The One Child Policy: The Impacts On The Future Of The People's Republic Of China

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PEOPLE’S REPUBLIC OF CHINA

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China and the one-child policy

The People’s Republic of China (PRC) covers 9.6 million square kilometers of the earth and is the second largest country by land area in the world. Governed by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and housing a population of over 1.35 billion, China is also the world’s most populated country. Such a huge population, combined with dwindling natural resources, would prove to be a hindrance to China’s development in the modernising world. Falling death rates and rapid growth also put a greater strain on the CCP’s efforts to meet citizens’ needs (Kane & Choi, 1999). There was a global concern that China would soon head towards a “Malthusian collapse”, meaning “unchecked population growth that eventually outstrips growth in the food supply and results in massive famine” (Ebenstein, 2010).

Hence in 1979, the one-child policy was implemented to enforce strict limits on family planning. Under the largely controversial policy, families could only have one child, with exceptions to certain rural families and ethnic minorities. Within a span of a few years, the effects of the one-child policy could be seen – China’s population growth slowed immensely and people took to later marriage and larger intervals between births.

A demographic precipice

China of the 21st century has experienced a demographic transition like no other – from the extremely strict one-child policy to a relaxing of policy for certain groups of citizens, the one-child policy was indeed effective in curbing rapid population growth. It however, had unintended consequences that would prove to be obstacles needed to be overcome in the future. With extremely low fertility rates, a rapidly ageing population and a smaller workforce by the day, China faces an impending
demographic crisis that puts enormous stress on the country’s economy and ultimately threatens the ruling party’s legitimacy.

The demographic precipice China is currently facing is hence a serious issue that calls for action, but to be able to understand what kind of action is needed, the problem at hand has to be studied. The causes for the implementation of the one-child policy are clear, but learning more about the impacts of it on the future of China’s population would greatly help. It is therefore imperative to gain more insight into the family planning policies in place in 21st century China, where the one-child policy has been in effect for 36 years.

**Overview**

It is noted that all readings make use of data analysis, providing figures for research purposes. Be it from China’s national census or the authors’ self-conducted surveys, the studies have all made use of quantitative data extensively to delve into the topic of study, and are all delightfully useful in the research of the impacts of the one-child policy.

This essay thus reviews several articles that highlight the problems brought about by the strict birth control imposed by China on its citizens i.e. the one-child policy, as well as tackles the issue of whether there is a need for change in 21st century China. Firstly, we will cover major problems highlighted in the articles – a gender imbalance and an ageing population, and their impacts on future of China. Then we will look at the need for change in the PRC’s family planning project, followed by identifying future areas of study revolving around China’s demographic transition.
Gender imbalance

Years after the implementation of the one-child policy in China, a huge gender imbalance plagues the nation. Due to “a combination of son preference, a decrease in fertility induced by the one-child policy, and the progress of gender selection technology” (Li et al., 2011), the ratio of boys to girls has been steadily increasing. According to Hvistendahl (2010), China’s ratio of male to female births now stands at 119 boys born for every 100 girls, which is far more than it was back in 1979 when the one-child policy was implemented. This is further supported by figures from the 2005 census in the article by Zhu et al. (2009), which records sex ratios outside the normal range in “almost all age groups in almost all provinces.”

Preference for sons

From the 2000 census, Ebenstein (2010) gathers that mothers with two daughters (46%) are thrice as likely to have a third child as compared to mothers with two sons (18%). The preference for sons is evident from the results of the census and this is supported by Li et al. (2011), who also mentions that son preference is traditionally rooted in Chinese society.

Chinese beliefs uphold the value of filial piety, a Confucian philosophy representing a virtue of respect for one’s elders. It is widely believed in China that daughters are less valuable for labour, as their only job is to care for the family. Sons, on the other hand, are perceived to be more capable as they are able to help out in the fields, and grow up to support their parents in old age. The most rational choice for couples to make when doing family planning is then to have male children to contribute to the household and act as a safety net in their old age. Besides that, sons are also deemed
more important as they carry on the family name when they move on to the next generation, while daughters are married off into the in-laws’ family.

*Gender selection technology*

In addition to the Chinese preference for sons, gender selection technology is said to play a part in exacerbating the gender imbalance in China. Not long after the one-child policy was put in place, ultrasound machines were available in modernising China, which gave pregnant women the chance to screen for the sex of their fetuses. The preference for sons meant that if the sex of the fetus was found to be female, parents could choose to abort them (Hvistendahl, 2010).

Ebenstein (2010) attributes that “parents under tighter fertility control are characterized by lower fertility and higher sex ratios among births,” hence they engage in sex selection to adhere to the one-child policy and at the same time satisfy their desire for a son. According to Zhu *et al.* (2009), the steady increase in sex ratios over the years since 1986 “mirrors the increasing availability of ultrasonography over that period.” Hesketh *et al.* (2005) and Wang (2005) all put forth the same reasoning unanimously – certain parents resort to gender selection technology i.e. sex selective abortion to have a child of the desired sex.

*Decrease in fertility*

Like Li *et al.* (2011), Peng (2011) also advocates that the one-child policy, together with other social and economic factors, brought about a general fertility decline. With the recently relaxed rules in China, it seems natural that parents would want to increase the normal family size. However, having a second or third child seems less attractive to parents now – it could be a higher level of education, an increasing
number of women in the workforce, better healthcare services or a high cost of living that result in what seems to be a voluntary continuation of the one-child policy.

**Implications**

The different sources have illustrated the causes of gender imbalance in China extremely well, but many of the articles fail to highlight the impacts of this severe imbalance in sex ratios at birth. On one hand, while the CCP has relaxed family planning policies to accommodate more births, Hvistendahl (2010) says that purely doing so might only ease the problem temporarily. Other social factors like inheritance are involved – “because daughters marry into their husbands’ families, couples see sons as a form of social security” (Hvistendahl, 2010), hence the issue cannot be so easily dismissed with just a relaxing of policies.

Peng (2011) brings to mind the severe “marriage squeeze” which is expected to happen in the near future. Altering marital ages by sex and thereby reflecting the relative supply of potential husbands and wives, this potential marriage squeeze could bring about “serious instability in the institutions of marriage and family” (Peng, 2011). Poston and Glover (2005) also shares that if the huge number of men who are unable to find brides do not marry, they would be more likely to commit crimes than if they were married.

The presence of the huge gender imbalance is indeed one that has begun to be felt in 21st century China, and will continue to be felt for a long time to come.
An ageing population

Besides a worsening gender imbalance, the implementation of the one-child policy also brought about a rapidly ageing population. The sudden fertility decline left China lost for words; it was touted a country that had become old before it had become rich due to the lack of a proper standard of living and social safety net before plunging into a greying population (Wang, 2005).

From 2010 to 2020, the number of Chinese between ages 20 to 24 is expected to fall by a whopping 45%, from 125 million to 68 million (Hvistendahl, 2010), and that’s not all – urban elderly account for large numbers in today’s population. Wang (2005) predicts the numbers will increase from 20.6 million in the year 2000…to 34.1 million by 2015, 45.6 million by 2025, and 55.9 million by 2050.” Peng (2011) also elaborates that the ageing process has been sped up by the retirement of the baby boomers of the 1960s. While he admits that urban ageing is slowing due to the immigration of rural workers from the countryside, it leaves an even more pressing ageing challenge in the rural areas.

Implications

An ageing population could potentially have serious effects on China’s growth. For one, an increase in the number of elderly would mean a decreasing number of people in the workforce. This “slower growth and eventual decline of the labor force could constrain future economic growth and could have a profound impact on development” (Peng, 2011). According to Peng (2011), decreased availability of cheap labour would push production costs up and hence affect the global competitiveness of China’s manufacturing industry. It would set off a chain of events that would eventually lead to a restructuring of the economy.
In addition to economical impacts, an ageing population would put an extra strain on the CCP for pension and healthcare. Zhang & Goza (2006) assert that a mere 25 percent of the nation’s workers are covered by pension plans of any sort, and China’s weak social security system might not be able to withstand the impending crisis of the ageing population.

The need for change

While it is not evident in every single article covered in this essay, some articles do highlight the need for change in China. With the implementation of the one-child policy, it is stated above that the impacts on the nation are great and lasting, be it economically, socially or culturally.

Wang (2005) says that “though no policy change now can reverse the arrival of this demographic crossover, an early departure from the one-child policy and a gradual increase in fertility could help to lighten population aging pressure 20 to 30 years from now.” Peng (2011) agrees with this, maintaining that the most rational decision would be for the CCP to modify its family planning policies such that the total fertility rate would improve in the near future. By slowing down the ageing process and speeding up population decline, it would put China in a better status to cope with future problems that might arise.

Conclusion

As Peng (2011) puts it, “demographic changes in China will have important global impacts.” The problems that have risen from the introduction of the one-child policy
do not just affect China itself, but also has impact on a vast number of countries around the globe.

It is noted that while a great part of the articles focused on the direct impacts of the one-child policy (gender imbalance and an ageing population), most regretfully fail to bring attention to the impact of the one-child policy on broader issues such as environmental concerns, political legitimacy and so on. This would be a gap that could be filled in the future – more studies need to be conducted to assess the full impact of the one-child policy on the various institutions (political, economically, psychological etc.). Also, most of the research in these articles reviewed was quantitative; more qualitative research could be done to add depth to the study. Rather than relying on breadth (quantitative figures) alone to study the impacts of the one-child policy, having more depth would give greater insight and allow for more understanding regarding this matter.

Lastly, the fact that China is facing a demographic precipice is undeniable. Years of strict birth control has led to an appalling gender imbalance and a rapidly ageing population that has brought on an onslaught of other problems. It is an uphill task for China’s CCP now to slow their fall down the slippery slope, but what is done is done. More definitely needs to be studied about the need for a change in the PRC’s controversial one-child policy, and it can only be a long time before China’s population growth slows for the better without any adverse effects.
REFERENCES


