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# THE ONE-CHILD POLICY AND PRIVATIZATION OF EDUCATION IN CHINA

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## ABSTRACT

China's one-child policy is one of the most significant, yet controversial, programs of planned fertility. While the focus of the controversy is on the nature of the policy (for example, whether the policy is humane, or whether it violates the basic human rights of individual freedom), the impact of such population control program on China's educational policy and practices is understudied. Moreover, the relationship between the one-child policy and the privatization of K-12 education in China remains insufficiently understood. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to address this gap in the literature and to explore the impact of one-child policy on privatization of education, and the transformation of education policy in China since 1979.

## INTRODUCTION

Implemented in 1979, China's one-child policy is one of the most significant, yet controversial, programs of planned fertility. It emerged as a panacea for the country's many pressing social problems, including population crisis, poverty, inflation, agricultural stagnation, inadequate school facilities and unemployment (Chow & Chen, 1989). The one-child policy was designed to restrict population growth, thereby advancing economic prosperity in China. Since the inception of the one-child policy in 1979, China's population has decreased by about 250 million (Kane & Choi, 1999). This reduction in fertility has eased some of the pressures on communities, the state, and the environment in a country that still carries one fifth of the world's population. Moreover, because of the low fertility rate, China can focus on developing its economy and raising the living standards of its

people. Since 1979, an unprecedented 150 million people have been lifted out of poverty (Potts, 2006). As Greenhalgh (2003a) suggests, the one-child policy has served as a means for China to accelerate its industrialization and modernization, catch up with the West, and achieve its rightful place in a global stage.

Despite these positive effects, China's one-child population policy has been highly controversial and it has been criticized by the Western world as "totalitarian," "coercive," "barbaric," and "uncivilized" (Ebenstein, 2010; Greenhalgh, 2003a; Li, 1989; and Wasserstrom, 1984). While the focus of the debate is on the nature of the one-child policy (for example, whether the policy is humane, or whether the policy violates the basic human rights of individual freedom), the impact of such population control program on China's educational policy and practices is understudied. Furthermore, the relationship between the one-child policy and the privatization of K-12 education in China remains insufficiently reported. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to address this gap in the literature on the impact of one-child policy on privatization of education and the transformation of education policy in China since 1979.

This article is a review of literature and legislation on family planning in China from 1979 to the present. It aims at answering the following research questions: 1) What is the relationship between the one-child mandate and the emergence of private education in China? 2) How does one-child policy affect family choice of schools?

This article begins with an historical overview of China's one-child policy, elucidating the historical, social and political context of its implementation. The article further focuses on the relationship between the one-child policy and parental school choices in China. It closely examines two forms of private schools: the elite private schools (*Gui zu xue xiao*) and the people-run schools (*Min ban xue xiao*).

Previous research has considered these private schools primarily as an economic response to the liberalized climate of the 1980s when the once intrusive state acceded a role, even in the provision of education, to entrepreneurs (Kwong, 1997). However, this article argues that the one-child policy has contributed to and facilitated the emergence of private schools. Because each couple could only have one child, the parents were not satisfied with the mediocre educational services that public schools offered to their single children. Many parents were anxious to improve the chances for their single children to learn marketable and employable skills or to gain entrance to Ivy League education. Boasting high educational standards, strict discipline, highly qualified instructors, and state-of-art technology, elite private schools (*Gui zu xue xiao*) have been established to cater to the needs and demands of a wealthy clientele (Kwong, 1997; Lin, 1994). Indeed, China's growing middle class and nouveau riche regard these elite private schools for their single children as the latest status symbol (Arora, 2010).

It would be incorrect, however, to assume that all private schools are elite, catering to the rich and the powerful. The people-run schools (*Min ban xue xiao*) are

often short in funding, lack qualified teachers, and lack high standards in school administration (Lin, 1994). Nevertheless, these private schools have been set up to serve the unplanned children or those who were born outside of the family planning policy. As a result of the one-child mandate, unplanned children or illegitimate children are denied basic benefits and rights, including the right to a free 9-year public education (Greenhalgh, 2003b). Therefore, the people-run schools are a response to the increasing demand for a basic education for unplanned children. The discrepancy between the elite private schools and the people-run schools symbolizes the increasing gap between the rich and poor in China, the second largest economic power of the world.

### **THE ONE-CHILD POLICY: HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL BACKGROUND**

For thousands of years, the traditional ideal Chinese family was patriarchal in authority, patrilineal in descent, and patrilocal in residence (Huang, 1982). The feudal ideology, which values fecundity and favors male offspring to maintain paternal lineages, has dominated Chinese culture and family life. It was commonly believed that the more sons one had, the more good fortune a family would have. Birth control or family planning has conflicted with such cultural values and with the patriarchal system, and therefore was alien to Chinese society before the People's Republic of China (PRC) was established in 1949.

During the first decade of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) rule between 1949 and 1959, the Chinese leaders introduced the novel concept of state-controlled family planning as “an irrefutable task of the socialist state” (Greenhalgh, 2003b, p. 201). Any unregulated or unplanned human reproduction was considered antisocialist and contrary to the fundamental interests of the Chinese state (Greenhalgh). In keeping with this idea, births were planned by the state on the basis of the collective good, and state planned birth control has been placed at the center of China's approach to population control to this day. Yet, no specific policies or measures were adopted to slow the birth rate.

This birth-control campaign was suspended during the 1960s and 1970s because a large population was once again considered to be an asset to economic growth. The Chinese government shifted its focus from overpopulation to the shortage of manpower (Freeberne, 1965). Unrestrained population growth, a falling morality rate, and concurrent improvements in health care resulted in a demographic explosion in China that taxed the country beyond its economic and political resources. China's population grew from 500 million in 1947 to 800 million by 1970, and was close to one billion in 1980—approximately 22.7% of the world's population (Rosenberg & Jing, 1996). If the trend had continued, the three-child family would have produced a projected population of 1.414 billion by the year 2000; of 2.923 billion by 2050; and of 4.260 billion by 2080 (Goodstadt, 1982, p. 39).

In response to this population crisis, the Chinese government launched a birth-control campaign from 1971-1979, advising its citizens to marry late, not to have their first child until the age of 25, to have children spaced at longer intervals, and to have fewer offspring (Chow & Chen, 1989). This campaign laid the groundwork for the one-child per married couple policy instituted in 1979. The one-child policy was also a result of the government's effort to improve population quality and individual living standards. After decades of political turmoil (especially ten years of destruction of "Cultural Revolution 1" from 1966-1976), China's economy was stagnant, and people were living with bare necessity. Determined to overcome the sluggish economic growth and low living standards, the new regime under Deng Xiao Ping's leadership, launched an economic reform in 1979, placing the development of "market socialism" and the transformation of China into a modern nation within decades as the top priority (Greenhalgh, 2003a). As economic goals were expressed as per capita gains, population control was the key to this new reform agenda. Muhua Chen, vice premier and head of the State Council Birth Planning Leading Group, stated,

Under present conditions in China, whether or not to control population growth is definitely not merely a question of having fewer or more children, but a serious question related to the development of our social productive force, to the realization of the four modernizations, to socialist construction, and to the strategic transition to communism (Chen, 1979, p. 2; as cited in Greenhalgh, 2003b, p. 203).

Between the mid-1970s and early 1980s, discursive elements from various sources were drawn and elaborated into a complex conceptual framework that served to legitimize and, later, in 1980s and 1990s, guided the enforcement of the one-child policy. This discourse established the basic goals, rationale, and measures of birth planning and control. The one-child policy generally allows one child per couple under normal circumstances<sup>2</sup> (Yang, 2007). However, depending on the provincial economic development, population size, location, and to some extent, fertility desires, the one-child policy has varied at the provincial and local levels. To battle the patriarchal belief of "the more sons, the better," the Chinese government offered four major rationales for planned fertility and few children: better health care for both children and mothers; better social conditions for raising future generations; increasing work efficiency and political awareness; and promoting gender equity (Huang, 1982).

With the introduction of the one-child policy, the Chinese government has undertaken tremendous efforts and a number of measures, including education, persuasion, and media promotion coupled with economic rewards or sanctions (Huang, 1982; Chow & Chen, 1989; Rosenberg & Jing, 1996; Greenhalgh, 2003). Government policy has emphasized education about modern methods of contraception, eugenics, maternal care and child-care. Furthermore, the government has

dispensed free birth-control pills and devices and has legalized abortion. Couples who comply with the mandate receive an honorary certificate along with monetary awards and privileges such as extended maternity leave, free nursery care, free medical care, and special access to education and job opportunities (Chow & Chen; and Rosenberg & Jing). Parents who violate the one-child policy are severely penalized or disciplined with economic sanctions commonly known as “social compensation fee [SCF]<sup>3</sup>,” and they forfeit other social benefits (Huang; and Chow & Chen).

As a result of the one-child policy, the total birth rate decreased from 2.9 in 1979 to 1.7 in 2004, with a rate of 1.3 in urban areas and just under 2.0 in rural areas (Hesketh, Li, & Zhu, 2005). The policy is estimated to have reduced the number of births by over 400 million since 1979 (NPDSRG, 2007; Zhang, 2007); however, the impact of the one-child policy is beyond population control. It has far-reaching effects on Chinese social structure, women’s roles in production and reproduction, children’s development and well-being, and education policies and practices in China. It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss all of the impacts of the one-child policy, and, therefore, this article focuses on the role that the policy plays in the emergence of private schooling in China.

### **THE ONE-CHILD POLICY AND PRIVATIZATION OF EDUCATION**

Since the launch of the economic reforms in 1979, Chinese education, like other institutions and enterprises, has experienced the processes of privatization, commercialization and marketization. In the context of capitalism with Chinese characteristics, the centralized educational system has been rendered inappropriately (Yang, 2004). Acknowledging that the over-centralization and stringent rules would hinder the initiatives and enthusiasm of local and non-government educational institutions, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) called in 1985 for steps to streamline administration and devolve powers to local government—steps that would allow them more flexibility to manage education. Since then, the state has begun to diversify educational services, allowing and encouraging the non-government sectors to establish and administer educational institutions. The central government has changed its monopolistic role to macro-management, providing the necessary framework for educational development (Hawkins, 2000; Ngok and Chan, 2003). The retreat of the central government has provided space for local government as well as non-government sectors to assume more responsibilities for education provision, financing and regulation. Thus, non-government organizations now provide education services in the formal public education sector, thereby leading to the emergence of private schools. Compared with public schools, the private education sector remains small; however, privatization of education has become an inevitable trend in China. According to China’s Ministry of Education [MOE] (2008), there were 95,200 private schools of various

levels, and 22,300 private vocational training institutions, enrolling as many as 34 million students in 2007. The total number of students in China's private schools in 2007 was equivalent to more than half of France's population and nearly four times the population of Switzerland (Bing, 2009).

In addition to the top-down educational reform, this article argues that the one-child policy plays an important role in the emergence of private education in China. First, the government has made strenuous efforts to limit parents' child-bearing in exchange for the greater opportunities it provides for the "only child," including educational opportunities. The official slogan for the one-child campaign is *You Sheng You Yu* (give birth to fewer children, but give them better care and education), aimed at improving children's well-being (Yang, 2007, p. 417). The underlying rationale is that more resources at the national, community, and household levels will be available for children and that children with fewer siblings will garner more resources and fare better in physical and intellectual development (Peng, 1997). The long-lasting *You Sheng You Yu* campaign has greatly influenced parents' expectations for the only child and has provided them incentives to better educate their children. Furthermore, in an era of a competitive labor market, parents—especially the middle and upper class parents in urban China—are not satisfied with the mediocre education provided by public schools, and they are preoccupied with giving their only child the best education despite the overwhelming financial burdens (Mok, Wang, & Zhang, 2009). Parents' obsession with children's education facilitated the emergence of private schools, private tutoring services, and private extra-curricular classes, which have become an important component of the marketization of China's education. For example, in order to prepare their children for the competitive globalized world, Chinese parents consider learning English to be very important to the future of their children. A growing number of parents have sent their children to private tutoring classes or to private English schools in order to learn English (Mok, et al.). Many bilingual private schools have been established to cater to the demand of middle and upper middle class parents. These elite or so called *Gui Zu* (noble) schools boast high educational standards, strict discipline, excellent learning conditions and environment, high technology, and high quality faculty, including some native English speakers (Lin, 1994). These schools charge stunningly high tuitions and fees—some equivalent to 35 or more years of income of an ordinary peasant in rural China (Mok, et al.,). These private schools or "checkbook" schools are a luxury reserved for *nouveau riche*.

In addition to academic performance, Chinese parents increasingly expect their children to master a variety of skills. Equipping their children with artistic or athletic skills has been popular among urban middle class parents. Such skills can be counted as part of the national entrance examination scores for college, thereby giving them a better chance of getting into prestigious universities. These skills are considered as necessary stepping-stones in getting established in a successful career. According to a survey conducted by a market research company, 52%



of children under the age of 12 in China attend private extra-curricular classes on weekends, and 62% of children aged 10-12 take additional private lessons in English, math, music, art, dance and martial arts (Mok, et. al, 2009). Private tutors and schools are flourishing under these demands.

However, private schools and education in China are diverse; the *Gui Zu Xue Xiao*, or noble schools, provide sophisticated instructional equipment and luxurious accommodations serving only the elites, whereas the *Min Ban Xue Xiao*, or the people-run schools, operate from makeshift facilities catering to the masses, especially the unplanned children who were born out of the family planning policy (Kwong, 1997). As mentioned above, couples who have unplanned births are subject to severe penalties, including the high “social compensation fee [SCF],” job loss or demotion (Yang, 2007). Government policy also punishes unplanned children by denying them essential rights and social support. Ineligible for *Hu Kou* or the household registration <sup>4</sup>, the unplanned children have no right to schooling, health care, state-sector employment, and a host of other state services and benefits (Fan & Huang, 1989). Parents still demand a basic education for their unplanned children. Under this social context, the *Min Ban*, or people-run schools, are set up in response to the inability of the current educational system to adapt to the rapid social reconfigurations and changes in society. These schools have played a supplementary and self-help function within the present educational system (Han, 2004). The emergence and expansion of *Min Ban* or people-run schools have basically filled the gap in compulsory education for unplanned children.

Moreover, the internal migration has also contributed to the emergence of the people-run schools. Since the economic reforms initiated in the late 1970s, China has undergone rapid modernization, industrialization, and urbanization. As urbanization expanded, so did the discrepancy between urban and rural incomes and living standards (China Labour Bulletin [CLB], 2009). As a result of such discrepancy, millions of farmers have left their homes and migrated to the cities in search of work and a better life. Large-scale internal migration has thus become one of the most prominent by-products of the socioeconomic development of China. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) of China (2009), there are 225.42 million migrant workers in China—more than the populations of the United Kingdom, France, and Australia combined (Hamey, 2008). An estimated 19 million children have accompanied their migrant parents to the cities (Chan, 2009). Because urban governments are only responsible for the education of children with an urban *hu kou*, they have no obligations to educate migrant children. As the governments of the host cities do not have a responsibility to provide social welfare and services to migrants and their children, migrant children’s basic rights to health care, education, and socialization are denied, leading to a higher rate of emotional, behavioral, and psychological problems (Chan, 2009). Ignored, migrant children have become the city’s “invisible population.” As a collective response to such educational inequity, migrant communities are try-



ing to rebuild social networks and renew the sense of hope among the children through people-run migrant schools. People-run schools are thus an alternative for migrant children's education.

Nonetheless, many of the *Min Ban*, or people-run schools, are plagued by high turnover of students, high rate of teacher turnover, less qualified teachers, poor school conditions, and substandard curriculum. Furthermore, *Min Ban* schools, face the problem of recruiting and retaining qualified teachers. The teacher turnover rate is high due to low wages and heavy teaching loads. For example, according to a survey of 59 *Min Ban* schools in Shanghai, Ding (2004) reports that about 78.3 percent of the teachers earned a monthly income of RMB 700 yuan or less, and, of these, 13.7 percent earned between RMB 300 yuan and RMB 500 yuan. The average monthly income for local office workers, however, was RMB 2,815 yuan (US\$339) <sup>5</sup> in 2004. Moreover, the operating conditions in *Min Ban* schools vary greatly, because these schools are set up with private funds and rely mainly on student tuition as revenue. Some more effective schools lease empty public school buildings, whereas others have classes in civilian homes, dilapidated warehouses, or primitive jerrybuilt houses (Ding, 2004; Han, 2004). Classrooms are overcrowded with as many as ninety-three students (Ding). Lighting, heating, and ventilation are poor; some lack fire exits, drinking water, sanitary facilities, health clinics, and playgrounds. The inequity of unplanned children's education is further exacerbated by the substandard curriculum in *Min Ban* schools. Due to lack of funding, qualified teachers and facilities, many *Min Ban* schools can only offer basic Chinese language and math classes. In contrast, the urban students in public schools or in elite private schools have the opportunity to learn English, computer skills, music, arts, social studies, science, and so forth (Han, 2004).

The emergence and growing importance of private education in China have indeed evolved from China's unique transitional social and economic context. *Gui Zu* or noble private schools are catering to China's nouveau riche's demand for the best education for their only children, who are often referred to as "the little emperors." Moreover, these parents regard the elite private schools as a symbol of high social status (Arora, 2010). On the other hand, for parents of unplanned children and for many migrant parents, *Min Ban*, or people-run private schools, are "merely temporary venues for education, providing their children with a basic knowledge of mathematics, reading and writing" (Han, 2004, p. 44). Nonetheless, with the increasing number of self-financing students and non-government education providers (including elite private schools and people-run schools), China's education has been undergoing diversification, marketization, privatization, commodification and decentralization (Borevskaya, 2003; Mok, et al., 2009). The one-child policy has led to inequities in schooling experiences for planned and unplanned children in China.

## CONCLUSION

It is evident that one of the foremost objectives of China's one-child policy is to control population growth in order to ensure quality of life. As noted at the Cairo Conference on Population in 1994, "any effort to slow population growth necessarily involved reducing poverty, seeking economic progress, improving the status of women, environmental protection, and reducing unsustainable consumption and production" (United Nations General Assembly, 1994, p.2). The profound impacts of the one-child policy on family structure, women's rights and roles, and socialization process have been widely acknowledged (Goodstadt, 1982; Chow & Chen, 1989; Greenhalgh, 2003; Yang, 2007). Less well known, however, is the nature and extent of this policy's effect on the privatization of education in China. Therefore, this article reviews literature, media reports, and laws in order to document the direct and indirect impact of the one-child policy on China's education system. It further investigates the relationship between the policy and the emergence of two types of private schools (*Gui Zu Xue Xiao* and *Min Ban Xue Xiao*). I argue that parents of only children put all their hopes on the single child and have higher expectations for him or her. Parents devote more financial resources, time, attention, and energy to the only children, which may contribute to their cognitive advancement and increase the ability of the children to compete academically. *Gui Zu Xue Xiao* have emerged to cater to these parents' needs and demands. For many parents of unplanned children or migrant parents, *Min Ban Xue Xiao* are the alternative venue that their children can receive a basic education, since unplanned children are deprived of basic rights and social services.

Educational stratification and inequality is evident between the *Gui Zu Xue Xiao* and the *Min Ban Xue Xiao*, which reflects the increasing gap between the rich and the poor, and intensified social inequality between the haves and the have-nots. What will the Chinese government do to alleviate the growing tensions between different social groups, for example, the elite and the poor, the planned and unplanned people? Will China move towards attracting capital flows to cities and the amelioration of the unequal distribution of knowledge, power, language and material resources to growing populations? Will China develop into a society of fundamental social divisions between the poor and the rich with the emergence of binary provision in education? Will the education system continue to deny basic education rights to the unplanned children? What is the future of private schools (both the *Gui Zu Xue Xiao* and the *Min Ban Xue Xiao*) like? These are the questions that future research should address. Policy makers should also focus on new approaches to family planning and ways of improving educational and social equality for unplanned children. If the Chinese government fails to properly balance the tensions between economic efficiency and social inequality, these social problems could escalate and cause significant political pressures and turmoil.

## NOTES

1. The “Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution” (1966-76) was launched by Chinese Communist Party (CCP) chairman Mao Zedong to stem what he perceived as the country’s drift away from socialism and toward the “restoration of capitalism.” The Cultural Revolution is now referred to in China as the “decade of chaos” and is generally regarded as one of the bleakest periods in the country’s modern history. The movement’s ideals were betrayed at every turn by its destructive impulses. The much-vaunted initiatives that were to transform the nation often had disastrous consequences for China’s education and cultural life. Economic development was disrupted by factional strife and misguided “ultraleftist” policies (Joseph, 2001).

2. Normal circumstances are broadly defined as that the couple is not ethnic minorities, is not from overseas, has siblings, has a healthy child. If, for example, the first child has health problems (broadly defined), the couple is allowed to have a second birth (Yang, 2007).

3. Currently, the amount of SCF to be paid for an out-of-plan birth is from 2 to 3 times the amount of the local per capita annual income (Yang, 2007, p. 473).

4. The government instituted a permanent and rigorous system of household registration or *hu kou* in 1955 to control migration (Han, 2004). A rural household (*nong cun hu kou*) or an urban household (*cheng shi hu kou*) was assigned to a Chinese citizen based on his or her mother’s residence. Local governments were responsible for providing the residents whose *hu kou* was registered in its jurisdiction with welfare and social services, including education, housing, and health care (CLB, 2009). Residents were not allowed to work or live outside the administrative boundaries of their household registration (*hu kou*) without permission of the authorities.

5. The current exchange rate is one US dollar equals 6.5 Ren Min Bi [RMB] yuan.

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