards sex preference and family size there is reason to believe that in several areas a lasting social reform is emerging. A cohort analysis of women in Beijing has shown how economic conditions have changed couples' attitudes on large families and they have accepted these constraints by limiting themselves to one child. The current state of the economy has given urban couples incentives to follow the policy, but has also allowed them to draw on their expanding financial resources to circumvent the policy, thereby muting its effectiveness. The numerous loopholes and the regional variation in implementation have thereby made having one child more of a suggestion rather than an imperative. Thus the One Child Policy demands another round of revision. At present, the policy is simply buying the state time to develop a social security system, a task it knew would need to be addressed, but that it has not made significant steps to enact. I argue the state cannot continue to manipulate the private lives of its citizens and rely on the household to absorb the social and economic costs of reform. With most parents relying on their children for old-age security, the burden is now on the state to develop the necessary programs and infrastructure to accommodate the increasing needs of its citizens rather than using population pressures as a scapegoat for lagging growth.

Notes

1. In the early 1950s women were denied access to birth control and abortion as part of pronatalist policies designed to rebuild the population of China.

2. Family planning efforts were not designed to give women greater control over their fertility; they were a guise for population control efforts. However, until the 1970s efforts at controlling fertility were as voluntary rather than directed by the state, and

liberation, health, and the education of children, rather than national survival" (Hershatter 2007, 27).

3. Population decline was the result of family planning and the Great Leap Forward, which took a toll on fertility. In addition, campaigns like the Cultural Revolution disrupted China socially and economically, and the separation of spouses during this period (1966–1976) also may have contributed to declined fertility.

4. Scharping reports that the incentives were modified in 1991 to add paid nursing leave and remove job recruitment preferences (see Scharping 2003, 130). The job preference changes likely stem from the labor reforms that implemented contract labor and removed lifetime employment guarantees.

5. Others have argued that the unnatural sex ratios have led to contemporary problems with trafficking, kidnapping, and prostitution as young men are unable to find mates. See Attane 2002, Hesketh, Li, and Zhu 2005, and Shanor and Shanor 1995).

6. Minorities were not affected similarly by the policy to begin with.

7. National family planning health surveys have also claimed fertility was as low as 2.8 children per woman in 1979 and dropped to 1.7 children per woman in 2004 (see Hesketh, Li, and Zhu 2005 1,172).

8. Reasons for the higher son preference include: carrying on the family name, social/cultural expectations with regard to sons and care for elderly parents, marriage practices that encourage daughters to leave their familial villages to become part of her husband's family, and the expectations of boys versus girls with regard to work on the family's agricultural plots.

9. Additionally, Milwertz makes a useful linguistic distinction between "voluntary compliance" with the policy and what might be considered a conscientious acceptance. She argues that zijue should be translated an acceptance of the policy and does not mean that women willingly advocate the kind of restrictions or measures one must undertake to comply with the one child policy (190).

10. I also had very open conversations with women who had violated the one child policy, as they described both the punishments for their actions and their reasons for having additional children. Therefore although son preference is not an open topic for

discussion at the national level, these discussions readily occur more locally or privately.

11. The policy has been criticized and met with resistance by Chinese feminists, but the state's control over organization and its ability to suppress public critique have kept those perspectives marginalized.

12. The sample was obtained by a combination of snowball and quota sampling. Furthermore, marital status, children, and age factors were comparable to statistics on Beijing as a whole when measured against the Beijing Statistical Yearbook and for the National Bureau of Statistics Yearbook for China.

13. One factor to consider with the higher sex ratios reported for all of Beijing, compared to the sample, is that Beijing as an administrative unit includes a variety of suburbs and surrounding areas, which also contain rural residents and not just urban residents.

14. Only six women, all in the middle cohort, reported violating the one child policy and gave birth to additional children without permission.

15. Reports on pregnancies would give a better indication of the use of abortion and possible use of sex selection techniques, but were not acceptable for inclusion on the survey. However, in interviews this information was obtained from some of the respondents.

16. FasTracKids is identified as a junior MBA program reported in the New York Times for children as young as age four. See French 2006.

17. Retirement varies depending on the type of work one does, but forced early retirement has been a growing problem, where women retire on average five to ten years earlier than men and some as early as the age of forty-five.

18. The title “little emperor” or “little empress” is used to refer to the extreme spoiling and papering by parents and grandparents of only children.

19. China Daily also reports that new fines are being developed to punish “the rich and famous who have ignored the country's family planning policy…” (Guan 2007).

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