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**A REVOLUTION IN GENDER AND  
FAMILIAL LIFE: AN ANALYSIS OF  
SOCIO-POLITICAL AND CULTURAL  
FACTORS ON THE CONTEMPORARY  
CHINESE FAMILY**

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to investigate gender relations and the family in contemporary China. More specifically it seeks to contextualise the contemporary Chinese family within a socio-historical, political and cultural analysis of China from the formation of the People's Republic of China in 1949. It uses a historical sociological methodology, on the basis of existing studies. It attempts to ascertain what has changed and what has stayed the same over the last fifty years, as well as to evaluate what Chinese families have gained and lost as a result of government reforms. With a different focus in each chapter, the study examines some of the ways the accelerated quest for modernity has impacted on the Chinese family and society. It explores family structure and the rapid changes currently taking place in dating, romance, and marriage, reproduction, child socialisation practices, and gender and family relationships. Far more than in most countries, the Chinese family plays a central role in economic relations and political ideology, which makes these changes especially consequential. One obvious impact of the government reforms on the Chinese family lifestyle was the preservation of traditional beliefs and practices, such as wedding and funeral ceremonies, ancestral worship and preferences for sons over daughters. Another impact discussed by this study has been the attempt to remake the Chinese family into an economic and social unit, depriving it of its traditional ideological, spiritual, and ritual significance. But the real challenge imposed by the current government, that may ultimately weaken or even fundamentally change the Chinese family, has been the birth control campaign. Socially and economically, this study shows that the well-being of many young couples especially rural couples, with only one daughter may be endangered when they could no longer carry out manual labour on their farm. The main conclusion from this analysis is that the family and its continuity still occupy the focal point in the lives of Chinese people.

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## INTRODUCTION

The aim of this research is to investigate gender relations and the family in contemporary China. More specifically it seeks to contextualise the contemporary Chinese family within a socio-historical, political and cultural analysis of China from the formation of the People's Republic of China in 1949.

The study has the objectives of conducting research into gender relations and social changes within the Chinese family institution over the past 50 years, and of researching with a narrative mode in a historical sociological methodology, on the basis of existing studies. The research was conducted using this method, as it is useful for a critical study of the past, which looks for mechanisms through which societies change or reproduce themselves. Historical sociological studies highlight the particular and varying features of social structures and social change, which are extraordinarily difficult to capture solely through the use of empirical research methods.

This study deals with the question, of to what extent can the Chinese state change family structure, family relations, and conceptions of family behaviour? In order to answer this question this investigation starts by exploring the historical changes in the institution of the family and its place in the Chinese social framework. It also examines the impact of Communism on Chinese families and their way of life. This trend is understandable since, at the start of its power in 1949, the Communist Government claimed to be establishing new social organizations and a new social ideology, drastically different from those of previous ages in order to elicit social change. Certainly the organisational capacity of the Communist Party, together with its revolutionary ideology, enabled it to penetrate further into everyday life of both rural and urban families than any previous regime had done. Furthermore it traces the responses of contemporary Chinese families to the macro-political and economic changes of reforms deemed necessary by Deng Xiaoping in his attempt to modernise China. The micro-dimensions of the research are defined by the data associated with the family and the home. This is then set against

the backdrop of a macro level understanding of power relations, to aid in our understanding of how Chinese families have changed over time.

I have suggested using a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches as a means of achieving the aims and objectives in this study. To a great extent a qualitative perspective has played a major role in this study because it is inherently a multi-methodological focus involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject material (Handel, 1992). But using empirical data as a general parameter, the study follows a historical, sociological perspective for an analysis of the major changes of constraining and incentive components, both structural and ideological, and assesses their roles in the process of societal change in China.

A narrative technique has also been employed as a means of achieving aims and objectives in this qualitative socio-historical research. It would be used as a frame for constructing the history-theory relationship. Using a narrative approach involves concurrent construction and mutual adjustment of history and of theory. It requires that we build history to correspond to explicitly theoretical terms. It also requires that we build theory in a way that incorporates eventful as well as contextual time. Thus research framed by narrative constructs history as both "path-dependent" (defined as the contingent, yet cumulative and constraining effects of past action on future possibilities; Aminzade, 1992), action sequence and as institutional and cultural conjuncture shaping action. Indeed, a narrative provides an overarching central frame for combining, extending and precisely operationalising central extant narrative and comparative techniques.

To start this narrative I have used secondary sources to construct historical and sociological concepts and ideas against a general theoretical and comparative historical backdrop. Examining these concepts sets the stage for designing a broader research base to be executed in different themes of the study. Each theme combines examination of secondary sources with narrative and comparative logic to provide self-contained responses to specific theoretical questions. All phases together combine to respond to the full range of articulated theoretical issues that have been used to complete this study.

The socio-historical methodology used in this study supports the popularity of narrative as a term of art today because it signals the latest attempt to promote for sociology an explanatory form that follows Weber in seeking interpretive and sound understanding of historical happenings which are treated as valid objects of critical science inquiry. Narratives are sequential accounts. They organise material into chronological order to tell 'stories' about what happened (Stone, 1979). These accounts are conceptual wholes, built through selection and chronological linkage of other wise discrete parts, each of which then takes on meaning in light of the whole (Griffin, 1993).

Adopting a narrative form requires the narrator to focus on individual, institutional, or collective actors; the actions they take; and when, where, why, how, and with what consequences they take them. Thus, explicitly or implicitly, narratives not only tell us what happened but they explain why it happened as it did and not otherwise. Because explanations built on narrative become appropriate and useful to the content that temporal ordering is crucial, it is no accident that historical sociologists are responsible for importing the construct of narrative from the humanities and transforming it to serve as an analytical tool for social science (Griffin, 1993; Abbott, 1992; Quadagno and Knapp, 1992: 481-507).

## **HISTORICAL CHRONOLOGY**

This section briefly explores some of the important dates, policies and phenomenon that have been important landmarks in Chinese history from Imperial times until the 1990s. These need explaining before the start of the study, in order to provide a historical landscape for the family changes that are being explored in this work.

Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, China experienced growing external pressure for change. Increased foreign trade, political intervention, urbanisation, and cultural contact pried open some parts of China's inward-looking social system and shifted the balance of power in different directions (Murphey, 1999: 55-59). Faced with imperialist expansion from Europe, America and Japan, which revealed China's military weakness, China was drawn into wider international processes of economic and political power on very unfavourable terms. (Fairbank, 1979 213-263). Defeats in war

resulted in loss of territory (Hong Kong), loss of jurisdiction over urban districts called ‘concessions,’ and loss of control over customs administration, over foreign trading companies operating through Treaty Ports, and over foreign investment in crucial modern industries such as textiles and railways. This went far to damage the prestige and legitimacy of the Imperial Chinese regime (or Qing Dynasty 1644-1911), encouraging opposition movements and stimulating conflicts with the state elite over how to reform the Chinese state, the better to cope with external challenges and internal divisions. Such humiliations were destined to continue and grow in scope for over a century (Murphey, 1999: 55-59).

The May Fourth, Movement is named after a climactic student demonstration at Tiananmen Square (the Gate of Heavenly Peace in front of the Forbidden City in Beijing) on that date in 1919, passionately opposing the weak Chinese government’s passive acceptance of humiliating concessions of Chinese territory to Japan in the Treaty of Versailles that concluded World War One. For students and writers, the demonstration represented the culmination of a groundswell of youthful anti-traditionalism represented by Chen Duxiu’s popular magazine *New Youth* (*Xin qingnian*), and the literary revolution sponsored by Hu Shi, by his promotion of writing forcefully and directly in the modern vernacular (Laughlin, 1999: 373-377). Many of these intellectuals developed forceful arguments in favour of women’s rights. They also waged an all-out war against the hierarchical notions of Confucianism and made bitter attacks on arranged marriage, restrictions on women’s education and rigid family structures.

Until the establishment in 1949 of the People’s Republic of China (hereafter PRC) and its subsequent consolidation, China was the site of almost continuous and often violent struggles for power. All forms of power, economic, political and ideological, were actively contested in recurrent situations of great instability and uncertainty. In societies with stable power structures, contestation is usually held within strict limits by the knowledge of all participants as to where power lies by varying degrees of acceptance of its legitimacy. The collapse of the Imperial political institutions, and the establishment of the new republic in 1912, the sharpening of economic antagonisms, the challenge of new social beliefs and values, and the threat and

reality of external aggression, especially Japanese expansionism, all rendered such knowledge uncertain and undetermined legitimacy. Power could not be assumed, it had to be proved in practice, ultimately by resort to armed force (Spence, 1990). In Mao Zedong's words (1967, II: 224) "political power grows out of the barrel of a gun."

After the collapse of the Imperial Empire, political power, the power to rule over the territory of China, dissolved. Attempts to establish coherent state institutions which could maintain control over the whole of the country failed. China fragmented into a large number of more or less fluid regimes dominated by military leaders, the so-called 'warlords' (Spence, 1990) warlord might dominate a whole province, but none had the resources to attempt the reunification of China under consolidated state rule. Two political movements, each with their own armed forces and their economic and social constituencies, competed with each other to achieve this task: the Guomindang (hereafter known as GMD), or the Nationalist Party, and the Chinese Communist Party (hereafter known as the CCP). Both were formed as revolutionary movements committed to revolutionary transformation of Chinese society. Like any large-scale social and political movement, they were composed of a large number of groupings with diverse views and goals, strategies and tactics (ibid).

Holding each of them together despite this diversity was a conception of socialism. The CCP's conception of socialism was essentially a Marxist one, as mediated through the Soviet Union and adapted to specific Chinese circumstances. The Nationalists' conception of socialism was enshrined in Sun Yat-sen's (he was the Provisional President of the Chinese Republic) 'Three Principles of the People,' one of which referred to the People's livelihood, jeopardised by the landlords' appropriation of rent, which the revolutionary state should restore to the people. In either case, revolutionary change would require the movement to wrest economic and political power from established classes and institutions. In both cases, however, their capacity to do this was restricted throughout the 1920s 1930s and 1940s, not only by the power of those established classes, but also by the competition and military confrontation between the revolutionary movements themselves, by the strength of local warlords, by the Japanese occupying forces in much of Eastern and Central China, and by

the leverage exercised by other foreign powers in return for aid in the struggle against the Japanese. Until the Communist victory in 1949, neither movement had the power to carry out a radical restructuring of society on more than a local scale (Gamer, 1999: 67-75).

The outcome of the unstable trilateral conflict between the Guomindang, the Communists and the Japanese and their diverse relationships with the economic power of propertied and un-propertied classes in urban and rural China, was settled by military force. The reasons for the Communist victory in the civil war (1946-1949) that followed the surrender of Japan are many and complex, and cannot be discussed here. Apart from the Nationalist retention of Taiwan, and the perpetuation of colonial rule in Hong Kong and Macao, the victory was total, and laid the political basis for a more thorough revolutionisation of the structure of power and social change than had been possible hitherto (ibid).

The Communist approach to the family was in many ways radical, but it was always a part of the wider programme of social change, the underlying philosophy of which did not accord very much significance to the institution of the family. The government was primarily concerned to develop the economy, and to this end the hierarchically structured traditional family could be a useful means. The explicit family policy for the PRC was expressed in the Marriage Law of 1950, which aimed to replace the 'feudal' patriarchal marriage system of the old society with the 'new democratic' marriage system 'based on free choice of partners, monogamy, equal rights for both sexes and protection of lawful interests of women and children' (Meijer, 1971). The power of the state was to be used to shift the basis of family relationships away from the hierarchies of generation, age and sex to a more egalitarian model.

The Land reform implemented in 1950 was intended to break the dominance of the landlord class in the countryside and to relieve rural poverty (Spence, 1990). At first, Mao returned lands to the peasants. Then he began forcing them to join production teams that became linked with larger communes to farm on a great scale. Mao Zedong envisioned communes as the basic cells of the People's Republic of China. Self containing and self sustaining complexes performing the roles of industry, agriculture, commerce, education, military and social life. What

happened during the brief period of the People's Commune Movement in the fall of 1958 came closest to destroying the Chinese family institution. Small children were put in nurseries. Older children were assigned to brigades of Little Red Soldiers. All able-bodied adults were mobilised to join the communes and work in production teams. They were encouraged to dismantle their kitchens and contribute their cooking utensils to the communes. Family members, young and old had their meals in commune mess halls (Rae Yang, 1997).

When Chu and Yannan Ju (1993: 276), paid a visit to one of the villages in Qingpu in 1987 to make preparations for some anthropological fieldwork, they passed a deserted ramshackle building. Painted on its broken door were the fading characters of "People's Commune Mess Hall." Upon inquiry, these researchers were told that this was where people from the village went for their meals during the first few months of the commune movement. That commune experience proved to be a colossal human disaster. Within a matter of three months, the Party had to retreat from its utopian ideals of communal life and restored the Chinese family to its time honoured functions.

The collectivisation of agriculture and rural industry began once land reform had been completed. Families were organised into larger and larger production groups to farm on a great scale. The height of this collectivisation came during the Great Leap Forward in 1958-1960, which called for simultaneous development of both agriculture and industry, both small and large industry –what Mao propagandists called "walking on two legs" (Jacka, 1997: 32). In rural areas, the "people's communes" mobilised peasants en masse for large-scale capital construction like building dams and irrigation systems as well as making iron and steel by indigenous methods (the so-called backyard furnaces) (Chang, 1991). Not just wasteful of resources these mass activities also resulted in a serious neglect of farming and cultivation.

The Great Leap Forward collapsed in 1959 with disastrous economic consequences, particularly a dive in agricultural production and widespread food shortages in the countryside. The other party leaders tried to return to more traditional production methods, making industrial goods in factories and producing food on collectivised farms, but Mao was undaunted and unconvinced (Gamer, 1999: 109). In 1966 he tried again by

starting the Great Proletarian Revolution, which he also used as a means of getting rid of his dissenting senior party colleagues, who he considered to be revisionist. Thus, millions of students were organised as Red Guards to attack the country's power structures, including government and party establishments. Virtually all senior party leaders except Zhou Enlai (senior member CCP) had been attacked or were purged at one time or another by the Red Guards (Rae Yang, 1997).

Unlike the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution was primarily political in nature. In the economic arena, it merely emphasised certain ideological attributes in the overall economic development strategy such as "self-reliance," "ideology and politics to take precedence over economics," or "ideological incentive to be substitute for material incentive." Consequently, the Cultural Revolution brought much less direct disruption to economic production, though it resulted in long-term economic damage to government administration and factory management (Murphey, 1999)

The Cultural Revolution was believed to have inflicted wide-ranging damage on the Chinese family. During the height of this phase there were many cases when children were incited to accuse and denounce parents who were branded as counter-revolutionaries. However according to Chu and Yunnan Yu (1993: 275), even the denunciation of parents by young ideologues proved to a transient phenomenon.

However, the Cultural Revolution did leave behind at least one positive legacy. Many old guards like Deng Xiaoping (senior member CCP) emerged from this nightmare to finally realise that politically and social stability is most crucial to economic development, where as incessant class struggle and ideological contention were inimical to economic growth. Thus, when Deng finally regained power, he was determined to open a new chapter in China's modern economic history, which he did by launching economic reform and the open-door policy in December 1978 (Wong, 1993).

Opening the door to external economic forces became official at the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee in December 1978. Since that time China has become increasingly incorporated into the international capitalist economy. Restrictions on foreign trade were relaxed by licensing several provinces and cities. To engage in foreign trade,



commercialising state trading agencies, and giving enterprises certain rights to retain foreign exchange earnings. China is now becoming one of the world's most important trading economies (Wong, 1999).

After Mao's era ended, China was free to pursue the added elements of economic strength that had eluded it before; foreign capital, technology, and markets (Naughton, 1995). To implement reform, Deng called for 'four modernisations' - of agriculture, industry, defence and science and technology - and initiated new economic policies.

The earliest transformations took place in agriculture. Between 1978 and 1984 agriculture was largely decollectivised. In place of the collective system of production teams fulfilling targets set by central planners and transmitted down through communes and brigades, there emerged the 'household responsibility system.' The land of the teams was divided up among households, which contracted with the collective to farm a certain amount of land and to deliver a certain quantity of crops as a fee for using the land and as a tax, beyond which output could be sold on the market. Households thus once again became autonomous units of production and investment. The ownership of the land remained with the collective, though the length of time specified in contracts (usually fifteen years or longer) enabled long-term planning by households. By the middle 1980s China had seen the re-emergence of a family-farming peasantry (Gamer, 1999: 110-112).

The second Marriage Law of China was adopted in 1980 and implemented on January 1 1981. It fixed the earliest marriage age for men at twenty-two and for women at twenty (it had been twenty and eighteen respectively in the 1950 Marriage Law). The laws recommended guidelines for women were first marriage at twenty-four, (and ideally last) childbirth at twenty-five. Effective enforcement of the 1980 Marriage Law was crucial, since in many cases husbands could be forced to stop beating, and even torturing, their spouses only when brought into court. With the laws reassertion of the right of women to obtain divorce rose to about 5.5 percent of all marriages for 1983 (in 1979 it had been 3.0 percent); over 70 percent of the divorce petitioners in 1983 were women. The 1980 Marriage Law also allowed divorced women greater chance to sue for the joint property one shared in marriage (Spence, 1990: 708).

One of the most profound ways in which the Chinese state has attempted to penetrate and police Chinese families, is in the sphere of fertility. The Communist regime headed by Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s promised economic progress to the Chinese people, staking its legitimacy on its ability to achieve prosperity by century's end. Having seen rampant population growth eat up economic gains in the past, China's leaders were convinced that their economic project would fail if it could not staunch the growth of the population, especially the rural component of it, which made up three-quarters of the total. The one-child policy which commenced in 1979 provided the solution to this problem (Spence, 1990: 683-690).

## **CHAPTER OUTLINES**

In this section we will consider the organization of the seven chapters, and the themes that have been discussed in this study.

### **Literature Review**

In Chapter One I will explore the range of literature that has been used to analyse the changes found in the Chinese family to date.

### **Methodological Review**

Chapter Two is a methodological review, which briefly describes the chosen methodology, collection of materials, and problems encountered along the way.

### **Changes in the Chinese Family**

China has often been seen as a familial society (coined to characterise Chinese social values and organisation), and Confucian social theory placed special emphasis on family relationships as the core of a stable and harmonious society. Yet in modern times the structures and functions of the Chinese family have come under vigorous attack. From the nineteenth century, the Chinese family was seen as an obstacle to modernisation of Chinese society, a backward-looking brake on the energies of the young, holding them in patterns of behaviour which led China into decline and defeat. Since then, the reform of the family has been a central focus of modern state policy; republican regimes, both bourgeois and socialist, established programmes to transform family life by legislation, compulsion

and incentive, programmes to which masses of ordinary Chinese people have had somehow to respond. At the same time, economic and cultural developments have led people to reconstruct their family life. Many women have attempted to redefine their family relationships with men and many young people have sought to recast their relationships with their elders.

Chapter Three explores changes in the institution of the family and its place in the Chinese social framework. Its aim is to trace the changes experienced by the Chinese family from the beginning of the twentieth century until the 1990s. It is intended to provide a historical survey of the Chinese government's concrete reform programmes and how changes have affected the family during the period under consideration.

### **Love, Marriage and Divorce in China**

As in most societies, marriage has always been an important institution in China and offers a unique window on social inequalities and change in any given historical period. In the past, the purposes of marriage were many and included the transfer of rights over the bride (Wolf and Huang, 1980: 73), continuance of a family line (Wolf, 1972: 72), a way to increase hands in the field (Croll, 1994), formation of alliances (Ebrey, 1991b: 5), a way to make a statement of class standing (Ebrey, 1991b), provision of old age support and security (Potter and Potter, 1990: 202), and the transfer of resources from one family to another (Gates, 1996). The emphasis on any of these processes might depend on a number of factors including religion, class, life cycle of the family, and economic and political circumstances (Watson and Ebrey, 1991).

The ethical basis for the establishment of a family in contemporary China is switching from the family to the individual. The family was formerly considered a societal cell, and it was widely believed that family stability was an indicator of overall social stability. This ideology is no longer common, as greater emphasis is placed on individual happiness, and marriage is considered more a private affair. People do not force themselves to maintain an unhappy marriage, and divorce is no longer the discrimination it once was in the past. Women are not merely their husband's attachments or tools, but demand more emotional and sexual satisfaction, as well as rights within their marriage, in particular the right to enjoy more freedom

generally. Partners in marriage lacking in passion are no longer considered virtuous, and there are those who are sympathetic to extramarital love which at least involves genuine emotion.

Chapter Four explores the husband and wife relationship, starting with the selection of a future spouse. It goes on to deal with this relationship in terms of what each partner expects of the other; how they interact in different domains of family life, and how marital conflicts are resolved.

### **Gender Issues in the Chinese Family and Society**

The study of women in the Chinese family and society during the twentieth century must be viewed in the context of China's political movements and the challenge of transforming China from a disintegrating Imperial power into a modern nation. The most ambitious political transformations were introduced by the Communist Party when it took power in 1949. Unlike many other developing nations that have placed little or no priority on integrating women into development, China, under the leadership of the Communist Party, made explicit commitments to improving the status of women as part of its socialist agenda of promoting social and economic equality.

China's long historical tradition of male dominance and patriarchal authority is deeply embedded in its culture and institutions and not easily overturned. For two and a half decades of heavy state planning and promotion of revolutionary egalitarian goals, there was much talk about equality between the sexes. Since Mao Zedong's death in 1976, the emphasis on gender equality has subsided, and liberalising reforms have permitted a return of market forces and revival of earlier cultural practices. The reforms have provoked concerns that old patriarchal patterns and abuses of women would resurface, and indeed, a more open society has allowed gender inequalities to become more visible. At the close of the twentieth century, critics in China and abroad strongly lament China's persisting structural inequalities and the unequal treatment of women both in the family system and the state sector (Croll, 1983; Honig and Hershatter, 1988; Johnson, 1983; Stacey, 1983; Wolf, 1985). Moreover, China's strict family planning policies, discussed in Chapter's Six and Seven, target women for control and place heightened pressure on women to give birth to sons (Greenhalgh, Zhu and Li, 1994; Greenhalgh and Li, 1995). As a result of strict

family planning quotas, the sex ratio of reported births in the 1990s shows an increasing problem of “missing girls” – a clear sign that males and females are not treated equally. At the same time, increasing levels of female literacy, education, and urbanism, along with smaller families and greater economic autonomy, brings new benefits to women and may undermine patriarchal traditions even where earlier policies failed.

When reviewing the twentieth century as a whole, there are many reasons to consider it to have been a century of significant, if not always revolutionary, change for women as well as men. These changes, toward modernity and greater equality and opportunity for women, continue to be contested by entrenched interests. From the perspective of a single lifetime, they may appear to be slow and to fall short of the revolutionary claims of the Maoist period, but from the perspective of several centuries the achievements of the twentieth may indeed be revolutionary.

The aim in Chapter Five is to examine women’s lives and the ways that gender has shaped the Chinese family and society. It begins by setting the historical context, which is the key in understanding Chinese women’s lives today. It then describes women’s roles and position in contemporary social, political and economic life. The last half of the chapter is devoted to examining three aspects of Chinese society that reflect the shape of gender inequality in China in the 1990’s and suggest what might be expected in the future. Economic policies have been crucial in shaping key aspects of most women’s lives and have not only provided women with new opportunities but have also been a source of new forms of gender inequality. A second influence has been the commercialisation of women for sale – and abuse on the open market. This section seeks to explore the sex and sexuality discourses in reform era China. Finally, we will discuss forms of discriminatory actions against women, including infanticide, trafficking of women and domestic abuse.

### **Childbirth and Reproduction in China**

‘May you have many sons’ has long been a common felicitation and reference to sons or a son as ‘the greatest of blessings’ punctuate everyday language and ceremonial occasions, such as weddings. Customarily each generation of Chinese couples have been exhorted anew to have a son and continue the family line,

so that the greatest of unfilial acts has been the failure to produce a son and the most venomous of curses has been: 'May you die without sons.' Although such phrases are less likely to be openly articulated in present-day China, prestige and stature are still linked to sons and it is often said that the birth of a son causes a house 'to grow by three feet. (Croll, 2000: 71)' In contemporary China, with its stringent birth-control and single-child policies, the quest for sons has been magnified with the result that, in the absence of sons, the birth of a daughter not only remains a disappointment but more than ever before means a lost opportunity for a son.

In China it is without doubt the importance of the family line and the permanent bonding of sons into chains of generations and networks of male kin which still underlies the unique status of sons, positioned as they are between ancestors and descendants (Baker, 1979). It has long been and still is according to Huang Shu-min (1998) the expectation that sons will worship and care for the ancestors of previous generations as only they can do while, in turn, sons have been exhorted since ancient times to have many sons to fulfil their own obligations to their father and their father's lineage. Each new generation of sons is expected to continue the line of descent and, simply put, without sons signifying the unbroken continuity of the family line, there is said to be no bridge between family past and family future. It is sons as sole performers of ancestral rites, who are responsible for the welfare of their departed forebears in the spirit world (*ibid*).

But it was not just beliefs about the family line or the ritual support of the dead that underlay son preference, for parents also remain almost entirely reliant on a son's support in old age, both in the countryside and to a lesser but still important degree in the cities. Sons are not only for dreaming and descendants, for in very practical ways they represent prosperity, future security and even survival in old age. This has been so in ages past and is still so, despite a minimal safety net for the very poorest and the remnants of an urban pension scheme. The absence of a pension system in China's rural villages and the uneven distribution and declining pension support in cities have meant that today sons are still perceived to be the most important source of support in old age by both men and women (Potter and Potter, 1990).

In Chapter Six the aim is to focus on the socio-cultural meaning of reproduction in Chinese society, in order to explore the importance of the preferred male child. To explain this preference, I will deal with the concern about security of old age as well as a characteristic of Chinese culture that seems at first unrelated to reproduction – ancestor worship. In a way, this means I have to deal with the opposite of birth, i.e., death. This is an essential task, if we are to grasp the meaning of reproduction to Chinese people, and to understand its changed as well as unchanged traits.

### **Impact of the One-Child Policy in China**

It is well known that China is the most populous country of the world. On February 15 1995, the government announced that its population had reached 1.2 billion – about one fifth of the total world's population which stood a 5.5 billion in 1993 ( Ma Rong, 1999: 210). As the population pressure on land, urban jobs, housing and social spending became more serious, it was clear that a rapidly growing population would make the “four modernisations (the goal of which was to transform China into a powerful and modern socialist society by developing four sectors of the economy: agriculture, industry, the military, science and technology) announced in 1978 an impossible dream. So in 1979 the Chinese government finally set up a more restrictive birth control policy, the one-child campaign (Greenhalgh, 1994).

The importance of family planning becomes even clearer if we carefully examine the connection between natural resources in China and population growth. Arable land in China covers less than 250 million acres (101.2 hectares) and has continually decreased because of urban expansion and construction of dams, roads, bridges and new factories. The arable land per capita in 1991 was 0.27 acres (0.11 hectares) in China, one-ninth that of the United States, one-thirty-fourth that in Australia (Edmonds, 1999: 237-266). The Chinese government argues that, with 7 percent of the world's arable land and the need to feed 22 percent of the world's population, there was no other choice for China to maintain its social stability and proceed into modernisation except practicing family planning.

The outlook for other natural resources in China is equally grim. Only 13 percent of China's territory has forest cover, the

indicator of area per capita is even lower. Water is one of the most important natural resources. The per capita surface run off – the amount of water that flows on the surface to use for drinking, agriculture, sanitation, and industry is only one-fourth the world average. Furthermore, China's water resources are unequally distributed. Most of the cities in Northern China experience serious water shortages, whereas South-eastern China is often threatened by floods (Edmonds, 1999: 237-266).

With such shortages and imbalanced geographic distribution between population and natural resources, birth control and family planning are necessary measures. Wong (1999: 103-140) discusses Brown's concerns that China will be unable to feed itself and the growing consensus that although Brown's fears may be overblown, the difficulties of increasing food production for a growing population are substantial. Though ample food does not automatically bring population increases (Harris and Ross, 1987; Gates 1996: 54-60), history has shown that when the Chinese have enough to eat, their population grows. If it keeps growing, food supply might not be able to keep up with the population, and money would have to be diverted from other projects to import food.

Chapter Seven examines the impact of family policy on family structure and socialisation processes in China. The aim is to examine the factors leading to overpopulation in China, describe the governments strenuous efforts to solve the problem by issuing a one-child mandate, and analyse its immediate impact on individual family life, the developing child, the family structure and parental practices. Clearly, a revolution in family life and parental practices is taking place in China. The after effects echo throughout the political and social structure of the earth's most populous nation, with enormous impact on the Chinese people's economic and well-being and quality of life. This revolution even influences the quality of the armed forces. In effect, development of the one-child policy has created the need for consequent policy shifts in areas earlier thought unrelated to the policy as originally construed.

## **CONCLUSION**

This chapter has outlined the aims and objectives of this research, briefly explored some of the important dates, policies



and phenomenon in Chinese history and considered the organization and themes of the study.