China's One-Child Policy, a Policy without a Future

Pitfalls of the "Common Good" Argument and the Authoritarian Model

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Abstract: The Chinese Communist Party government has been forcefully promoting its *jihua shengyu* (planned fertility) program, known as the "one-child policy," for more than three decades. A distinctive authoritarian model of population governance has been developed. A pertinent question to be asked is whether China's one-child policy and the authoritarian model of population governance have a future. The answer must be no; they do not. Although there are many demographic, economic, and social rationales for terminating the one-child policy, the most fundamental reason for opposing its continuation is drawn from ethics. The key ethical rationale offered for the policy is that it promotes the common social good, not only for China and the Chinese people but for the whole human family. The major irony associated with this apparently convincing justification is that, although designed to improve living standards and help relieve poverty and underdevelopment, the one-child policy and the application of the authoritarian model have instead caused massive suffering to Chinese people, especially women, and made them victims of state violence. A lesson from China—one learned at the cost of individual and social suffering on an enormous scale—is that an essential prerequisite for the pursuit of the common good is the creation of adequate constraints on state power.

Keywords: one-child policy; Chinese authoritarian model; common good; ethics of population control; state violence; social engineering

Introduction

In a period that has witnessed the decline of the planned economy and the relaxation of state controls over society, the Chinese Communist Party government has been forcefully promoting its *jihua shengyu* (planned fertility) program, widely known as the "one-child policy," for more than three decades. The most ambitious and intrusive population control program ever undertaken in human history constitutes an archetype of the massive projects of social engineering rolled out by the Chinese state. Its far-reaching consequences include the prevention of an estimated 200 million births (the official claim is more than 300 million), a deficit of more than 40 million female babies (partly the result of other factors), and a radically altered population structure. Its extraordinary demographic success has been achieved at extraordinary human and social cost. This victory—if it *is* a

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victory—is a Pyrrhic one, although compared to the military endeavor undertaken by the ancient Greek king who has given his name to the expression, the number of people affected by the modern demographic campaign is astronomical—more than 1.3 billion.

Does China's one-child policy, along with the authoritarian model of population governance, have a future?

The answer given by the Chinese authorities appears to be that, although there are plans to modify the policy, they have no intention of terminating it. Headed by Xi Jinping, China's new leaders recently held the Third Plenary Session of the Eighteenth Communist Party of China Central Committee on November 9–12, 2013. The meeting endorsed a document entitled "Decision on Major Issues Concerning Comprehensively Deepening Reforms," which outlined a number of economic, social, legal, cultural, and administrative "reforms" that the party government would like to pursue over the next decade. As publicized in the Western mass media,[1] one of the sixty "reforms" on the agenda concerns relaxing the one-child policy to allow couples in which either the husband or the wife is a single child to have two children. Nevertheless, it is far from clear when and how the promised modification will be implemented in practice. And the government does not plan to further relax current restrictions to include couples in which neither partner is a single child.[2] It seems that there is still a long way to go before the policy is shelved.[3] More importantly, what has *not* been mentioned in media reports, such as those in the *Guardian* and the *New York Times*, is that the newly released document has stressed that China will still "adhere to *jihua shengyu* as a fundamental and national policy."[4] In other words, despite some modifications, China's state-directed approach to reproductive and population issues is set to continue.

My answer to the question is no; they do not have a future. Although there are many demographic, economic, and social reasons for ending the one-child policy, the most fundamental reason for opposing its continuation is drawn from ethics. The fostering of the common social good has been used as the most significant justification for the one-child policy and for the regime's authoritarian approach to social policy in general. However, this apparently plausible and even compelling justification is undermined by a number of serious abuses and shortcomings. Ironically, although designed to relieve poverty and improve the living standards of Chinese, the implementation of China's one-child policy has led to the imposition of enormous suffering and violence on Chinese people.

The Authoritarian Model of Population Governance: Planned Fertility and the One-Child Policy

Shortly after Mao Zedong's death in 1976, the Chinese party government led by Deng Xiaoping initiated a series of social polices that have profoundly changed the shape of Chinese society and have had effects on a global scale. The twin centerpieces of China's reform agenda (*gaige kaifang*, or "reform and openness") have been dubbed *jingji jiangshe* (economic development) and *jihua shengyu*, respectively. Since the late 1970s, the economic system characterized by rigid planning and control by the central government has increasingly given way to pressure for a market economy. Consequently, China has experienced an unparalleled economic rise and today is the second-largest economy in the world.

In addition, compared to Mao's regime, contemporary Chinese people enjoy an unimaginable degree of freedom in their social and political lives. In the field of population and human reproduction, however, the relatively laissez-faire attitudes prevalent in Mao's time have been replaced by a state-planned and state-controlled regime.

Jihua shengyu literally means "planned fertility" or "planned reproduction" and is parallel to *jihua jingji* (planned economy). It has been translated into English as "birth planning," "birth control," or "planned fertility." The official English rendering of the term in Chinese government documents is "family planning," a political euphemism with Orwellian overtones. However the name is rendered in English, China's birth-planning program follows the fundamental logic of the communist revolution and the control of society by the party government. It is an extension of the state-planned economy, as the original Chinese phrase reveals. Its extensive and intrusive character is unprecedented in human history.

In official pronouncements, family planning has been referred to as a "long-term," "fundamental," and "strategic" national policy ever since China's state birth control program was launched in the late 1970s. The Chinese program has been popularly referred to as the "one-child-per-couple" policy or the "one-child policy," phrases that have also been widely used in official and semiofficial Chinese documents. However, the term "one-child policy" is misleading in a number of ways, as China has never carried out a *one-child* policy as a national and universal rule. The policy is flexible in its application and allows a number of structural exceptions according to residence, employment, and ethnicity. For instance, the one-child policy as practiced in urban China has never been enforced among minority ethnic groups, including Tibetans, although these groups are encouraged to practice family planning. Furthermore, couples can have additional children, whatever their residential status, on exaction of fines or other penalties—including losing one's job. This phenomenon has become increasingly widespread as incomes rise.

From the outset, the program has had two essential aims: to control the quantity of the population and to improve or enhance the quality of the population. The ultimate goal has been *shaosheng yousheng* (fewer but healthier births). Since the 1990s, an increasing emphasis has been given to the goal of *yousheng youyu* (literally, "superior birth and superior child raising"), including efforts to reduce birth defects. This dimension of China's birth control program, focused on enhancing population *quality*, is probably best expressed in the 1994 Law on Maternal and Infant Healthcare. The original title of the law was *Yousheng Fa* (the Eugenic Law); it was changed partly in response to international criticism. However, the law has produced little debate in mainland China and is certainly less controversial than the one-child policy.

As a prime example of demographic and social engineering, the establishment and development of the Chinese birth control program reflects a complex mix of social, cultural, political, and economic factors and strategic goals. One of these factors was the widespread concern in the international community over a global population explosion, especially in Western countries, in the 1960s and 1970s. Underlying the program are a number of ideological premises that have dominated twentieth-century China, including nationalism and statism, scientism, developmentalism, social Darwinism, and Malthusianism. The chief architects of China's one-child policy were not population experts or social scientists but rather a group

of natural scientists and engineers led by Song Jian, a leading researcher in cybernetics and control theory who had originally been trained in Moscow in mechanics and engineering.[5]

As the result of ongoing pressure, mostly from public opinion within China but partly from the international community, China's birth control program has been constantly subject to change. For instance, as early as the 1980s, following resistance from rural people, the "ideal" norm of one child was modified to allow two, especially when a couple's first child was a girl. Since the 2000s, it has been permissible for an urban couple to have a second child, provided that both parents are single children. Although unwilling to terminate the policy, and especially to abandon the state-planned authoritarian approach, China's new leadership has recently announced a further loosening of the rules.

Since the late 2000s, more and more critical voices have been emerging from the academic world[6] and, more significantly, from the public domain. Among them is prominent writer Mo Yan, whose realistic novel *Wa* (*Frog*) deals with the pain and loss involved in implementing family planning in rural areas. The novel was awarded one of China's top literary prizes before going on to win the Nobel Prize in 2012.[7] Another influential critique has been offered by Yi Fuxian, a Chinese-American medical scientist. Based on a series of articles he published on the Internet, his book *A Big Country in an Empty Nest* was first published in Hong Kong but banned in mainland China until 2012.[8]

The "Common Good" Thesis and the Fundamental Duty to Planned Fertility

In the official Chinese discourse, the ethical rationale of the planned fertility program appeals to the common social good, arguing that social and economic conditions in China and ordinary people's living standards can never be improved significantly if the nation's rapid growth in population continues unchecked. The issues at stake have been presented in terms of stark alternatives: a rigorous, state-directed population control program versus continuing poverty and social and economic underdevelopment. In language that reeks of state paternalism, the Chinese authorities have consistently claimed that China's family-planning measures will benefit individuals and families, promote the greatest happiness for the greatest number of Chinese people, and even advance the well-being of humankind.

This rationale has been propagated in numerous official pronouncements. Among them are two key documents—one addressed primarily to a domestic audience and the other to the international community—that set out the common good justification for the state-planned fertility program, and the one-child policy in particular. The first was the 1980 "Open Letter of the CCP Central Committee to the General Membership of the Communist Party and the Membership of the Communist Youth League on the Problem of Controlling Population Growth in Our Country," one of the initial announcements of the one-child-per-couple policy. It asserted that, with the rapid growth in its population, China would "encounter increasingly severe problems in such areas as feeding the entire people, clothing them, housing them, providing adequate transportation, education, public health care, and employment for our people. This makes it difficult for the country as a whole to transform its state of poverty and backwardness over a short

time." Moreover, overpopulation would "increase excessively the consumption of natural resources, such as energy resources, water, and forests, . . . aggravate the pollution of the environment and severely worsen the conditions for production and the people's living environment, making it difficult to improve these in the long run." Thus, the necessity of every couple having no more than one child was proclaimed as "the most effective way" of solving these massive problems.[9]

The second official document at issue here was the State Council's 1995 white paper entitled "Family Planning in China." Released on the eve of the Fourth World Congress on Women held in Beijing, it was an official response to criticism from the international community and a systematic defense of China's birth control program. It named overpopulation as "the key factor and primary problem restricting China's economic and social development." Population control was thus identified as the key to national development. According to the white paper, family planning is "a social undertaking that benefits the people" in a number of ways.[10] These (already achieved) benefits were expressed as China's having (1) effectively checked the trend of overrapid population growth; (2) promoted a change in thinking regarding marriage, birth, and the family; (3) created favorable conditions for the development of China's economy and an improvement in living standards; (4) enhanced the quality of the Chinese population in terms of education and health as well as the overall development of the people; (5) further liberated the productive potential of the female workforce and helped improve the status of women; and (6) accelerated the process of eradicating poverty in rural China.

The benefits of China's family-planning program were further extended to the whole human family. As the document's preface put it, "For a populous developing country like China the challenge posed by the population question not only has a bearing on the survival and development of the Chinese nation but also affects the stability and prosperity of all human society." The first and last sentences of the document read: "Excessive population growth is an extremely serious problem facing the contemporary world. . . . China, as always, will continue to . . . *make positive contributions to stabilizing world population and ensuring a happier future for mankind*" (emphasis added).[11]

Although the white paper acknowledged reproductive rights, it stressed that such rights are never absolute. "When there is conflict between social needs and individual interests, a means has to be sought to mediate it. . . . As China has a large population, the Chinese government has to limit the number of births of its citizens."[12]

For the Chinese authorities, the logic of population control appears unchallengeable. Faced with limited natural resources, overpopulation and rapid population growth must be contained to avoid a permanent struggle with hunger and poverty. The Chinese population, characterized as large in quantity and low in "quality," is the major obstacle to the nation's economic and social development. China thus has to formulate and implement a vigorous population policy simply for its people to survive and to create the conditions for them to live better lives.

Accordingly, there is a moral as well as a legal duty for every couple to practice family planning. This reproductive responsibility has been presented as fundamental. In fact, it has long been mandated in Chinese laws. As early as 1980, the Fifth National People's Congress passed a revised marriage law that obligated citizens to practice family planning. In 1982, the same body passed a constitution

that includes a directive that "both the husband and the wife have an obligation to practice family planning." These measures were reinforced by the Law on Population and Family Planning (2001, Article 17).

In China, the general public's reaction to the one-child policy contains a sharp paradox: the coexistence of widespread acceptance with continuous resistance. Contrary to the common wisdom in the West, and supporting official Chinese claims, the policy has been widely and "conscientiously" accepted as necessary by Chinese citizens, notably urban women.[13] Although this acceptance by Chinese people is a result of heavy state propaganda and the lack of adequate public debate, acceptance of and support for the policy have been overwhelming. One way of understanding the reasoning behind this is to compare the Chinese attitude to Westerners' views on taxation, in which a general acceptance is tempered by rumblings of discontent.[14] In other words, the general public has been "well educated" (to use the official Chinese term) or "brainwashed" (in the eyes of critics) to believe that the one-child policy is essential for the common good of the nation.

The common good has long served as the basis on which Chinese ethicists have theorized the moral necessity of population control and citizens' fundamental duty to practice family planning. In a pioneering Chinese work on the ethics of population control, it has been systematically argued that a core principle of a socialist ethics of population is that "every couple, each family, ought to consider it *a sacred duty* to provide society with an appropriate size of population and a good quality of population."[15] More than a decade ago, seeking to explore the ethical issues related to coerced abortion in the context of population control, I myself had recourse to the common good argument in order to offer an ethical justification for the practice. I concluded that, in achieving the common good, forced abortion could be seen as a moral tragedy or a genuine ethical dilemma rather than the irredeemable moral evil it appears at first glance.[16]

Two Cases of Coerced Abortion

In June 2012, a case of forced abortion—coerced induced birth, to be accurate—captured the attention of the Chinese media, especially the Internet community. It occurred in Ankang (whose name literally translates as "peace and health"), a township in Shaanxi Province in northwest China. Feng Jianmei, a 23-year-old woman, had been pregnant for seven months. As she had already had one child, the couple would have had to pay a fine of 40,000 Chinese dollars (nearly USD 6,600) if they wanted a second child. As the family was unable and unwilling to pay the fine for violating the one-child policy, Feng was "escorted" to the hospital by local family-planning cadres. The following day she had a stillborn baby girl. A few days later, one of Feng's relatives posted on the Internet some disturbing photographs of a suffering, helpless young mother together with her dead and bloody baby daughter on a hospital bed. Feng's highly publicized case created such an outcry that the provincial family-planning authorities punished the local officials involved by imposing administrative sanctions.[17]

This case was exceptional in many ways. First, the Internet played an essential role in publicizing it. Second, the power of the graphic images associated with it contributed greatly to the nationwide public outrage that ensued. Third, despite its leniency, the punishment meted out to the officials responsible was almost

unprecedented. In more than three decades, very few local family-planning cadres had been punished for actions of a similar kind.

The second case, a far more common occurrence, was one I personally encountered during fieldwork conducted in 1997 for my Ph.D. thesis on Chinese views and experience of abortion. Li Xiaohua (a pseudonym) was required to have an abortion or induced birth when she was five months pregnant. She had been married for about a year. Local government policy in her area required that a married woman be at least 23 and a half years of age before she could obtain a permit allowing her to give birth. Because she was one year younger than the required age, Li was denied the necessary permission. Although her husband was more than 30 years old, the family-planning official she dealt with recognized only the age of the mother. The couple really wanted the child and tried their utmost to obtain a birth permit; they failed because, in their case, the state family-planning policy was implemented very strictly. As a result, Li had no choice but to present herself at an abortion clinic. When asked how she felt about the abortion, tears welled up in her eyes. Between sobs, Li told me:

> How could I feel? How do you think I felt? It'd be better if I had no feelings at all. No words can describe what I've gone through. First, drugs were injected into my womb to kill the child, to make it dead. Then I had to wait for the fetus to descend. When it came down, I asked the doctor to show me the aborted baby. How brutal this is! I felt extremely sad. The baby is a part of my bone and flesh (*gurou*). But I couldn't do anything to protect my baby, my child. Only a few months later and the baby would have been born and become a child. Shouldn't this be regarded as murder (*mousha*)?[18]

Though her voice was extremely soft and barely audible when posing this question, it was an authentic cri de coeur—a heartfelt cry.

Yet despite all her suffering, Li Xiaohua still supported the national family-planning program—because she accepted population control as an essential component of the common good:

> Our country must carry out family planning. Our nation has so many people. It's crowded everywhere. My husband and I had no intention of having more than one child. The "one-child" policy is necessary for our country. It's also good for women. But should the policy be carried out so rigorously? In my case, I'm just one year younger than the required age. Why didn't they grant me a birth permit?[19]

In saying this, her voice, though barely audible, betrayed her anger and frustration. Her eyes and face exposed her helplessness and suffering.

Shortly after the publication of my 1999 paper, which attempted to rationalize the practice of coerced abortion through recourse to the common good argument, I changed my views on the subject. This shift in ethical stance was not so much a result of sophisticated intellectual reasoning but rather a response to the case of Li Xiaohua and her whispered cri de coeur, along with the many other heartbreaking personal stories that I was privileged to listen to and document in my first English-language book, *Behind the Silence: Chinese Voices on Abortion* (2005). Now, more than 16 years later, the questions posed by Li Xiaohua still echo in my

ears, even though they were not directed to me. I can still clearly see the helpless, frustrated, and angry expression on her pale face.

Some might argue that the suffering undergone by Li Xiaohua and Feng Jianmei is a necessary sacrifice to help achieve the nation's demographic goals and the presumed common social good this would make possible. If so, I would have to be on the side of the victims, however grand the "common good" argument appears to be. Opposing the logic of justifying the means by the end, Mencius (372–289 BCE), a Confucian sage regarded as second only to Confucius himself, formulated a fundamental principle of Confucian deontological ethics: "One ought not to pursue it if one has to commit one single act of unrighteousness and kill one single innocent person in order even to win the whole world."[20] As far as Confucian political philosophy is concerned, Mencius articulated the influential principle of *minweigui* (the paramount importance of the people): "The people are of supreme importance; the country and state come next; last comes the ruler."[21] Although far removed in time and place, Mencius's ideas were echoed and systematically theorized in Kant's ethical thought, particularly his formulation of the categorical imperative or moral law regarding humanity as the end, that is, treating persons—oneself or others—never as a means only but always as an end in itself.

The Massive Suffering Caused by the One-Child Policy

The two cases discussed previously were unfortunate, to say the least. What is more unfortunate is that they are far from isolated instances. In the process of carrying out the state's ambitious and intrusive national birth control policy, numerous Chinese people, especially women, have had to endure suffering on a massive scale.[22]

A group of Chinese scholars led by the two leading Chinese experts in population studies, Zhu Chuzhu and Li Shuzhuo, have used the term "double effects" to encapsulate the consequences of the family-planning program for women. They have acknowledged a number of benefits emphasized by the government, including a substantial reduction in the risks related to frequent pregnancies and childbearing and in the burden associated with housework; the improved dissemination of reproductive health information and knowledge; and the significant improvement in accessibility to effective contraceptives, safe abortions, and related medical services. As this group of scholars has pointed out, these factors have greatly contributed to helping Chinese women "become masters of their lives," and of their reproductive lives in particular. At the same time, they have also documented grave negative impacts on women undergoing reproductive interventions, including the side effects of contraceptive use, mental and physical problems caused by the uninformed selection of contraceptive methods, conflict between a couple's wishes and the state's population goals, and the permanent distress entailed in the failure to produce a male child.[23]

American anthropologist and China scholar Susan Greenhalgh and political scientist Edwin Winckler have succinctly expressed the massive suffering caused to Chinese women by the one-child policy: "By world-historical standards, China's birth control program has been exceptional in its hostility to women. It is women's bodies that have been made to bear the burden of contraception and abortion, and women's private and public selves that have been diminished by the policy's

prescriptions and social sequelae."[24] They have further pointed to the balance of gains and losses incurred: "The post-Mao birth project helped to create a hard-edged, competitive Chinese modernity in which the new generation of 'quality,' cosmopolitan, and consumerist singletons exists in a large cultural sea of *peasant suffering and female sacrifice*."[25] Extraordinarily heavy costs have been exacted by China's birth control program:

> Even without precise measurement, it is clear that the human and bodily costs of rapid, essentially coerced fertility decline have been enormous, and unevenly distributed in such a way that it has been the most powerless members of Chinese society—rural women, infant girls, and the unborn—who have endured the most. . . . The extent of social suffering and the scale of the costs incurred in the name of demographic modernization is staggering. Even the birth program's most vociferous Western critics have not added these up. Not only is the *scale* of the human problem imposed on China's people greater than has been appreciated—in China or the West—but the *scope* of those problems is broader as well.[26]

The Circle of Violence: State Violence and Violent Resistance from Below

Since the early twentieth century, Chinese people have suffered greatly, despite remarkable progress in many areas of sociocultural life. The major episodes of massive violence and suffering that wracked China over the past century read like a history of the nation: the Boxer Rising of 1898–1901, which led to the looting of Beijing by an international army and a punitive protocol concluded with eleven foreign powers; Japan's invasion in 1931 and the eight-year war against the Japanese (1937–45) that engulfed the entire nation; the three-year civil war between the nationalist government and the communist insurgents (1947–9), in which more Chinese died than in the anti-Japanese war; the war with the United States (fighting on behalf of the UN) in Korea in 1950–3; the 1957 Anti-Rightist Campaign, led by Mao, that banished millions of intellectuals to the countryside and silenced the whole nation; the social policy that produced the Great Leap Forward, which in turn created a man-made famine in 1958–60, the biggest famine in human history, which claimed between 20 and 40 million lives; and the notorious Cultural Revolution of 1966–76. We may also consider the violent suppression of peacefully protesting students and civilians throughout the century, from the May Fourth Movement in 1919 to the Tiananmen Square Massacre in 1989. States—foreign and domestic—have been at the root of this quantum of violence and suffering visited on the Chinese people.[27]

Coercion and violence have also been an inherent part of the family-planning program. Not surprisingly, the Chinese authorities have always denied this. For the authorities, the program is "guided" by the policies of the central government and participated in "voluntarily" by millions of Chinese people. As for those cases in which coercion and violence have been employed, it is not the policy but local cadres who are responsible. However, the truth is that local officials are so pressured by the demands of the national policy that they feel they have no choice but to resort to coercion and physical violence.

China's propaganda is all-pervasive. One commonly used mechanism is to plaster the cities and the countryside with political slogans. Most of those relating

to birth control are about the necessity for family planning and its presumed benefits for individuals, families, the country, and humankind. In rural areas where the state's birth control policy has met persistent resistance, slogans were disseminated that were extremely threatening and even murderous in their intent. In early 2012, the National Commission of Family Planning carried out a mission with the title Xilian Gongcheng (the Project for Washing the Face) to rid the countryside of the most callous slogans. Here is a selection of the family-planning slogans posted in some villages:

> *Ningtian shizuo fen, butian yige ren* (better to add ten tombs than another person).
> *Ningke xueliu chenghe, buzhun kaosheng yige* (better to have a river of blood than a birth without a permit).
> *Ningke jiapo, buke guowang* (better to break up families than ruin the country).
> *Shuibu shixing jihua shengyu, jiu jiaota jiapo renwang* (those who fail to practice family planning are doomed to have a broken family and a dead person).
> *Nengyin de yin chulai, nengliu de liu chulai, jianjue buneng shengxialai* (those who *should* have an induced birth *must* have an induced birth; those who *should* have an abortion *must* have an abortion; what absolutely *cannot* happen is giving birth).
> *Gaizha buzha, fangdao wuta; gailiu buliu, pafang qiangniu* (if those who should be sterilized have not been sterilized, their houses be destroyed; if those who should have abortions fail to do so, their houses and water buffalos will be confiscated). [28]

Little wonder that the forced terminations suffered by Feng Jianmei and Li Xiaohua, along with countless others, happened so readily.

Large numbers of individuals, especially in China's vast rural hinterland, have engaged at great personal risk in persistent and even violent resistance to the state's population policy using strategies ranging from direct confrontation to evasion and accommodation.[29] Especially in the 1980s and 1990s, in some villages frustrated and angry peasants resorted to physical violence to resist the population control policy. There were many instances in which family-planning cadres and medical professionals, particularly female cadres and doctors or nurses, were assaulted both verbally and physically and in extreme cases murdered. Thus, not only the subjects of the birth control policy but also its executors have become victims of violence.

The key to breaking this circle of violence is to put an end to state violence, or, as a Chinese saying puts it, to take away the firewood from under the cauldron. By contrast, attempting to address violent popular resistance through the further use of coercive state force would be like pouring fuel on the flames.

Other Large-Scale Negative Demographic and Social Consequences

As is more and more widely acknowledged, China's birth control program has—directly and indirectly—produced a series of unintended negative demographic and social consequences for Chinese society on a very large scale, although these consequences have hitherto been seriously underestimated. They include a radically altered population structure, looming labor shortages, a rapidly aging population, and what has been called the "4-2-1 problem" (in which a single child is

responsible for caring for two parents and four grandparents). The well-being of single children (nicknamed "little emperors") has long been a concern. A recent qualitative study that compares individuals born just before and just after the introduction of the one-child policy in 1979 confirms that people growing up as single children are "significantly less trusting, less trustworthy, more risk-averse, less competitive, more pessimistic, and less conscientious."[30]

One consequence of the policy highly relevant to bioethics is the fact that, due to the widespread practice of sex-selective abortion, 30–40 million (or even more) females are missing from the population. The official position is that there is no necessary and causal relationship between the national birth control policy and the country's unbalanced sex ratio. However, at the very least the phenomenon of millions of missing girls has been demonstrably exacerbated by China's population control program. In particular, the policy that allows a couple a second child if the first is a girl has a direct relationship to the sex ratio at birth. Although both prenatal sex diagnosis and sex-selective abortion are proscribed by a raft of regulations and laws, this comprehensive effort at prohibition has been ineffective. All this raises serious questions about the ethical soundness of coercive state intervention in sex-selective terminations.[31]

The Nature of the Population Problem and the Effectiveness of the One-Child Policy

From an ideological perspective, China's birth control program is founded on two beliefs or arguments, one demographic and the other ethical. So far I have focused on the problems associated with the ethical rationale, the common good thesis. If we are to take seriously the massive suffering caused by the one-child policy, and the violence used to implement it, we are compelled to conclude that it is not worth pursuing, even if China's radical population control program helps achieve some important goals related to the common good. In other words, the one-child policy is ethically unjustifiable, even if it is demographically necessary.

The demographic argument contains two major assumptions. First, China, along with the rest of the world, is facing a population explosion and the serious consequences that flow from it. Second, a dramatic state-directed population control program is the only way to contain this impending catastrophe. If these demographic assumptions are correct, one may insist that at least some (if not all) of the extraordinary human and social costs involved in implementing the one-child policy are still justifiable.

However, serious questions need to be raised about the demographic necessity argument, including the nature of the problem of overpopulation and the effectiveness of the one-child policy in solving it. In the official discourse, overpopulation or rapid population growth has been presented as the *principal* problem faced by China. But is this really the case? Has the much-touted overpopulation question been used by the party government as a smokescreen for the political and social problems resulting from its failures of governance? Does the state birth control program really promote the common good of the Chinese people, or does it rather serve the ultimate goal of the party government—that is, maintaining and enforcing the existing power structure? Just as in medicine a misdiagnosis prevents the detection of the patient's real problem and thus prevents effective treatment,

defining population growth as the primary problem facing Chinese society hinders identification of the nation's genuine political and social problems.

According to official Chinese pronouncements, it is the national birth-planning program that has brought "excessive" population growth under "effective control." But this claim is questionable, if not totally wrong. A cross-country study of the relationship between fertility decline and national population control policies in India and China concludes that governmental mandates were not a major determining factor.[32] Through comparing the Chinese birth control program with other socioeconomic factors, a new meticulous, demographical analysis concludes that the family-planning policies have played only a minor role in China's transition to a low fertility rate.[33] Indeed, fertility rates have been in steady decline in China since the late 1960s, long before the draconian one-child policy was introduced. It is a commonly observed phenomenon worldwide that fertility rates decline whenever and wherever the economy is booming and women's education and employment opportunities are improved. As the saying goes, "development is the most effective contraceptive." In other words, the desired goal—low fertility rates—could have been achieved in any case, but in an ethically sound and humane way.

Whereas the subject is demographically debatable, the ethical implications are overwhelming. If the one-child policy has been basically ineffective, the massive suffering and violence endured by generations of Chinese people become completely pointless: what is morally repugnant can also be shown to be pragmatically unnecessary.

Chinese Culture and Reproductive Rights

One might be forgiven for thinking that the authoritarian mode of governance and the belief in the primacy of the common good are deeply rooted in Chinese cultural heritage and thus form an irresistible destiny for China. This view, in my opinion, is derived from a popular misconception of traditional Chinese culture, or perhaps a modern prejudice against it. The response to the nation's contemporary birth control program offered by traditional Chinese moral and political philosophy, in particular Confucianism and Daoism, is a question for further study. Nevertheless, a few remarks can be passed on here.

As the official discourse has consistently acknowledged (e.g., the 1995 white paper cited previously), the one-child policy violates traditional Chinese norms regarding reproduction and the family. More importantly, the moral and political ideals of classical Daoism and Confucianism present a serious challenge to the ethical soundness of a state-centered and coercive approach to birth planning. Although Confucianism at times endorses extensive government intervention in citizens' lives, it also stresses that the state should avoid punishment and coercion as much as possible and must ensure that such measures are truly beneficial to society. To quote Confucius's own words: "Govern the people by regulations, keep order among them by chastisements, and they will stay out of trouble but lose all self-respect. Govern them by moral force, keep order among them by ritual, and they will keep their self-respect and reform themselves."[34] This cardinal political ideal of *renzheng* (a mode of governance built on humanity or humaneness) is even more relevant to China today than it was two and a half millennia ago. Because the contemporary Chinese state is far more powerful than the Chinese kingdoms of

Confucius's own times, the harmful effects of misgovernance and the abuse of power are magnified in proportion.

Contrary to the official Chinese discourse, which emphasizes the individual's reproductive duty to limit family size for the sake of the common social good, the mainstream ethical norm of the international community has placed the focus on reproductive liberty and individual rights. One widely circulated counterargument against reproductive rights and human rights in general is ostensibly based on acknowledging and respecting the cultural differences between Western and non-Western societies. Elsewhere, I have exposed the intellectual flaws and political pitfalls inherent in the apparently plausible cultural differences thesis and have argued for the cultural compatibility of human rights with Chinese culture as well as the applicability of universal ethical values in the Chinese context.[35] The point I want to make here is that, even if human rights principles were culturally incompatible with Chinese sociopolitical traditions, they are still ethically applicable to China insofar as they offer a moral counterweight to the state's ethically unjustifiable interventions into human reproduction. The doctrine of reproductive rights places the burden of proof on the state to show that state intervention, especially where it involves coercive or punitive measures, must genuinely serve the common good of individuals and society and not the interests of the state, whether patent or latent.

Conclusions

To a large extent, China's one-child policy is a part of the sweeping global movement of the imposition of population control. Based on a "fatal misconception," the global population control campaign has caused untold horrors and suffering especially for vulnerable women and children—not to mention numerous bitter ironies.[36] In this article I have attempted to demonstrate a series of pitfalls that underlie the Chinese authoritarian model of population governance and the common good justification for the one-child policy. The greatest irony of all is that, while originally designed to improve living standards and help relieve poverty and underdevelopment, the one-child policy has inflicted massive suffering and state-directed violence on Chinese people, especially women.

As social thinkers have long observed, the modern state has evolved into the sole institution with the legitimacy to use force, physical and otherwise. According to Marxism, the state is founded on force, a violent machine harnessed by the ruling class for suppressing and exploiting the ruled classes. Although his social thought was often opposed to the ideas of Karl Marx, Max Weber agreed completely with this Marxist definition. For Weber, a state is "a human community that (successfully) claims *the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force* within a given territory."[37] In reality, state violence—violence justified in the name of public or national security and other forms of the common social good, and operated through the all-pervasive machinery of the state—constitutes a major source of social and individual suffering throughout the contemporary world. A new and daunting challenge is thus presented for ethics: how to resist state violence through distinguishing what kinds of state intervention are morally justifiable and what are not.

I have argued for terminating not only the one-child policy but also the overall authoritarian approach to reproductive and population issues. Nevertheless, I am not arguing that the Chinese state, or any state, does not have any ethically

appropriate role to play in these issues. Indeed, this is far from being the case. In the process of implementing planned fertility as a national and strategic policy, China has established what is probably the world's best system for providing family-planning services. The state should not retreat from this area. In addition, the state may, and even *should* in certain circumstances, set demographic goals in the genuine long-term interests of society. However, by genuinely respecting the principle of voluntariness, the key means to achieving these goals—reducing or increasing births—should be to reward those who follow the desired reproductive norm rather than punishing those who do not.

In 1996, 87-year-old Sir Isaiah Berlin received an invitation from Ouyang Kang, a professor at Wuhan University in south-central China, to contribute a summary of his key ideas to a book aiming to introduce Anglo-American philosophy to a Chinese audience. Although having ceased writing for nearly a decade by then, the Chinese invitation inspired the author of *Karl Marx*, *Russian Thinkers*, and *Four Essays on Liberty*. The result was an autobiographical essay, "My Intellectual Path." Summing up his lifelong inquiries into the intellectual roots of the massive destruction and widespread atrocities humankind had experienced in the twentieth century, in particular the actions of the Third Reich and the Russian revolution and its aftermath, the final paragraph of this last substantial piece by the eminent philosopher and essayist reads:

> It seems as if the doctrine that all kinds of monstrous cruelties must be permitted, because without these the ideal state of affairs cannot be attained—all the justifications of broken eggs for the sake of the ultimate omelette, all the brutalities, sacrifices, brain-washing, all those revolutions, everything that has made this century perhaps the most appalling of any since the days of old, at any rate in the West—all this is for nothing, for the perfect universe is not merely unattainable but inconceivable, and everything done to bring it about is founded on an enormous intellectual fallacy.[38]

The Chinese authoritarian model of population governance and the one-child policy aims to achieve an ideal demographic goal. The moral lesson from China, a lesson learned at a massive cost in individual and social suffering, is that an essential prerequisite for the pursuit of the common good is the creation of adequate constraints on the power of governments and states in making and implementing public policies. Otherwise, any project of social engineering—great or small—that is based on an intellectual misconception will inevitably result in suffering and misery, often on an enormous scale.

Founded on a major ethical misconception, the one-child policy, along with China's authoritarian model of governance in general, has no future. To paraphrase the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, in terminating these policies, the Chinese people have nothing to lose but their chains—and their suffering. They have a better future to win.

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