

Female Education in the Age of One Child Families: An Ethnographic Approach

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Abstract. *China's Family Planning Policy (FPP) is the largest scale attempt at population control that any nation has undertaken. Most Western commentators on this policy are critical with respect to its impact on women, citing female infanticide and the consequent gender imbalances. However, in this preliminary study we suggest otherwise. Rather, we consider how a reduction in family size is altering long held attitudes towards gender, family dynamics and marriage, as best evidenced by the increased importance placed on female education. As academic achievements are increasingly required to enter the job market and as the traditional role of the son to financially support ageing parents is fast being replaced by an equal expectation of only-child daughters, family strategies begin to prioritize the education of daughters as an avenue to security in old age. Furthermore, this paper argues that as women enjoy educational opportunities equal to their male peers and unparalleled by previous generations, their success in this sphere is challenging common attitudes towards what it means to have a daughter. It may therefore be argued, in contradiction to many previous studies, that one impact of the FPP is its contribution towards female emancipation. This study is a result of five weeks of ethnographic fieldwork in rural Shanxi Province.*

1. Introduction

China's population control strategies have long been the subject of mixed review from international commentators, many of whom are critical of the perceived human rights abuses perpetrated under the Family Planning Policy (FPP). These human rights abuses, it is argued, have had particularly severe consequences for women who at times throughout the policy's history have suffered coerced sterilizations, abortions and infanticide. While acknowledging the validity of these concerns, this preliminary study argues that they are increasingly outdated as population control becomes internalized and accepted within a self-disciplining population. Furthermore, it is the population control itself which has profoundly altered certain aspects of Chinese society resulting in the invalidity of these arguments. What this study hopes to achieve is a re-examination of the FPP in the context of a modern, free market China, and in particular the impact that it has had on the status of rural women both within their families and wider society. For reasons I will go on to explain, I use the willingness to

educate daughters and relative educational attainment as the focus of this study on female opportunity and changing gender roles.

2. Location of Study

Fieldwork for this study was conducted over a five week period in 2011 in XiYang County, a small, rural location in east Shanxi Province. During this time I lived with the Zhang family. Mr Zhang, a retired high school politics teacher, Mrs Zhang, a retired barber and their daughter Zhang Li, fully incorporated me into their family routine. The respect, status and trust they held within their small town and neighbourhood proved invaluable to the gathering of data necessary for this research.

XiYang County is a small region with a population of 270,000. The Zhang family live in Li Ping Zhen, the capital of the county, with a main street of supermarkets and shopping malls which quickly diffuses into small brick courtyard houses and villages. The location for this study was chosen for its rural location, isolation and relative poverty, with Shanxi Province having one of the lowest GDPs in China. While urban women, especially since the rise of the Communist Party in 1949, have enjoyed greater freedoms and opportunities, rural populations are still believed to maintain a preference for sons over daughters and as a result are believed to be responsible for a disproportionate number of female infanticides. The results of a study in female status in the context of the FPP would therefore be considered more conclusive coming from a rural context.

3. Methodology

The research was carried out through a process of participant observation and interviews. Throughout the duration of fieldwork I was teaching in the local high school. This not only ingratiated me into the wider town community, but gave me an opportunity to meet with hundreds of students and dozens of teachers. During classes I was able to conduct questionnaires on family residence, sibling gender and age, between classes I was able to interview teachers on an individual basis, and in the evenings I held focus groups with between six and twelve students per session. Time which was not taken up with the school was spent helping my host parents with household chores, visiting friends, or informally interviewing neighbours and family friends of the Zhangs, many of whom were middle aged or older. Inter-generational accounts were useful to chart the changes that population control policies have had on gender roles and family dynamics.

4. The Family Planning Policy (FPP)

Strict population control was seen by the Chinese government under Deng Xiaoping as essential to the success of a programme of market reform which was being implemented in 1979, and to the overall improvement in living standards [1]. The FPP was introduced in order to maintain the population under 1.2 billion by the year 2000 [2], thus facilitating the state's modernization controls which included the abandonment of "feudal habits" [3] and the creation of a "quality" population [4]. It consists of a set of rules that govern family size, including marrying and having children late, spacing children and having access to contraception and abortion [5]. The success of the policy has been significant, particularly considering the pro-natal history of China. In the China Birth Planning Year Book 2000, as cited by Winckler, between 1971 and 1998 it is estimated that economic and social change has accounted for 46% of the reduction of fertility while the policy had accounted for 54% of that fall and has reduced births by 338 million [6]. What is perhaps most significant is a

decline in the fertility *desires* of the population, from on average six children per woman in 1970 to 1.6 children in 2000.

On a main street in Li Ping Zhen, a large sign hung prominently on a wall and listed in great detail the FPP, the central tenant of which is the restriction of urban Han couples to one child. Rural inhabitants however could have a second child if their first was female. According to Zhang Li, people often avoided reading the sign, choosing to ignore it perhaps as a form of resistance. While many parents voiced that having more than one child was expensive, and while almost everyone claimed that “there are too many people in China” in general the FPP was regarded as being restrictive. While necessary in the past, it was now outdated. Despite such a policy, I found many families had more than one child. Such violations came at a heavy price; an illegal second child would cost a couple 20% of their previous years income for seven years after the child was born. As well as a fine, land may be removed or withheld, and those in government positions may be fired.

5. Criticisms of the FPP

As previously mentioned, international opinion, including that of the academic world, has been largely critical of China’s FPP citing human rights abuses and a population imbalance of 117 boys to every 100 girls as evidence of its resulting gender discrimination. Greenhalgh, a leading anthropological expert on the FPP, supports such criticism stating in the introduction to her latest book, *Just One Child*, that “China’s one-child-per-couple policy is one of the most troubling social policies of modern time” which “must be judged harshly” [7]. She further argues that “rural women, especially those living in poor, remote areas, have in many ways been harmed by the sharp restrictions on their reproduction” [8], claiming that the damage is not only physical but psychological for women who do not bear sons. The underlying problem, she suggests, is that the birth control program starts from the needs and interests not of women but of the state.

These criticisms must be taken seriously. The early implementation of the FPP was particularly rigid sparking a wave of coercive abortions and sterilizations for women who did not comply [9]. However, while acknowledging past abuses, the same criticisms do not hold true today where coercion is very rarely used. An aim and achievement of the FPP is national modernization and we thus must understand the policy in the context of a modernizing China, in which access to global markets has profoundly altered family strategy and fertility desires. The birth of multiple sons to work the land is no longer optimal in a market where educational achievement is the key to security. Rather, it is the children who don’t have to compete with siblings for educational resources that stand the best chance of success.

6. Education

The changing role of education was clearly demonstrated by the intergenerational interviews carried out during my fieldwork and the variety of life histories that these revealed. Most people over fifty that I interviewed had no more than a middle school education, following which a job, usually working in factories, was provided to them by the government. Mr. Wang, the husband of an English teacher at the local high school, is an interesting example: Now in his forties, when he graduated from middle school he was allocated a clerical job in the bank from which he worked his way up to become manager. Unsurprisingly, many of the older generation recall not taking their education seriously, having as it did so little importance for their future prospects.

With the opening up of the Chinese markets in the 1980s however, education took on new significance. Mr Song, a high school teacher, explained:

“In the past, education was not so important because you got a job depending on who your family were, regardless of education. As China began to open up, education meant that you could have more opportunities.”

These new opportunities brought great competition in the education market with thousands of students vying for each place at the top universities. Without exception my students saw their education as an investment, the purpose of which was to rise socially, earn money and support their parents, most of whom were manual labourers. As one female student told me;

“The teachers give us a lot of work because they want us to do well in the exams and have a good life. If we get a good education then we can get a good job and earn money to support our parents. Our parents had little education. Their lives are very hard.”

Education after the age of 15 can be prohibitively expensive in rural China resulting in a number of my student's parents borrowing money from family or neighbours. High school education is also a significant investment of time on behalf of the students, who study between 7am and 10pm each day, and from parents who rise early to prepare food and may travel a few hours a day to accompany a child to school. The decision to support the pursuit of higher education therefore indicates confidence on behalf of the parents in their child's ability to validate the investment.

7. Son Preference

Son preference, rooted in Confucian tradition, was popular among older generations, founded in a belief that it was a son's duty to take care of his parents, while a daughter would join her husband's family. These traditional gender roles were not uncommon in the village. Even within my host family, Mr Zhang and his three brothers and their wives would rotate care of their elderly mother, while his two sisters had no responsibility in this regard. Mrs Zhang, by contrast, saw her mother only once a fortnight despite living fifteen minutes walk away. The absence of sons however, confers a new responsibility on daughters to stay closer to their natal home and support their parents.

Although none of my informants would admit to preferring sons, it was widely discussed, often prefaced with “in the past” or “in the village”, and quickly followed by, “now we think girls and boys are equal.” One informant, for example, noted the pleasure of her father when she gave birth to a son, and a number of students noted that their grandparents showed explicit preference to grandsons, creating inequalities among cousins. Despite proclamations of gender equality, data I collected on the gender make-up of 718 families showed that those families whose first child was a daughter were more likely to have a second child than those families whose first child was a son. Even in the town, out of the 111 families that had a daughter first, 59 families had a second child, whereas out of the 110 families that had a son first, only 28 families had a second child. Considering that having a second child in the town carries with it such a weighty financial penalty, the son preference is hard to ignore.

Unsurprisingly this son preference had implications for education. In the past opportunities for higher education in the rural areas almost always went to boys. A teacher of English explained that when she was young “some girls from the village may go to work in the city in order to support their brother's education and marriage” and the brother would in return

support the parents. Even today, while there was an equal ratio of girls to boys in the high school, the focus groups I held with students concluded unanimously that parents put more pressure on sons than daughters because of the duty sons have to support a family. If daughters did well at school that was good, but not critical.

8. Changing Gender Roles

As the FPP results in fewer families with sons, we see a shift in the gender roles. 230 out of the 718 families I surveyed had only daughters, requiring the daughters to fulfil the role of primary carer and financial support to ageing parents. As previously mentioned, even the female students saw their education as a means to this end. One teacher summarised:

“Twenty years ago male and female education was not equal, but now because many families only have one child they have the resources to educate all their children. In the past when there were many people in the family, they educated the boys more because they think that boys have more ability to contribute to the family. Girls, when they are twenty will marry another family. This is a traditional idea in China. If a family has only one child the child must be educated whether a boy or a girl because that child is the hope of the family.”

This statement is interesting for two reasons. Firstly we see that the reduction of family size, as a result of the FPP, frees more resources for female education and reduces competition among siblings which daughters of previous generations would always lose. Brothers and sisters are thus given equal opportunities. Secondly, in a situation where there are no sons to support the parents, a result again of the FPP, daughters are called upon to fill that role and as a result are educated to do so. The optimal family strategy is forcibly shifted to one which grants greater opportunities to women.

9. Changing Gender Status

Perhaps what is most interesting about this study is not that family strategies have shifted towards greater educational opportunities for daughters, but that common attitudes towards women and what it means to have a daughter have also changed as women increasingly demonstrate their proficiency in the academic sphere and in many cases their superiority in their ability to support parents. On a number of occasions young, female teachers expressed pride in the fact that they supported aging parents more than their brothers as a result of their higher professional earning salary. A particularly telling statement from an especially bright female student hints at the implications of this:

“In China many people think that boys are better than girls. My parents used to think that, but then I was born and they love me very much. They think that I am lively and clever and can support them when they are old...”

That her parents' understanding of the status of women has changed because they have only one daughter who has proven herself to be both clever and capable of supporting them when they are old, may be one side-effect that the FPP is having on the status of women on a more national scale. For the first time, daughters are given the opportunity to demonstrate what they can offer to parents and as a result parents respond with increased respect. Should this student have had many brothers, perhaps the opportunity to commit her intelligence and success to her natal home may have been limited.

A further impact of the greater opportunities presented to women for education and natal responsibility is a growing shift away from son preference towards daughter preference, a view held by many of the younger generation. Not only could daughters excel at education and have an earning salary equal to sons, but many of my students felt that daughters would be more attentive and committed to their parents in old age. Furthermore, daughters cost less as unlike sons they did not require money or property in order to marry. A daughter could marry into wealth whereas a son could not.

10. Conclusion

While only a preliminary study, this paper suggests that there is strong evidence to counter the current assertion that the FPP's impact on women has been overwhelmingly negative. Rather, I call for a more nuanced understanding of the implications of the policy, particularly in light of China's opening markets and the opportunities that that presents to this generation.

Acknowledgements

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