

Social and economic aspects of population planning policies in the People's Republic of China

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Abstract

In 1979 the People's Republic of China adopted a law introducing birth control planning, which is often known as the "one-child policy" in Western countries. The policy was created and implemented because of numerous demographic and economic problems. The paper presents the assumptions behind the introduced one-child policy, multidimensional analysis of the effects of its actions and their evaluation in the context of the economic development and demographic structure of the Chinese society. It further describes the historical and economic background of the policy and its short and long-term effects in the economic and socio-demographic areas. The analysis presented is based on the World Bank databases (for demographic data comparison), and on socio-political publications from both Western countries and mainland China. The paper strives to fully present and evaluate population planning policies implemented in the PRC.

Keywords

China, one child policy, population control, demography, society, gender disparities

Introduction

The population planning policy, 计划生育政策 (*jìhuà shēngyù zhèngcè*), is a law introduced in 1978, which officially introduced state control over family planning. Its main (and most generally formulated) goal was to draw China out of extreme poverty (Edlund, 2010, p. 3). In its primary aspect, this reform prohibits Chinese of Han nationality from having more than one child. In time, this non-complex model has been enhanced with additional clarification, including a number of principles mitigating the general ban. As a result, the current shape of the bill differs significantly from the initial one (Rocha da Silva, 2006, p. 20).

The main reason to write this study is the complex effect of one-child policy on the economic situation of the whole country and its demographic structure. Moreover, it is a widely discussed example of far-reaching government interference with private life of citizens, and opinions on the subject are extremely divided.

The main sources used in the article are the statistical data from the database of the World Bank and a number of publications and studies on this subject. Unfortunately, some of them are speculative in nature – especially in the context of assessing the positive effects of one-child policy on the size of the population of modern China. Therefore, it was necessary to use some approximated values as no other information was available.

This paper presents the assumptions of one-child policy introduced in China, a multidimensional analysis of the effects of its application and their evaluation in the context of economic development and demographic structure of Chinese society.

1. The origins of birth control

In unfavorable political and ideological conditions, in 1957 Ma Yinchu (马寅初 1882-1982) has formulated and presented his „New Population Theory” - 新人口论 (*Xīn rénkǒu lùn*). He is widely regarded as the father of the overall concept of birth control in China, including the one-child policy (Wang, 1996). The New Population Theory was based on the analysis of population censuses results for several cities, mainly located in Zhejiang Province, and Shanghai. Based on the observed trends Ma Yinchu came to the conclusion that rapid population growth, reflected in the research, can be detrimental to the future development of China. In his work he formulated a few basic arguments:

- China's population is growing too fast;

- the accumulation of capital is too slow compared to the rate of population growth;
- the state should have the power to influence fertility rate and shape of the population;
- „人多固然是一个极大的资源，但也是一个极大的负担” (*Rén duō gùrán shì yīgè jí dà de zīyuán, dàn yěshì yīgè jí dà de fùdān*) – Many people are a great resource, but also a huge burden (Yinchu, 1957).

After the death of Chairman Mao in 1976 and the acquisition of power by Deng Xiaoping in 1978, China started a period of economic and political development (Evans, 1995). Deng Xiaoping decided that control over the size of the population in China is crucial to the success of its economic reforms, which led to the introduction of restrictive one-child policy (Christiansen, 2013). Its assumptions have their basis in the work of Ma Yinchu. The Act 中华人民共和国 计划生育 (*Zhōnghuá rénmín gònghéguó jìhuà shēngyù*), (eng. Birth planning policy of People's Republic of China) was adopted in 1979 by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China. PRC authorities expected that the one-child policy will help to limit the use of natural resources in China, reduce unemployment (due to excess supply of labor) and restrict the scale of health problems. Official Chinese sources give estimates, according to which in the years 1979-2011 one-child policy prevented the birth of more than 400 million children (Han, 2011).

Western commentators generally define introduced regulations as a violation of human rights (Huang, 2012). One-child policy strongly interferes with the natural right to have children. Furthermore, the existence of exceptions to the rule introduces an artificial social division on privileged and ordinary citizens. Another differentiating factor is the assets, because the wealthy can afford the „luxury” of having two or more children. In addition, from the disparity in property arise disparities in children's access to health care and education, which creates and increases social inequities (Attané, 2013, pp. 87-90).

Since its introduction in 1979, the one-child policy act was amended several times concerning different provisions. Initially applied to all Chinese of Han nationality, without exception, it gradually softened its form and adapted to people's reality. However, in the urban areas, it was still very strict and did not allow any exceptions to the rule (*Status of population...*, 2013).

It was only in 1987, that decision-making competence on one-child policy was transferred from the central to the provincial level, allowing, inter alia, less strict treatment of families in difficult circumstances (Scheuer, 1987). Since that time, the restrictiveness of the reform varies, often significantly, depending on the province, which shows the map in Fig. 1.

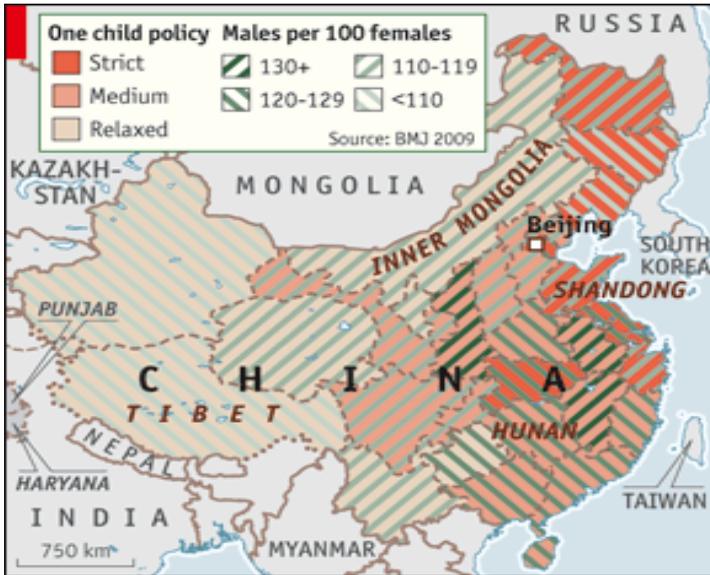


Fig. 1. One-child policy restrictiveness per province

Source: (*The worldwide ...*).

It can be observed that the restrictiveness of the one-child policy enforcement decreases toward the west. This is explained by several reasons. Firstly, a cluster of large cities, which are not eligible is located mainly in the provinces along the east coast of China. Secondly, far western regions are less populated, largely inhabited by ethnic minorities, for whom the population planning policy is less restrictive.

In practice restrictions for birth control policy violations have been implemented in the form of penal fees for each subsequent child born. Their actual height is determined based on the family income and other factors (Greenhalgh, 2005, pp. 253-276).

As a general rule, one-child policy applies to the Chinese of Han nationality – an ethnic group, which is approx. 90% of the Chinese population. There are a few exceptions from it that are shown in Fig. 2. These have been established for reasons other than demographic, mainly based on the structure of China's population or its social and ethnic diversity.

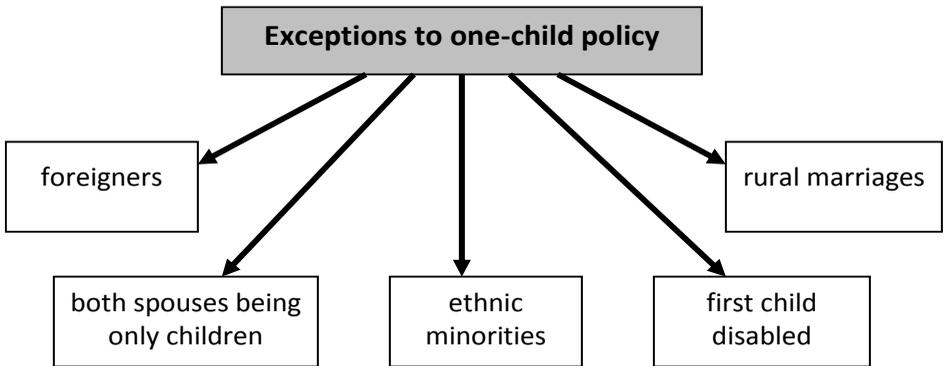


Fig. 2. One child policy exceptions

Source: own elaboration on the basis of (Anderson, Teng Wah, 2007).

Foreigners are obviously exempt from such a personal control. It was also considered that if both spouses are only children, they may have another child. Another example of derogation from the regulations is the situation when the first child is born with disabilities, while in the countryside, parents can have two children if the first born is a girl (Hu, 2002). Chinese agriculture is still characterized by extensive production model, where a large part of agricultural production is the result of huge amounts of labor, and not by mechanization or use of chemicals (Walker, 2011). In addition, the pension system in China does not sufficiently cover the rural population. These are the kids who provide material support and care of their parents in old age (Anderson, 2007, p. 2). It is also important to note that traditionally after marriage a woman is included in the family of her husband and committed to supporting in-laws, and not biological parents. Taking these factors into account, one-child policy is less restrictive on rural couples and they are entitled to the exception discussed above. In conclusion, with all the exceptions to the rule of one child in the family, at the moment it's given that actually only 35.9% of the Chinese population in general is subject to the policy (Xiaofeng, 2007).

2. Demographic consequences of introducing a policy of birth control

Completely negative effects of the implementation of one-child policy undoubtedly include the progressive aging of Chinese society, harmful to the economic development of the country. This reform, along with other factors had also a huge impact on

gender disparities in China, permanently disrupting the demographic cycle of population (Li *et al.*, 2010, p.1). Another destructive effects for society as a whole are probably yet to be seen, but already a significant increase in crime of a sexual nature is expected (Attané, 2013, p. 243). There has also been registered an alarming increase in trafficking in women and forced prostitution (Edlund, 2010, pp. 3-4). Deficiency in women will probably affect the economy and the cultural sphere all over the country (Cunningham, 2011, p. 21). Never before in China, have such disparities been so apparent (Hall, 2010, p. 10).

China is now characterized by one of the world's most favorable relations between the number of professionally active adults to persons „dependent” – children and the elderly. Currently, the demographic dependency ratio is about 3 dependents attributed to one independent (Huang, 2012). However, the situation in China may soon deteriorate, as the very low birth rates in several years will cause the number of employees to drop sharply, which will worsen the living conditions of the whole population and hamper economic growth (Walker, 2011).

The exact structure of Chinese society for both sexes in 2012 is shown in the Fig. 3. The shape of population pyramid which is clearly raised at the height of maturity, that is, 40-45 years, is characteristic for by a rapidly aging society.

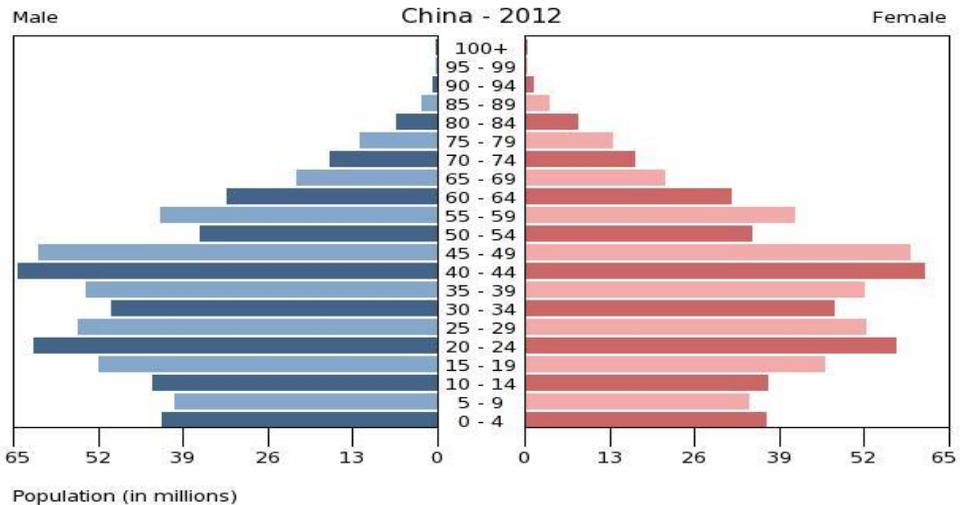


Fig 3: Population pyramid in China in 2012

Source: Data of the World Bank, <http://data.worldbank.org>.

The three most recent population censuses and demographic studies indicate that the sex ratio indicator (i.e. the number of men per 100 women) is steadily increasing. In 1982, it amounted to 108.5, whereas in years 1990 and 2000, the values were 113.8 and 119.9 respectively. A study conducted in 2005 by the Institute of Population and Labor Economics estimates this figure at 122.7 (Eberstadt, 2009, p. 46). For comparison, the society is considered to be biologically stable for the values of this ratio ranging from 103 to 107 (Li et. al., 2010, p. 1). It is estimated that in a decade or two more than 20% of young Chinese men will not be able to find a Chinese wife. In the case of a population as large as the Chinese, it means in fact 30 million boys who, for objective reasons, will not be able to find a permanent partner in their homeland (Edlund, 2010, pp. 3-4). The lower level of the girl births, which is widespread now throughout China, contributes to gender asymmetry. In practice, abortions are very often when the baby turns out to be a girl. There are also numerous cases of female infanticide or conscious negligence leading to their death (Mcelroy, 2001). This phenomenon has multiple causes. It is popular (especially in the Western press) to assign one child policy a key role in this issue. Traditionally, girls are considered less useful in agricultural work (which is especially important in rural areas), and it is believed that their utility for the whole family is insignificant (Huang, 2012). Additionally, the costs of raising a child in China are very high, especially in cities where parents want to meet the general standards concerning leading a child through life. There is a great social pressure to send children to expensive schools and providing them with many extra-curricular activities, otherwise it suggests that they are not properly taken care of. This pressure makes the upbringing of a child is very expensive, so parents have the stronger expectations for his gender. For these reasons, demographers estimate that the introduction of one-child policy permanently altered the sex ratio in the society. Parents consciously choose having a son, which is more prestigious and also gives them a sense of security in old age (Attané, 2013, p. 535).

A deeper analysis, however, shows that the same trends are present in the whole Asia, with particular intensity in India (Li et al., 2009, p. 4). There is also a significant gender imbalance in favor of boys, even though there was no law interfering in family planning implemented in the country. This shows that although the one-child policy in China could exacerbate or precipitate such an adverse process, it is however a major simplification to impose liability solely on these regulation.

3. Economic effects of the reform

The accurate quantitative analysis of the effects of one-child policy on economy is extremely hard to conduct. Due to lack or poor quality of statistic data concerning China's economic growth, most researchers are limited to mere subjective conclusions or estimations. However, the population planning policy has undoubtedly impacted the country as a whole, also economically. Thus, it is crucial to mention at least some of the areas where the role of one-child policy could not be denied.

Despite many negative effects on the demographic structure of Chinese society, the positive role of one-child policy in the rapid economic development of the country is worth emphasizing. It is estimated that one-child policy was an important driver of the rapid economic growth of the PRC in the 80s. Together with legal intervention in citizens' fertility, some burning issues were brought under control, for example health problems (such as regular outbreaks of diseases). It also increased the level of prosperity (Attané, 2013, p. 245), which is inextricably linked with one-child policy, that in the late 70s seemed to be the only sensible step for the government (Ravallion, Chen, 2007, pp. 1-42).

A side effect of one-child policy is an increase in the savings rate - this ratio shows what proportion of household disposable income is allocated in savings (Yang *et al.*, 2011). This is attributed to introduced regulations for two reasons. First, a family with one child spends less than large families with the same income. Thus allowing to put aside a larger sum from the household budget. Secondly, with the larger number of offspring, the expectations for old age are changing – an only child may not be able to sustain both parents. For this reason the desire to save for the future also increases.

4. Family model change

The introduction of the one-child policy resulted in changes larger and deeper than just concerning the number of children in the family. For a long time in China, families were large and with a lot of children. The one-child policy destroyed the traditional model.

In mostly patriarchal China, social relations were based on the principle of seniority. Children owed obedience to their parents, and their grandparents. After implementing one-child policy, this situation was reversed. China has now become a country of only children and so called „little emperors” (八零后 *bā líng hòu*, eng. born, after 1980).

In larger cities, where some families are relatively well-off, there is even a scourge of pampered, making claims and consumer-oriented only children. On the other hand, there is equally as much responsibility and pressure that rest on the children themselves. Not only, must they endure the over-protectiveness of their parents, but also meet their high expectations. There has been an increasing number of suicides of young people after failed exams, failures at school or work (Attané, 2013, pp. 44-54).

Another duty of a young Chinese is to take care of their parents when they are old and in need of assistance. When the number of siblings in the family was high, the cost and effort of taking care of parents was distributed to more people. Currently, only one child is responsible (and to a large extent financially, since the pension and medical care in China are not yet sufficiently developed, and in the countryside virtually inaccessible) for both parents. As a result, a young Chinese married couple has to sustain up to four people, not including grandparents. This is a huge cost, also mental, as more and more parents are demanding children to show an effort similar to their own dedication during childhood (Attané, 2013, p. 55).

5. Social disparities in modern China

The introduction of one-child policy in China is deepening some disparities between urban and rural areas. First, the distribution of income between the countryside and the cities is very uneven, in favour of the cities. Cities are areas with a high rate of growth, with higher wages and a wider range of jobs. This is not a typical feature of China, on the contrary – similar trends are observable everywhere in the world for many reasons. This does not change the fact that with the existing one child policy, the sum of the expenditure of urban parents per child, and the amount spent on their rural peer significantly differ from each other. Thus causing an apparent social inequalities among the youngest segment of society. No less important issue is the children's access to education. Theoretically, the Chinese state ensures universality of schools, the text of the family planning policy also contains a record of taking care of the „internal quality” of the population, where education has been cited as one of its main components. In practice, however, children raised in cities have a much better situation than their peers from rural areas. First, the physical access to schools in rural areas is very difficult, often there is one school for a few village (Attané, 2013, p. 125). Another issue is the difference in the quality of education in rural areas and frequent dropout. Many children are forced to drop out of school to help their family in labor. The situation of an only child is very difficult, because often

they bear the whole burden of helping their parents and don't have enough time, strength or money to study (Fu, Zhu, 2009).

Despite government assurances that universal access to health care system is now one of the priorities, medical expenses are too high for the average Chinese family. Some initiatives, such as starting medical cooperatives in rural areas, do not bring the desired effects for several reasons. First of all, the cost of annual contribution exceeds financial capacity of the poorer Chinese. Moreover, cooperatives themselves have problems with the budget due to low income (Attané, 2013, p. 95). The result is a very bad health care in rural areas, for which suffer especially the most vulnerable, namely children. It is estimated that half of the children dying in the villages were not treated at all due to the high costs (*Congressional...*, 2007).

The one-child policy is not a direct cause of the above-described social inequalities, but surely it worsens the situation. Children very often become the victims of these disparities in the country. The facts cast some doubts on the declared commitment to strengthening „inner quality” of the Chinese population.

Conclusions

The text of the Act of population and birth control policy is very extensive and divided into several parts. It consists of identified goals, established administrative and legal liability, the scope of the policy and the rights of the individual in the context of birth control. The provisions of the act provide the women with special protection, expressing concern for their health and role in the society. Also, girls are protected by law, with the categorical ban of both abortion due to the sex of the fetus, and negligence during infancy. On one side, this is the result of the gender structure of the Chinese society, where there are fewer women. On the other hand, this results also from the awareness of the cultural and historical conditions that put boys far higher than girls.

The introduction of one-child policy has huge implications to this day for both the Chinese model of the family, social relations, as well as the age structure of the population. The shape of the age pyramid of the Chinese population is characteristic for a rapidly aging population. A similar age structure have, for example, the Scandinavian countries and Western European countries with a very high level of development. This may in the future be a major economic and social threat to China, as that kind of social structure requires a more developed pension system and social welfare.

Despite the advantage of critical voices in the world, the fact that China's one-child policy has also had a positive effects should not be forgotten. Most of the problems currently plaguing China (such as scarcity of resources, poverty, unemployment, lack of water or too uncoordinated and uncontrolled urbanization) would have a definitely sharper course and a more serious nature, if the country had now about two or three hundred million people more.

However, there are new constantly emerging problems and the policy of birth control can no longer be the solution. A very rapidly aging population, youth unemployment, environmental degradation on a massive scale - these are just some of the challenges China is currently facing. For this reason, one-child policy is being more widely and more strongly criticized - on one hand as a relic of the past and the answer to the problems that are non-existent today, on the other hand as an ethically wrongful law, enforced in a way that violates basic human rights. It is becoming clearer that for a number of reasons - economic, social and demographic - it's worth to move away from the one-child policy to a less restrictive population policies.

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Społeczne i ekonomiczne aspekty polityki jednego dziecka w Chińskiej Republice Ludowej

Streszczenie

W 1979 roku w Chińskiej Republice Ludowej przyjęto ustawę wprowadzającą kontrolę planowania urodzeń, w krajach zachodnich częściej znaną pod nazwą „polityka jednego dziecka”. Była ona odpowiedzią nowej władzy Komunistycznej Partii Chin na szereg problemów demograficznych i gospodarczych, takich jak przeludnienie, nadmierne zużycie zasobów naturalnych, niedostatek dóbr. W artykule przedstawiono założenia wprowadzonej w Chinach polityki jednego dziecka, wieloaspektową analizę jej efektów oraz ich ewaluację w kontekście ekonomicznego rozwoju i demograficznej struktury społeczeństwa chińskiego. Opisano tło historyczne i gospodarcze wprowadzonej polityki oraz jej krótko-okresowe i długookresowe skutki w kontekście gospodarczym oraz społeczno-demograficznym.

Słowa kluczowe

Chiny, polityka jednego dziecka, kontrola urodzeń, demografia, społeczeństwo, dysproporcje płciowe

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