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REDIRECTION OF THE CHINESE FAMILY:
RAMIFICATIONS OF MINIMAL REPRODUCTION

by

H. Yuan Tien
The Ohio State University and
The Woodrow Wilson International
Center for Scholars

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Abstract: Since the early 1970s, China has made diligent efforts to end the country's "reproductive anarchy." To keep the total population within 1.2 billion by 2000, the revolutionarily unique policy of "one child per couple" has emerged as the family-size ideal. This policy is explicitly fair in both principle and procedure, but does generate problems as it reduces population growth. This paper reviews and assesses the misgivings and reservations of the critics and examines the major ramifications of the confrontation between society and the family implicit in China's population planning programs. The analysis goes beyond the commonly noted issues of old age, security, infanticide, and the "marriage squeeze" to speculate on how the policy of minimal reproduction will affect the life cycle of women. Will women be more able to contemplate and conduct their life in different terms? What will be the nature of married life when sex and reproduction become separated under this policy? The policy of minimal reproduction devalues women as mothers but simultaneously makes men unnecessary beyond their first or second impregnation. Will this not mean the ultimate emancipation of women? Answers to these questions must await the passage of time, but the behavioral and sociological impact of the one child policy or even two-child ideal should be considered with much more imagination and foresight than at present.

About the Author: Dr. H. Yuan Tien is a Professor of Sociology at The Ohio State University and a Fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, D.C. His research interests are population, demographic policy, and sociology of the family; publications include China Demographic Billionaire (1983); Population Theory in China (1980), China's Population Struggle (1973), and "Age at Marriage in the People's Republic of China," China Quarterly (1983), and many other articles in professional journals.

REDIRECTION OF THE CHINESE FAMILY: RAMIFICATIONS OF MINIMAL REPRODUCTION

Since the early 1970s, China's demographic problem has been viewed by the country's population specialists and policymakers as a matter of great urgency. This view contrasts sharply with the position taken in the 1950s. The earlier "supply-side" opinion saw each person as supplying a pair of hands--hands that, when better organized via revolution, would enhance production. This was an implicit premise of China's first large-scale social planning in the contemporary era. Agricultural collectivization and planned industrial development were major facets of this early planning. This was to be the way of solving the problems of feeding, employing, and improving the living standard of an already enormous population of more than 500 million. The scope of planning before the 1970s excluded population matters except for two brief attempts to promote fertility control in the name of infant and maternal health.

The living standard of the average Chinese has, indeed, improved since 1949. Yet, since 1971, China has become a strong advocate of population control. This change owes much to both the actual and the anticipated increases in population. In the years 1964 to 1970, the population growth averaged over 2.6 percent per year, the highest level since 1949, and the total population exceeded the 800 million mark by 1970.

As the population figures changed, so did population theories and politics. The "supply-side" perspective gave way to a "demand-side" perspective which questioned the view that the larger the population, the greater the supply of hands, and thus the greater the production. As Chen Muhua, head of the Family Planning Leading Group, put it in 1979:

In the 25 years between 1953 and 1978, consumer income went up by 180 percent, an increase of no mean magnitude. But the population grew by 66.7 percent. As a result, per capita consumption gained by only one-third. Fifty-eight percent of the annual growth in consumption funds had to be diverted to meet the needs of the newly added population, leaving only 42 percent of the increase to improve the living standard of the initial base population. Take grain as an example. The grain output in 1977 was 565.5 billion catties (1 catty = 1.1 lbs. or 1/2 kilo). Compared with the 1951 grain output of 287.4 billion catties, this represents a gain of 97 percent. However, the per capita availability of grain went up to 598 catties from 510 catties, an increase of only 88 catties or 17.3 percent . . . In our large country, with over 900 million persons, even a small rise in each individual's demand will produce a startlingly large aggregate figure, exerting great pressure on (for instance) the textile industry (when considering the question of clothing the people). The current market tension reflects not only insufficient output but also population pressure.¹

Accordingly, beginning with the Fourth Five-Year Plan (1971-1975), "China has brought population reproduction into the orbit of state economic planning."² The central premise of the government-initiated population planning policy is that, in a socialist economy, "the two kinds of production in society" (human procreation and material production) must be balanced. In theory, then, there is a limit to reproduction, and this limit is set by the macro-economic principle of proportional growth of population and production. To promote socialist development, it becomes necessary "to establish a population plan that is based on the principle of coordination between state guidance and mass voluntarism."³

This plan was to put an end to "reproductive anarchy" and to "place childbearing in each and every household on the track of the nation's unified plan."⁴ Controlling population growth became a key variable in China's efforts to speed up realization of "the four modernizations:" agriculture; industry; defense; and technology and science. Much of China's literature on population planning has, since the early 1970s, been couched in these terms. As stipulated in the 1982 National Constitution, "both husband and wife have the duty to practice family planning." Laissez-faire fertility behavior has no place in China's comprehensive planning scheme for the future.

China's population planning aims to keep the total population within 1.2 billion by the end of the century. In implementing this policy, awareness and acceptance by couples of the advantages to the society of controlled fertility are imperative. More importantly, the national population planning objectives must be translated into numerical terms that can serve to guide fertility behavior at the level of individual couples. Increasingly specific and strict reproductive norms have necessarily emerged in the continuing struggle to lower the overall fertility in China.

The Redefinition of Family Size Ideal

On New Year's Day 1983, China launched a "New Mobilization" for comprehensive planned reproduction. Qian Xinzong, Minister of the Family Planning Commission, observed at its start that, by 1982, 12.5 million "only-child" certificates had been issued throughout the country to couples pledging themselves not to have a second child. Moreover, the proportion of first births exceeded 80 percent in at least eight provinces and municipalities.⁵ All this makes explicit the unique thrust of China's population planning policy: minimal reproduction in each and every one of the new families.

This particular aspect of the redirection of the Chinese family away from its traditional "reproductive anarchy" has only recently crystallized. At the outset, in the late 1950s, discussions of fertility limitation in the interest of infant and maternal health were conspicuously non-specific with respect to the number of children that each couple should have. Emphasis was on the suitable ages at which men and women should marry. The specificity of the ideal family size, however, has increased steadily and sharply since the early 1970s.

The "wan, xi, shao" campaign that China inaugurated in 1970 employed for the first time a more definitive model of population planning with respect to individual behavior. Its immediate objectives were to promote: 1) late marriage and, thus, late childbearing--wan; 2) intervals of four years or longer between births--xi; 3) and small family size--shao. This definition of reproductive norms covered childbearing in all its important aspects--timing, spacing, and number of children.

With respect to number of children, exhortations were at first couched in terms of "one is not too few, two are good, and three are too many." Explicit here was the ideal of the two-child family. A measure of relative flexibility remained evident in this first definitive attempt to reduce national fertility through behavioral constraints at the level of individual couples. It disapproved, but did not foreclose the possibility of, three children in one family.

The ideal of the two-child family fit well with China's population goal of the early 1970s. It envisaged a reduction in the rate of natural increase to between 9 and 10 per 1000 population. Renewed access to foreign demographic literature, however, brought Chinese population specialists into contact with the notion of zero population growth (ZPG). The national population goal was revised to ZPG by the year 2000. The two-child family model no longer sufficed. Even strict adherence to it would not produce ZPG because of the coming of age of the 1962-72 baby boom cohorts. Accordingly, "an adjustment in the frequency of births" was deemed necessary. The Family Planning Leading Group resolved in 1978 that: "One birth be considered the best, two births the maximum, and a third strictly regulated." Specifically, 80 percent of annual births in urban areas and 50 percent in rural areas were to be first births.⁶ Thus began the "one child per couple" policy that has now become the centerpiece of China's population planning programs.

China no longer insists on ZPG by the year 2000 but has shifted, instead, to the numerical ceiling of 1.2 billion as a goal. This revision casts the policy in a more positive light, freeing it of the negative overtones of ZPG. Even if the actual outcome somewhat exceeds the projected maximum, the degree of accomplishment can be more easily measured and appreciated by using numbers than by expressing outcomes in terms of the distance to ZPG.

So that the total population may exceed the limit as little as possible, the specifications of the "one child per couple" ideal have become more exact. The national population goal and its accompanying behavioral norms are now:

"We will try to attain the goal that 95 percent of married couples in the cities and 90 percent in the countryside will have only one child in due course, so that the total population of China will be controlled at about 1.2 billion by the end of the century."⁷

"Among cadres, employees and workers of the state, and urban residents, except when approval is given because of special circumstances, each couple should bear only one child." "In the villages, the policy of 'one child per couple' should be extensively promoted. Those who want to have a second child on account of real difficulties may be permitted in a planned way after investigation and approval. Under no circumstances should a third birth be allowed."⁸

This further constriction of the ideal family size followed the call in 1980 that the nation's total agricultural and industrial output be quadrupled by the end of the century. Now, in contrast to the initial years of the wan, xi, shao campaign, two-child families are the exception rather than the ideal. China's population planning also jettisoned the "one is best" approach for the stronger "one is enough" ideal. For couples in China, therefore, family building now occurs in a context that has been made not only quantitatively explicit, but also most exacting.

The Demographics of Minimal Reproduction

The demographic patterns that stimulated China's population planning programs have made the country the world's first and only "demographic billionaire." This partly reflects the truly revolutionary results of post-1949 socio-economic reorganization but as also augmented anxiety about the country's future demographic well-being. An extraordinarily young population (46 percent below 15 years of age in the early 1970s) and a growing scarcity of arable land (1/4 of an acre per head in 1979) have convinced the Chinese policymakers of the need to halt additional rapid population growth. This is a significant departure from the pro-natal precept for the 1950s that "of all things in the world, people are the most precious."⁹

China's census of 1982 placed the total population at 1.008 billion. This total reflected an increase of 314 million during the 18 years since the census of 1964, amounting to an annual average growth of 2.1 percent. Between 1964 and 1970, the rate of growth averaged over 2.6 percent a year. For 1971, when China intensified population planning, the growth rate was 2.3 percent. Thus, the annual average rate of growth for 1964-1982 would have been higher than 2.1 percent without the recent policy efforts to limit fertility. In the years since 1976, the rate of natural increase has fluctuated between 1.2 and 1.5 percent a year.

Given the huge population base, at the pre-1971 rate of 2.6 percent a year, the Chinese population would reach over 1.6 billion by the end of this century. Even at the recent annual average of 1.5 percent, the population would be larger than 1.3 billion by the year 2000. Because of the baby boom of the 1960s, the potential for growth is enormous, as nearly 500 million men and women will be reaching marriageable age in the 18 years between 1982 and 2000. The number of marriages will average over 13 million a year, and the number of first births will be of a similar magnitude. Thus, even if

all couples adhered to the "one is enough" norm, by the year 2000, the population would still be some 50 million larger than the projected 1.2 billion.

The most recent birth statistics provide little cause for optimism. Of the 20.7 million births that occurred in 1981, only 46.6 percent were first births. The proportions of second and "high-parity" births were 25.4 and 28.1, respectively. In some rural areas, rates as high as 40 percent prevailed in the "high-parity" category.¹⁰ In 1978, the year before the introduction of the "one child per couple" policy, about 30 percent of the total births were in the "high-parity" category.¹¹ Unless the figure for 1978 was too low, the impact of the "one child per couple" policy during 1979-1981 seems to have reduced "high-parity" births only very slightly.

The shift to the "one is enough" injunction may have been at least partly inspired by the slow reduction in "high-parity" births. Evidently, the "one is best" recommendation was not effective. Since first births may reach 13 million a year between 1982 and 2000, should "high-parity" births continue at the 1978-81 level (i.e., about 28-30 percent of all births), the total population would be above 1.5 billion by the year 2000. Only the elimination of "high-parity" births, coupled with a larger reduction in second parity births, would enable China to keep the population to 1.2 billion by the year 2000.

Amid these obvious signs of further major population growth, the policy of minimal reproduction became imperative. The 1.2 billion limit was set in accordance with what is believed to be the nation's ability to feed, clothe, and shelter all its people and to improve living standards in the future. The minimal reproduction policy (i.e., "one is enough") is designed to prevent any one couple's infringing on the well-being of others. The penalties are the same for all non-complying couples. No social discrimination is involved; both social justice and societal welfare are taken into consideration.

There are, of course, critics who would argue whether China's population planning objectives will be served by the tightened strategy and indeed, about the theoretical foundations of the objectives themselves. But it can be said of the world's first demographic billionaire that the "one child per couple" policy seems explicitly fair in both principle and procedure.

The Repercussions of Minimal Reproduction

A case can easily be made for addressing China's population problem through an on-going policy of minimal reproduction. As noted, various demand-side calculations underscored the premises of the intensified population planning activities during the 1970s. Additional data of a similar kind accompanied the "New Mobilization" for comprehensive planned reproduction in 1983:

"By the end of the century, if we are able to control the population within 1.2 billion, our country will still have 1.24 mu (1 acre = 6 mu) arable land per head . . . On the basis of the experiences during the past 30 years, newly re-reclaimed wastelands have served, at best, to make up the losses of arable land to industrial, road, and residential uses . . . During the next 18 years, [therefore,] grain production can be raised mainly through increased yield per unit of land. But, the prospects for large increases are not good . . . If the population is controlled at 1.2 billion by the end of the century, food grain per head will reach or be close to 800 catties (1 catty = 1.1 lbs.) Should the population be still growing at the rate of natural increase for 1952-1981, food grain per head would be a little above 600 catties, [as compared to 570 catties in 1952] . . . Not only will [the country] be unable to become comparatively prosperous, but the shortage of food and fibre will also recur in some places."¹²

Obviously, very high stakes are involved in China's population planning efforts. For its advocates, the "one is enough" limit is an imperative. Under the country's current demographic circumstances, they should be given the benefit of the doubt. There is every reason to believe that the implementation of the population planning programs in general and the "one child per couple" policy in particular will increase the possibility for considerable economic gains.

On the other hand, the policy of minimal reproduction doubtless generates other problems even as it reduces demographic pressure. Many concerns have been voiced by critics in different quarters, inside and outside the country, since its inception. In assessing China's population planning measures, these reservations and reactions must be taken into account. More importantly, certain issues with wide-ranging ramifications have surfaced as the implementation efforts have intensified. These and other possible repercussions deserve close attention.

As a demographic intervention, the policy of minimal reproduction predictably aroused misgivings about China's population future. At issue is not the need to regulate population increase itself. The anxieties are centered around the economic and social instabilities that rapid and large contraction of the base of the population pyramid may create. Critics of the "one child per couple" policy contend it leads to aging of the population, shortages of labor and of males of military age, imbalanced sex ratios, and a situation of one young couple being sandwiched between 4 aged parents and one offspring (the 4-2-1 population structure).

Many of these questions about the impact of the policy of minimal reproduction can and will be answered only with the passage of time. Advocates and critics alike will find much to ponder and to argue about what the future holds. The effect on the age structure will certainly be significant and as salient as the extent to which the policy gains acceptance.¹³ An increase in life-expectancy inflates the dependency

ratio. For critics, the "4-2-1" population scene will be dominated by the spectre of "provider squeeze" with disastrous consequences for the next generation of workers.

Proponents of the "provider squeeze" hypothesis have adduced simple calculations in support of their view of the demographic outcome of the policy of minimal reproduction. Their warnings are implicitly based on the assumption that no meaningful elevation in labor productivity is likely to occur to offset the shrinkage of the labor force. Available evidence directly contradicts this stagnant outlook, particularly in view of the drive to achieve the "four modernizations."¹⁴

In the short run, China's demographic circumstances undermine the critics' case in another way. Because of the fertility booms in 1962-1972, the labor force will increase by 51 percent between 1979 and 2000. Although the number of persons aged 65 and older is expected to double, the dependency ratio would drop from 0.93 per provider in 1979 to 0.39 because of the anticipated 54 percent decrease in births under the "one is enough" policy. Thus, rather than an increase in the dependency ratio, the age structure of the population (more persons aged 15-64) should bring about a decrease in the dependency ratio by the end of the century.¹⁵ Even if China's labor productivity remained stagnant, the threat implied in the "provider squeeze" hypothesis would be hollow.

Nevertheless, the critics' case should not be summarily dismissed. From one perspective, the policy of minimal reproduction poses a clear, if not immediate, danger for one-child couples. Old age security may be deeply affected by the "one is enough" policy. As of 1982, for instance, only about one percent of men aged 65 and above and women aged 60 and above were receiving subsistence pensions from village community funds. Children are plainly valuable, as providers and the "provider squeeze" cannot but be a serious concern at the level of the family. In this context, the adverse effects of the policy of minimal reproduction cannot easily be written off in terms of a more favorable dependency ratio at the national level. Only an adequate state-provided retirement system for all can mitigate the problem of caring for the old. Presumably, the increase in labor productivity made possible by savings from reduced fertility will be large enough to provide a collective safety net. This likelihood remains an open question, but its prospects may increase with time.

Some critics in China also argue that the policy of minimal reproduction means problems in childrearing (e.g., spoiled brat syndromes) as well as inelible transgressions against the family (i.e., the disappearance of siblings, aunts, uncles, etc.). Direct evidence on the spread of child-spoiling, however, is still limited because the policy has been in force only since 1979. Studies outside of China have offered no clear-cut evidence for the critics' fear.¹⁶

But there is no disagreement on what the policy of minimal reproduction portends for the Chinese family. Full and continuous implementation will

transform the family immediately and Chinese society eventually. With the scope, thrust, and intensity of China's population planning programs, the state and the family have been caught up in a classic confrontation: the vision, and promises of the country's development plan for a better future provide the major impetus for ending laissez-faire fertility patterns in the interest of the society. With determination and community mobilization, the powers of the state can largely prevail in securing individual compliance with new norms and behavioral expectations. But the policy of minimal reproduction is unprecedented in the annals of planned social change. The clash of interests inevitably has "side-effects" with implications extending far more widely than the demographic consequences of the policy of minimal reproduction.

Such side-effects differ qualitatively from the direct and indirect results of the successful implementation of the minimal reproduction policy. They are part and parcel of the overt and covert responses on the part of those affected as implementation is being pressed.

The responses have become alarmingly evident in a variety of ways. Systematic information about their prevalence in urban and rural sectors is still lacking. The reports up to now seem to suggest that many rural parents as well as some of their urban counterparts have reacted negatively to the one child policy. Some of the responses are very simple. To avoid detection, pregnant women take leave and give birth outside the national plan and away from their usual places of residence, particularly avoiding the villages and smaller towns.

Because of son preference, some husbands, frequently with the encouragement of their mothers and other close relatives, have abused and battered their wives following the birth of girl babies; they hope to force their wives to seek divorce. These men then remarry hoping that the new bride may produce a male offspring.

Still more blatantly, couples in some places have resorted to female infanticide. Again, specific data are not available. It is not known whether the mothers, the fathers, or other relatives initiate the act most frequently. The regulations governing reproduction allow a couple with no living child to have another. This "second chance" may result in the birth of a boy. If not, the process may be repeated in some cases until the desired outcome is achieved.

This preference for male children is not simply an expression of feudalistic mentality. It is very much dictated by the requirements of still highly labor-intensive agricultural and related pursuits. Even during the communal farming under the People's Commune, more males enabled a family to earn more work points. The importance of male labor has lately been increased under the household-based agricultural responsibility system. More children, particularly more boys, enlarge the family's productive capacity and future old age security, its major concerns. When pressured in these vital areas, the family and its members are clearly quite capable of engaging in deviant or devious behavior in defense of self-interests.

Probably the most consequential impact of the policy of minimal reproduction, with ramifications both major and lasting, is the serious distortion of the sex ratio. In two decades or less, a "marriage squeeze" will be a certainty. Thus, it would be an over-simplification to say that China's population planning is not problem-free. The emerging challenges to the policymakers and population specialists are enormously complex, and the spreading costs implicit in the loss of female infant life, brutality towards women, etc., immensely taxing.

Beyond the Repercussions

The repercussions of the policy of minimal reproduction are still unfolding. Some of these raise long term concerns while others are immediately disquieting. But, are the repercussions sufficient to render a negative verdict inevitable on the policy of minimal reproduction?

The question is more easily raised than answered. The ultimate test for success or failure of any policy lies in whether or not the planned redirection redresses the circumstances engendering the need for it in the first place.

It should be recalled that, for more than two decades following its establishment in 1949, the People's Republic of China was continually chided for its lopsided supply-side demographics. Belatedly, the negative pay-offs of this population brinkmanship persuaded the policymakers to admit to error and to proclaim family planning a duty for all citizens.¹⁷ China has intensified population planning activities; however, the critics seem to have developed a case of myopia. They now pay little attention to prospective returns from planned population growth. Instead, they have become preoccupied with the repercussions of the country's population planning efforts in general and of the policy of minimal reproduction in particular.

When one looks at China's population numbers and growth potential--at the huge multiplication in recent decades of persons to be fed and employed and at the coming of age of bigger cohorts of young men and women in the near future--one immediately sees the need for strong demographic intervention. This heavy prescription presumably serves both to make up for lost time and to "buy" time for the country to improve the quality of life. Under the circumstances, the policy of minimal reproduction is the fairest way of lifting the living standard of all. Should it not be appraised as such and given the benefit of the doubt in that it may well serve to avert hardship for the next generation who will have to suffer from a lack of immediate demographic discipline?

With condoning the deviant and devious behavior that may result from the minimal reproduction policy, we must still look beyond the evident and projected repercussions. The truth is that there are not problem- or cost-free social changes, planned or otherwise. How the inconveniences and injustices are to be mitigated can only be surmised. As noted, some couples

will be permitted to have a second child when special circumstances justify it (e.g., a female first child). Also, a not insignificant number of couples will, without permission, manage to have a second birth. The issues of a "marriage squeeze" and the family's future would then become less poignant if not altogether moot. Actual behavior will carry a kind of "corrective" to the bleak picture based on the 100% realization of the one child policy.

On the other hand, there remains a need for the policymakers and other concerned specialists to look beyond the currently obvious repercussions because social change solves problems and generates others at the same stroke. While various side-effects and long-term consequences have been identified, additional and more detailed repercussions cannot be ruled out.

Consider the following logical developments. The current efforts to end "reproductive anarchy" and bring about planned growth, demands that the reproductive function of the family be greatly curtailed.

The policy of minimal reproduction thus creates new circumstances for marriage. Women will be able to fulfill the task of childbearing and childrearing in the relatively short span of time. What will women be doing after completing the minimal reproduction? With time on their hands, will women be more able to contemplate and conduct their life in different terms?

Furthermore, what will be the nature of married life? Love and romance is not part of traditional marriage in China. Sex is, in theory and in practice, synonymous with reproduction, but the policy of minimal reproduction will end this association. Once sex and reproduction are separated, will there emerge the view that sex can be for pleasure only? If so, will women be more able to emphasize love and romance in their relationships with men?

Parenthetically, the lack of contraceptive sophistication among the people has given sterilization and abortion a special place in China's population planning programs. Sterilizations of women with two or more children have been particularly numerous. Between 1971 and 1977, nearly 31 million sterilizations were performed in China, of which 58 percent were tubectomies. During the first month of the "New Mobilization" at the beginning of 1983, female and male sterilizations totalled 3.59 million. The drive calls for still wider promotion of sterilization among couples with two or more children who are "still in their highly fecund period."¹⁸

The median age at first marriage for women is probably about 21-22. First birth usually occurs within a year. Thus, even if the policy of minimal reproduction is not universally enforced, women will have borne two children by age 25 or so. Subsequent sterilization would free women from the risk of pregnancy early in life. What will this, coupled with the separation of sex from the function of reproduction, mean for sexual behavior generally?

Apart from the rapidly increasing sterilizations, the diffusion of contraceptive culture in general has accelerated under China's population planning programs. Population textbooks including contraceptive and physiological information are being used in many middle schools. Will this have additional influence on sexual behavior?

Thus, there is every reason to look beyond the repercussions already engendered by the minimal reproduction policy. With the separation of sex from reproduction, the effective liberation of women from childbearing and from the risk of pregnancy through sterilization, and the spread of contraceptive culture among the young, other repercussions seem to lie just below the surface. In all likelihood, divorce as well as pre- and extra-marital liaisons will become more frequent. With its prescribed minimal reproductive function, the transformation of the traditional family may well be toward matriarchy. The policy of minimal reproduction devalues women as mothers, but simultaneously makes men unnecessary beyond the first or second impregnation. Will this mean the ultimate emancipation of women?

Let it be said, therefore, that both advocates and critics of China's population planning programs ought not to debate in simple cost-benefit terms. The behavioral and sociological impact of the implementation of population policies will have to be considered with much more imagination and foresight.

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