

Swarthmore College

Works

Political Science Faculty Works

Political Science

2006

China's Longest Campaign: Birth Planning In The People's Republic, 1949-2005

Tyrene White

Swarthmore College, twhite1@swarthmore.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-poli-sci>



Part of the [Political Science Commons](#)

Let us know how access to these works benefits you

Recommended Citation

Tyrene White. (2006). "China's Longest Campaign: Birth Planning In The People's Republic, 1949-2005". *China's Longest Campaign: Birth Planning In The People's Republic, 1949-2005*. <https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-poli-sci/119>

This work is brought to you for free by Swarthmore College Libraries' Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Political Science Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Works. For more information, please contact myworks@swarthmore.edu.

Preface

In the fall of 1979, in my first graduate seminar on Chinese politics, I learned that China had launched a “one-child-per-couple” birth control campaign. I can still remember vividly my reaction—astonishment and awe. Astonishment because, as a young woman of childbearing age, I could easily imagine the implications for Chinese women of being subject to a regime of state regulation of childbearing. Awe because, as a student, I was astounded by this latest and fearsome assertion of power by China’s leaders, by their conviction that it was the right thing to do and that it could be done. I was also curious to know how the state expected to enforce such a policy in the face of what was sure to be massive resistance.

This book bears the imprint of that initial reaction and of the unique opportunity I have had over a quarter century to examine the implementation of a world-historic policy, one comparable to other grand state-initiated social engineering projects of the twentieth century. For all of the attention it has received, both in the U.S. political arena and in the population studies community, China’s population control efforts have yet to receive the sustained scholarly attention they deserve. The rural reforms of the early and mid-1980s, along with the broader economic reform project, have generated innumerable and varied scholarly studies. The one-child policy, by contrast, though arguably just as important, has been neglected, despite its critical role in bridging the politics of the Maoist, Dengist, and post-Deng eras. As of 2005, only a handful of books have been written on the subject. My purpose here is to help remedy that problem by examining the political origins and evolution of the one-child policy and the vital role it has played

in China's quest for modernization. Rather than approach the issue from a demographic, sociological, or anthropological perspective, I focus on why and how the Chinese Communist regime sought to enforce birth limits, and with what results.

The extension of state regulation to childbearing, and the imposition of a system of rationed childbirth, was seen by some observers as a harsh but unsurprising policy choice. This was a regime, after all, whose leaders had repeatedly shown themselves capable of launching radical programs of social transformation (e.g., the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution). Once leaders reached a consensus on the threat population growth posed to China's modernization program, there was every reason to expect them to launch a campaign to check the problem. Since the late 1960s, moreover, many Western population experts had urged the use of all necessary measures to halt the rapid growth of global population, and a few went so far as to advocate the use of coercive and punitive ones. Although China publicly condemned this pessimistic, Malthusian view, it arrived at the same place by a different analytical and ideological pathway. When it declared rapid population growth a major threat to its modernization goals, therefore, and began to set strict targets for local and national growth rates, many observers outside China applauded the move as a reasonable reaction to a grave and debilitating, even crippling, problem of "overpopulation."

Other observers condemned China's move to regulate childbirth and to penalize unauthorized births (unauthorized, that is, by the local authorities), just as they rejected the arguments of Western pessimists who advocated a similar approach. In the United States, China's birth control program became for conservatives in the 1980s and 1990s a galvanizing symbol of the need for pro-life legislation, and for liberals a prime example of the terrible consequences of state intrusion into a domain best left to personal and private decision making.

A divide also emerged in China during the 1980s. Because China's birth limitation program had begun in earnest in urban areas in the early 1970s, and because urban living had already begun to encourage lower levels of fertility, most urban couples of childbearing age either agreed with the state's arguments or acceded reluctantly. In the countryside, however, rural couples were far more skeptical. Experience had taught them that, while having too many children could deepen poverty and indebtedness, having too few could be catastrophic, resulting both in short-term and long-term poverty and in a decline in social status.

As these divided views were opening up in the United States and China in the early 1980s, I began my research. By the early 1990s, three rounds of fieldwork and research in China, plus sustained library research in the

United States and conversations with many friends and colleagues, had illuminated my understanding not only of China's birth planning program but also of the sensitivities around the issue. As more and more people in the United States learned about China's policy, conversations that meandered along a variety of trails always seemed to have one point in common. Sooner or later I was asked for my view of China's policy. Having heard of China's population challenge, but having also heard of the draconian measures used to enforce the policy, friends and colleagues, strangers and family members were all curious to know whether I thought the policy was justified. At times, the question came from harsh critics of China who were clearly hoping I would offer an unequivocal condemnation; at other times it was asked by those who were so worried about global population and the environment that they were willing to overlook the evidence of coercion in China's efforts to limit population growth. They, of course, hoped to hear a defense of the policy as a necessary part of China's struggle to lift its people out of poverty. My attempts to avoid these categoricals and offer a more nuanced view—one that acknowledged the gravity of China's demographic challenge while rejecting coercive means to tackle it—were usually heard politely, but most likely did little to alter previously held views.

It has sometimes been even more difficult to discuss this issue with Chinese acquaintances, friends, and strangers. Discussions about China's birth planning program almost always provoke the deployment of defensive armor in anticipation of being judged harshly by someone who doesn't understand China's situation. Perhaps my most striking encounter along these lines was with a stranger I encountered in the 1980s, a female graduate student who happened to be sitting in my row on a flight from San Francisco to Beijing. A middle-aged Chinese man sat between us in the three-seat row, and when he saw me working with my research materials, he struck up a conversation. Before long, he was expressing his regret that Mao Zedong had not supported birth control in the 1950s and 1960s, and I relayed some of my own findings on that topic. The woman in the window seat soon joined in and spoke in an agitated way about the necessity for strict birth control in China. A wiser person would have listened carefully and respectfully, and asked about her own experience. Instead, I engaged her on several points that challenged her view. Soon, the poor man between us was trying to will himself into another seat as we argued across his tray table.

Why recount this story? Because it is emblematic of the sensitivities that continue to surround China's population policy, sensitivities that persist after twenty-five years. These sensitivities make it easy to start an argument but hard to actually communicate. This book is my attempt to communicate, to interpret the one-child policy against its historical and political

backdrop. It is also my attempt to show how an understanding of China's birth planning program is inseparable from an understanding of the political economy of development, from the efforts of China's leaders since 1949 to chart a course to modernization. Perhaps it is also my attempt to start another conversation with the woman on the airplane.

This project has benefited greatly from the help and hospitality of many people and institutions. The journey began at Ohio State University, where Mike Lampton tutored me in the intricacies of Chinese politics and encouraged my interest in China's population policy. His efforts to create an exchange program with Wuhan University were reciprocated by the late Gao Shangyin (then vice president of Wuhan University), who gave me the opportunity to conduct research in China during a pivotal period of reform in the early 1980s. Professor Chen Chung-min, with whom I conducted township and village interviews in the spring of 1982, gave me an invaluable short course on the art and discipline of fieldwork, preparing me well for solo work later that year. I was graciously received and assisted by Wuhan University officials and staff members during three extended stays between 1982 and 1990. Their efforts to arrange interviews and field visits made this work possible, as did the many officials and individuals who agreed to talk with me. I am particularly grateful to the township and village officials in Donghu (a pseudonym), whose hospitality and cooperation were essential to this project. The Office of Village Self-Governance of the Ministry of Civil Affairs arranged field visits and interviews in villages in Hebei, Shandong, Liaoning, and Hubei in the early 1990s, allowing me to continue exploring the links between rural political reform and birth planning. I am particularly indebted to Wang Zhenyao, along with the many other central, provincial, and local Civil Affairs officials who assisted with these arrangements and shared their insights with me.

Financial support for this project came from Ohio State University, the Committee on Scholarly Communication with China, the Swarthmore College Faculty Research Support Fund, and in 1989–90 a post-doctoral fellowship at the Fairbank Center for East Asian Research, Harvard University. For their support during the fellowship year and after, I am especially grateful to Rod MacFarquhar, James Watson, and Merle Goldman.

Colleagues have provided support and encouragement along the way, some giving generously of their time to comment on parts of this manuscript. I am particularly indebted to Jean Oi, Marc Blecher, Dorothy Solinger, Thomas Bernstein, Elizabeth Perry, and Mark Selden, all of whom read parts or all of this work at various stages of development. Special thanks also to Christina Gilmartin, Gail Hershatter, and Lisa Rofel. My

work with them on a 1992 conference on women and gender in China, and on the conference volume we edited together, was a wonderful experience, not least because of their persistent efforts to shake up the intellectual categories and ways of seeing that came naturally to a political scientist. I am also indebted to Kay Johnson, who has generously shared some of her research findings, and from whom I have learned much.

Special thanks to Nancy Hearst, librarian at the Fairbank Center Library, for her help in finding research materials. I thank my students at Swarthmore College who have taught me so much. Special thanks to Susan Lin, Matthew Williams, and Rebecca Strauss, who served as research assistants.

My colleagues in Political Science and Asian Studies at Swarthmore College have been a constant source of support. I am particularly indebted to Lillian Li, who read and commented on a draft of this manuscript. I am also grateful to Roger Haydon for shepherding the project at Cornell University Press and to Candace Akins for her editorial assistance.

I have also had the good fortune to be supported by a large and loving family, to whom I owe a great debt of thanks and gratitude. They have encouraged and supported and, when necessary, simply put up with me, for as long as I can remember. My daughter, Mingming, is my inspiration and joy. I learn from her every day.

And last, a special thanks to Aunt Helen, to whom I made a promise.

TYRENE WHITE

Swarthmore, Pennsylvania