

The effects of the one-child policy on the education system, and girls' lives in China

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Introduction

The one-child policy was introduced nationally in China in 1979, to slow the population growth down. It came to an end in 2015. Literally, this policy means, one family could not have more than one child. Couples who violated the one-child policy faced a variety of punishments, from fines and loss of employment to forced abortion. This policy applied for two main nationalities: Han and Zhuang, which cover over 92% of Chinese population. It did not mean that couples from the other 54 minorities could have unlimited numbers of children. Basically, all the couples from minority ethnicities could have two children, and if the couple had an agricultural residency permit they could have three children. During its practice, family planning was firmly implemented on Han, Zhuang and Man, with more than 10 million residents each at that time.

Although the one-child policy ended in 2015, its impact is still noticeable. It prevented an estimated number of about 400 million births, it came along with human rights violations, sex-selected abortions, abandonment, etc. It influenced not only the birth rate but also other fields concerned with child care, such as the education system. Besides public critique in China and other countries regarding reproductive rights, the one-child policy also

challenged Chinese traditional culture. But, despite the criticism from numerous perspectives, many of my female friends (especially those who are at my age and highly educated) said that they should thank this policy. What benefits could the one-child policy provide for them?

The one-child policy, the Chinese education system, and class hierarchy

The birth reduction causes fewer children in kindergarten and school. With fewer babies born, fewer children get enrolled. As a result, fewer teachers were needed and many teachers became unemployed. The National Educational Development Statistics from 2015, released by the Chinese Ministry of Education, shows that the number of the nine-year compulsory education schools (six-year-elementary school plus three-year-middle school) was reduced by 11.100 to 242.900.¹ According to a report by Sina Education in Sep 2015, 172 teachers in Shayang, Hubei province joined the security team instead of teaching due to having failed to be recruited. Most of them are highly educated and have over thirty years of teaching experience. Although Shayang is a small county, are there so few children in this region, that so many teachers are not needed? The answer is yes and no: the reduction of births, and internal migration are responsible for the decreased number of teachers needed.²

Due to the Chinese economic reform in 1979 internal migration has become more common. Prior to the reform, it was really difficult to move from one place to another. The Hukou system kept the people where they were born. A hukou is a record in the governmental household registration required by law in Mainland China and Taiwan, which determines where citizens are allowed to live. The system originated in ancient China. People born in urban areas have a non-agricultural residency permit; people born in rural areas have an agricultural one. In the period of planned economy, everyone's work was assigned by the authorities. People could visit their friends or relatives in

¹ Cf. Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China: Report of Chinese education development in 2015. 2016, http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A03/s180/moe_633/201607/t20160706_270976.html (last viewed 25.08.2016).

² Cf. Sina education: Working position changing of 172 teachers in Wuhan. 2015, <http://edu.sina.com.cn/zxx/2015-09-22/1026484352.shtml> (last viewed 13.08.2016).

other places, but it was almost impossible to move to another place and find a job. For example, my grandfather has an agricultural residency permit, and although he went to high school, not an agricultural or technical school, it was impossible for him to go to college or find a job in the city area. He had to stay in the village where he was registered and ask the local government for a job. If he wanted to work in the city area as a worker, he needed to go to technical school to get the non-agricultural residency permit, if he could find a job by himself. If my grandfather had lived in a city with a lack in working force, he might have had a chance to get a job in a factory. But unfortunately, Beijing is not such a city. And he could not go to another province because he was registered in Daxing, Beijing. And college was not a suitable option since he was supposed to be a farmer.

After the economic reform, companies and factories could hire workers by themselves. Although it is still quite difficult to change one's household registration record, people could move to a city and find a job to start their life. This led to large-scale internal migration, from villages to cities, from underdeveloped regions to developed regions. But the Hukou system still exists, so the migrant workers face a lot of problems. Those 172 teachers in Shayang were affected mainly by internal migration. People move from one place to another for a better life. Chinese people move to another place for two reasons: fortune and education. It seems that nothing can stop Chinese parents from any opportunity to give their children a better or higher education. Despite minimal resources and budgets, the Chinese people make major investments in their children and the education system.

In the 7th century B.C, Chinese philosopher and politician Guanzhong classified the local people into a system called 士农工商 (scholar, farmer, worker, merchant). The classification system aimed at settling people and concentrate a certain industry in one region. At the beginning, the four groups of people were equal. But gradually they became classes where the scholar is the most respected, and the merchant is at the bottom of the hierarchy. In imperial China candidates for the state administration were selected in a civil service examination. The system became the major path to office in the 6th century, it was abolished in 1905. In ancient China, people barely learned any sciences, mainly the humanities, especially philosophy and politics. The imperial examinations became the main and easiest way for poor people to enter the upper classes. Until now, people say that

knowledge changes destiny. There are many ancient Chinese stories about parents supporting their children to continue education. The best known story is *Mengmu*, about a mother named Meng who moves three times to find good studying circumstances for her son.

The economic basis determines the superstructure – education is always combined with economics. In developed regions not only the education infrastructure but also the teaching faculty is much better qualified than in underdeveloped regions. Even in the same city, most of the best schools are in the downtown area. Parents and children cannot decide by themselves which primary school and middle school the children will go to. It depends on where they live. After the high school entrance examination, children can go to the high school of their choice. For better education, many parents become *Mengmu*. They move around to make sure that their children can go to the best kindergarten, and then the best primary school, and the best middle school, to get through the entrance examination of the best high school. And finally, hopefully, the children can get to one of the top universities. It sounds ridiculous. Moving is quite exhausting and the price of houses around renowned schools is really high. Also, not every child is good at studying. But many one-child-families are willing to take these risks.

The education and teaching resources in the urban area are much better than in the countryside. For example, to apply for a teaching position in a public school, applicants with a teaching license who graduated in an educational major can apply for a teaching position in the schools in their hometown; applicants, who have the teaching license but graduated in a non-educational major need to go to schools in the countryside. After five years of teaching, teachers from the rural area can apply for a teaching position in the city. Also, the education infrastructure and learning resources are better. As a result of the one-child policy, parents have even greater interest in the education of their children. Therefore, early childhood education programs are booming, and not only the number of public kindergartens increases every year, but also private early childhood education organizations become very popular. Therefore, although there are more schools and fewer births, it becomes more difficult to get enrolled in an elementary school in an urban area.

According to the United Nations' world wide fertility research the number of children decreases with higher income. The one-child policy undoubtedly speeded up this situation in China. Who was hurt by the one-child policy? The punishments that couples who violated the one-child policy faced, including fines, loss of employment and forced abortion, made many couples with jobs in government departments or public institutions, and non-agricultural residency permits, comply with the rule. Although after the economic reform, many people had a chance to find a job in private companies, most of the companies and factories were owned by the government. Especially effective was the threat of unemployment. The fine corresponded with the family income. The richer a family was, the higher the fine would be. Both of my parents are teachers, and their incomes were not good when I was a child. When I asked my mother why she did not have another kid my mother said, both of my parents would have become unemployed, therefore she never thought about a second child. If one of my parents could have kept their job, she would have had more, she added. However, for couples who had an agricultural residency permit, the main punishment was forced abortion. Family income in a rural area was difficult to calculate and farmers were not afraid of unemployment. Even if someone had a job in local government and got fired, he could apply for farming land as long as he had an agricultural residency permit.

Besides the punishments, people in city areas tended to follow the rules and use birth control products. As a result, the fertility rate in the urban area is lower than in the countryside. According to the data released by the National Bureau of Statistics, the disposable income per capita of urban households in China in 2015 was 31.195 ¥ (ca. 4.185 €), while the disposable income per capita of rural households was 11.422 ¥ (ca. 1.532 €).³ Rural children have less education and teaching resources and need to share fewer education investments with their siblings. As a result, the gap between the rich and the poor keeps widening.

³ Cf. Statista: Per capita disposable income of urban households in China from 2008 to 2015 (in yuan), <http://www.statista.com/statistics/289186/china-per-capita-disposable-income-urban-households/> (last viewed 25.08.2016).

The one-child policy and son preference

A “4-2-1”-family is a standard Chinese family form, consisting of four grandparents, two parents and one child. When the only child is born, six adults are there to take care of it. On the one hand, the child gets more attention, care and education investments from his or her parents and grandparents. On the other, the one child could be spoiled. While all the other countries are busy putting pro-natalist policy in practice, the Chinese government is trying to control human population. France passed the *Code de la Famille*, a complex piece of pro-natalist legislation in 1939. Germany restarted pro-natalist policies in 2007 (although it failed). China also used to be a pro-natalist country. In China, we say 多子多福, which means the more children you have, the more happiness you have.

Women who are not willing to have a baby are under huge social pressure. This pressure could come from everywhere, not only friends and families but also colleagues, even neighbors would pressure women without children, to get pregnant. During the Twelfth National People’s Congress in 2016, CPPCC (Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference) members Wang Ming and Liu Dajun jointly submitted a proposal about the revival of a pro-natalist policy, claiming fertility as one of the core values of traditional Chinese culture. The CPPCC members claimed that birth control destroyed Chinese culture and caused plenty of problems, such as the aging population, and gender imbalance etc. They appealed that birth control policies should be abolished completely, and the traditional culture of fertility should be restored. They did not explain what the traditional Chinese culture of fertility is, or which part of it should be revived, but they used the word 传宗接代, which means “carries on the family line or has a son to carry on the family line”. Traditional Chinese culture prefers sons. There are three ways to be unfilial, and the worst is to not produce offspring, which refers to sons.

The Chinese society is very much influenced by Confucianism, where maintaining the lineage is fundamental. It is characterized by the principle of patrilocality, according to which the couple has to live in the man’s village. In

traditional China, a married woman had to move in with her husband's clan.⁴ As a result, it is preferable for families to have sons instead of daughters, as they will secure that the lineage will be maintained and the property will stay within the family. Normally, the naturally higher proportion of boys at birth is compensated by their higher mortality rate. With the development of medical science, nowadays the neonatal mortality rate decreased remarkably. But in China, girls are more likely to be neglected during their childhood and receive less medical treatments than boys, the sex gap increases. As a compromise with the traditional culture, in some parts of rural China couples are allowed to have a second child when the first one is a girl since 2007.

How severe is the son preference in China? Once I read an article about a six-year-old girl, who is taking care of her blind parents and her newborn younger brother.⁵ The article contained many pictures of the little girl doing housework and taking care of her brother. This article was aimed to praise the little girl. But the truth behind the article was released in the comment section. The newborn baby boy is the fourth child of the blind couple. The couple is unemployed, and they live on social welfare. The father is seriously ill and was not able to work anymore. The mother is also ill. The second and the third child were girls and given to the relatives. Although the father was already bedridden, they finally had a son. Many readers and I asked the same question: the girl is at school age, does she have a chance to go to school, while she is busy taking care of her parents and her younger brother?

The story might be an exception. A more common situation is the story of my friend. My friend Ding is from a one-child family. Her parents love her a lot and supported her so she could go to Germany. They also bought her a house close to the university. Although she is married, her father set up a trust fund for her. I was really jealous when we talked about her family. But

⁴ Cf. William Lavelly, Xinhua Ren: Patrilocality and Early Marital Co-residence in Rural China, 1955–85. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/C165A7E7CCC0C17C3D80DDAEBBCC054F/S0305741000040789a.pdf/patrilocality-and-early-marital-co-residence-in-rural-china-1955-85.pdf> (last viewed 29.08.2016).

⁵ Cf. Sina: 6-year-old girl takes care of her blind parent. 2016, <http://zj.sina.com.cn/news/s/2016-07-05/detail-ifxtsatn8129016.shtml> (last viewed 22.08.2016).

she told me, her father also said several times, if she had a brother, all that would belong to him. The one-child policy protects her rights to have more education investment from her parents. Another interesting phenomenon is how girls were named. Many girls from one-child families share the name 若楠 (Ruonan) or 胜楠 (Shengnan), which sounds similar to “as a boy” or “better than boys”. Their names contain their parents’ hopes and wishes. “Women hold up half the sky” is an old Chinese proverb. Prompted by the government’s appeal and their parents’ wishes, many girls did become more competitive than boys. Is the situation better, when residents are better educated and more wealthy? Barely. A good example is the preference for sons in South Korea. I was shocked when I heard that a famous K-pop star, Kim Jaejoong, is the eighth child in his family. He has seven big sisters. This situation was quite common in the generation of my parent. My mother has three sisters and one younger brother. My generation is the one-child generation. Therefore, the policy did help many women getting out of the endless cycle of reproduction.

Most of the Chinese families have two working parents. Money is certainly the main reason. Many families need another income to pay the bills. Another considerable reason is the social status. Generally, in Chinese society housewives are looked down on. They are considered as not capable or too lazy to do any work. In traditional China, when women almost exclusively had a reproductive role, the major way to enhance the social status was to have a son. Most people blame the low family status of women on unemployment. Fathers bring an income to the family, while mothers mainly take care of the household. As a result, women want to break the chains of reproduction and enhance their social status through working. But without a pro-natalist policy to protect working mothers’ rights, many working mothers are in a dead end. Women want to change the situation of their low social status and go to work. But the traditional culture drags them back to the family to have children. In China, a working mother has only three months of maternity leave. If mothers want to have more time to take care of their children, they are threatened to lose employment. If they spend more time at work, they are criticized by their families and the public as an incompetent mother. At the same time, women without children could face even more resistance.

The saddest thing is, that in many occasions women put the chain of reproduction on other women. Many wives are struggling with their responsibility for childcare and the household. Many men, who are considered as a treasure of a family, lack the ability for self-care and responsibility. Many of them never wash their clothes or clean the house, they do not even cook. Their mother did everything for them. And the mothers hope that their son finds a wife who will take care of their son the way they did. Even worse, in many families with sons and daughters, the parents think daughters should take care of the parents and her siblings because they will not be family members anymore after they get married. If daughters refuse to give the parents money or other things the parents want, daughters are considered unfilial. In contrast, sons are good, even if they do not take care of their parents, or they even stay with them after they are married, or even have their own kids and do not work, because they are family members forever. My understanding is, that many parents think, what they take from their daughters is what they take from another family, and they take it for granted.

On September 7th 2016, a young Chinese actress, Xu Ting passed away at the age of 26 due to lymphoma. Her name circulated on Weibo (Chinese social media), which was her wish, as a sign of her popularity after her death. Xu was the third of seven children. She had five sisters and one younger brother. After she went to college, she started to work to pay for her tuition, supported her siblings and helped her parents to pay the debt. She wrote an article on her Weibo account of her story. She said that she felt released after the doctor told her that she has lymphoma. Xu has appeared in about fifty films and television series in the past five years. She gave her parents every cent she earned. She was diagnosed in March 2016. She refused chemotherapy and chose Chinese medicine because she did not want to lose her hair after chemotherapy, she said. The lymphoma was caused by formaldehyde in her new house, which she bought for her family. All of the family members were diagnosed with formaldehyde poisoning. She was so weak because of her hard working that only she got Lymphoma. Another important reason, why she refused chemotherapy is that she did not want to waste money on the treatment, because the survival rate with lymphoma is low. In Chinese culture, parents will prepare a house for their sons to get married. Xu's parents could not afford a house for their son. Xu,

although she is not the oldest one, bought her younger brother a house instead. If she was to undergo chemotherapy, she would have had to sell her house. To cure her lymphoma, Xu went to see many so-called popular Chinese medicine doctors and became a Buddhist. Her parents started to be vegetarians. But herb medicine, massage or religion could not cure the cancer. In August, Xu underwent her first round of chemotherapy, because the disease advanced very quickly. Her sister asked if she regretted to having refused chemotherapy in the beginning. She said, yes.

This young actress's story is a typical case of son preference. The impact of son preference on daughters is inestimable. I think, girls like Xu ask themselves the same question, why they were not born as boys. Xu and many other girls like her might hate their parents, too. But they decide to accept it, to be good. They work hard make a lot of money for their families to prove that they match any man. They hope their parents would pay more attention to them and be proud of them. They think if they could do better than a son, their parents would love them more. They take the responsibility for their parents and let their siblings count on them. But Xu's understanding and considerateness just worsened the situation. What's more, Xu might blame her family's poverty on herself, or even her other sisters. If she had been a boy, her parents wouldn't have had more kids. The situation of her family would be better. If she had been a boy, she would be her parents' treasure. She would not need to work hard to prove anything. She would be the most precious one. As a result, she could be an advocate of son preference. At the end of Xu's life, she did not forget to tell her sister, that she hoped that her big sister will have a son.

孝, filial piety, plays an important role in Chinese culture. Children should be obedient to their parents. The youth should respect the seniors to gain more knowledge. In China, we say, 没有父母的不是, "parents are never wrong". If children think, that their parents did something wrong or bad, they must assume that they are too young to understand their parents. Also, parents could be too young themselves, or too shy to explain everything to their children and make the right decision. As a result, parents could have done something wrong out of kindness. But in Xu's situation, I think, her parents enslaved her. She did not have the right to make a choice. She accepted that girls are less valuable than boys. She tried her best to make money to feel less guilty about her gender. The victims of this kind of slavery are not

just women. But there are more girls in this situation. Xu's sisters would follow her path to devote themselves to their family. On the one hand, the one-child policy made boys more precious; on the other hand, the policy protects girls' rights to go to school, and it ensures that girls get love from their parents.

Conclusion

The one-child policy prevented a large number of births, at the same time it violated human rights, caused problems like sex-selected abortion, abandonment, etc. The policy widens the gap between the rich and the poor and makes sons more precious. China is in a phase of rapid urban expansion with a heavy focus on building infrastructures.⁶ Both, building infrastructures and absorbing the surplus capital is based on a huge population. Migrant laborers from the rural area facilitate the urbanization process. In recent years, we could always read news about factories in developed areas that lacked workers after the Spring Festival break. The lack of laborers and the aging population are two main reasons for the end of the one-child policy. The impact of the two-children policy on enhancing the birth rate might be limited. A child is quite pricey. In most of the Chinese families both parents are already working to pay the bills. The impact of the two-children policy, of course, depends on whether the mothers are willing to have another baby or not, but it also depends on how strong the pressure from the family and the community is. The one-child policy protects the rights of girls in many ways. It protects their right to education, to have more choices and to live their lives.

⁶ Cf. David Harvey: *Rebel Cities. From the right to the city to the urban revolution*. London 2012, p. 11.

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