

Body and Nation-state: Population, Sex and Control in the People's Republic

Written by Pia Muzaffar

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PIA MUZAFFAR, FEB 2 2008

I.

For states seeking to reproduce the nation in line with a particular vision of national development, fertility control becomes a crucial component of state planning. As such 'population planning' policies, which euphemise a highly interventionist and direct method by which the state regulates the bodies of its citizen-subjects, are evident in numerous Third World or 'developing' countries. Arguably however, they possess particular force in socialist states, which "enjoy exceptional power to reshape social life through their extensive control over the resources and institutions of society", and emphasise state planning and state intervention in the construction of a socialist modernity (Greenhalgh 2003:197-6). This essay examines why fertility control is of such importance in contemporary China— where, according to official estimates, China's population policies have prevented more than 300 million births in the last 30 years – and furthermore, how this control is exercised. Thus I first consider the ideological and discursive background to China's one-child policy<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[1]<!--[endif]-->, before employing the Foucauldian concepts of *governmentality* and *biopower* to outline how these techniques of control are effected – looking specifically at non-coercive examples, which tend to be overlooked in discussions and popular conceptions of the People's Republic.

II. Why Control Fertility? Population Discourse in China

The notion of population control in China has been discussed throughout its history, and is not necessarily the exclusive characteristic of the People's Republic. Xu Guang Qi (1562-1633) and his contemporary Feng Meng Long (1574-1646) long predated Malthus' concerns about unchecked population growth creating an inevitable strain on resources, and advocated some form of fertility control as a response (Zhou 2006:22-3). Even as far back as over two thousand years ago Han Fei Zi (c. 280-233 BC) noted:

each child may in his or her turn beget five offspring, so that before the death of the grandfather there may be twenty-five grandchildren. As a result, people have become numerous and supplies scanty; toil has become hard and provisions meagre. Therefore people quarrel so much that, though rewards are doubled and punishments repeated, disorder is inevitable.

(in Liao 1959:276-7)

However, in contemporary China the latent notion that an excessively large, untrained and unregulated population poses a threat to the stability of Chinese society is perhaps less significant than the concern with accelerated 'modernisation' articulated early in the era of the People's Republic. The Chinese Marxist modernising project

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defines itself both against its backward 'feudal' or pre-modern antithesis, and against capitalism: thus birth control could not be framed in the proto-Malthusian terms of resource shortage suggested above, but rather in a specifically socialist paradigm of state-planning:

I think humanity is most inept at managing itself. It has plans for industrial production... [but] it does not have plans for the production of humans. This is anarchism, no government, no organization, no rules...

(Mao 1989:159)

This theory of social progression depends upon the construction (and then destruction) of modernist binaries; thus "[p]lanned parenthood is a profound revolution to destroy the old and establish the new, change existing habits and customs, and reform society in the realm of marriage, family, and childbirth" (Hua 1985:21). By designating certain customs and beliefs such as the desire for many children or the son-preference as 'backward' feudal vestiges which needed to be revolutionised, the state could recast the Chinese population "into the primary objects of reproductive intervention and control"; as the subjects of a political education necessary for socialist development (Greenhalgh 2003:203). Consequently, the one-child policy has created in the popular consciousness a tendency to equate low birth rates with modernity itself. Anagost (1995) notes the shock with which her (two-child) family was received: many people appeared confused that she was from an 'advanced industrial nation', and yet had more than one child. In this way the entire nation is bound up in and responsible for the progression of Chinese society.

The strength of the nation finds its metaphor in the 'quality' of the body. This association is perhaps rooted in Maoism's rejection of the Confucian ideals that understood frailty and scholarship as characteristic of the culturally refined, redefining physical strength as central to the project of nation-building (Anagost 1995:28). Sigley, however, suggests that the preoccupation with regulating the moral and physical quality of the population may in fact be partly influenced by the European moral philanthropic and hygienist movements of the nineteenth century, noting that both the Nationalist and Communist regimes displayed such tendencies in the early twentieth century (2003:121-2). Either way, the ideological connection has achieved hegemonic status in both party rhetoric and in popular discourses, and it is not uncommon to hear such expression as, "The quality of the people is too low, and the reason that the quality of the people is too low is because they are too many!" (woman on a train, cited in Anagost 1995:24). Such an "internalized sense of lack" (Anagost 1995:27) produced by the success of the idea of the 'poor quality' the Chinese body and nation, arguably accounts for the apparent willing consent of China's population to such a stringent policy.

From the time of the Government of the Soviet Areas until the present Government of the People's Republic, it has been a government of the people themselves... It has no other interests but those of the people and it does not interfere in matters in which the people do not want it to interfere...

(Chen Shaoyu, cited in Meijer 1971:178)

Hence, if China's modernisation, social development and national strength requires a reduction in population size, the aim of family management should be likewise.

III. Governing Bodies: Sex, the Family and Birth Control

Like its discursive rationalisation, the actual exercise of governmentality in contemporary China is both rooted in Chinese cultural history, and simultaneously peculiar to the Chinese socialist modernity. It is in many ways

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reminiscent of classical Confucian practices, being in large part focused on shaping and educating the popular consciousness or “common people” in ‘correct’ conduct and correct “techniques of living” (Sigley 2003:119). Significantly, efforts have been directed toward the detail: controlling the rituals and everyday practices of the Chinese family in order to constitute the family as a site of government (Ebrey 1991:153-4). As Foucault notes, “[d]iscipline is a political anatomy of detail” (1984:183), which takes on a specific meaning when applied to the Confucian notion that civilising the family – the basic “cell of society” – is fundamental to the larger objective of “the construction of socialist spiritual civilisation” (Ren Jianying 1993:13). The specifically biopolitical nature of this modern project, however, must be emphasised in order to appreciate the intimate connection between the modern Chinese nation-state and the individual Chinese body, which exemplifies Foucault’s distinction between sovereign, repressive power and the disciplinary, productive power located at the site of the body:

...The population has thus been imbued with a different sense of utility. It is no longer something to be merely taxed, corveed, punished, and led by moral example. The population is now seen to be a visible mass of bodies that require appropriate intervention in order to increase their physical well-being and in turn strengthen the nation.

(Sigley 2003:141)

In this context, it is not sufficient to characterise the one-child policy as merely a top-down directive, as something to be imposed on the population by its ruling elite. Of course government propaganda (see Appendix) remains significant, as does the conscious stigmatisation of large families, the imposed fines, and the latent threat of violence. However the potency of the population policy derives from its operation at the micro level, including regulatory bureaucratic techniques such as birth quotas, targets and planning (Greenhalgh 2003:205), as well as the ‘thought work’ or subtle persuasion through insidious means (Anagost 1995:35) of local birth workers. Population policy constitutes a *rationalised* technology of control; it

was to be expressed as a set of finely modulated rules. Embodying the totalizing aspirations of the planners, population policy broke reproduction down into its component parts (marriage, childbearing, contraception, and so forth) and then established detailed and precise regulations so that every aspect of reproduction could be planned and controlled in a comprehensive, meticulous way.

(Greenhalgh 2003:204)

This exemplifies Foucault’s conception of biopower (1978) characterised by *omnes et singulatim* – ‘all and each’ – in other words, government as both totalising and individualising (Gordon 1991:3).

One example of the way population planning policies may remodel individual subjectivities, investing bodies with certain properties in order to make them amenable to control, is through the government of sexuality. Against the claims of certain scholars (see for example Dikötter 1995:185), the regulation of birthing in China has led to an increased focus on marital sex with vigorous encouragement of the maintenance of sexually harmonious marriages, in order to dislocate sex from procreation. This form of sexual ‘liberation’, though in practice producing some similar consequences to those of the feminist sexual liberation movements in the West – greater emphasis on women’s enjoyment, and greater sexual equality between husband and wife – is in fact rooted in very different concerns. The Western “repressive hypothesis” (Foucault 1978) represents sexuality as something personal and suppressed, as the object of self-interrogation and self-realisation, whereby sexual liberation is an end in itself. Sexuality in the People’s Republic, however, individualises and governs bodies differently. There exists, as Sigley argues, “a

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biopolitics without the secret lever of sexuality" – in other words, a more "mechanistic" employment of sexual knowledge, whereby 'liberation' entails maximising sexual pleasure by "getting it right" (2003:131-2). Furthermore, the Chinese economy of sex does not extend to the "extremes" evident in Western capitalist societies, such as the "licentious pursuit of sensual pleasures without the guidance of any social regulations, responsibilities or obligations" (Yang Lingling 1989:138); it must be regulated for the health and stability of Chinese society. Sexual 'liberation' in the People's Republic is thus a form of inserting the exercise of government into the intimate minutiae of familial and sexual conduct. The family are "made agents for conveying the norms of the state into the private sphere" (Donzelot 1979:58).

IV.

Of course, it would be mistaken to assume that the Chinese state is completely successful in its totalising population project. The accepted idea that the one-child policy goes against the wishes of most Chinese people and has to be implemented coercively has recently been questioned<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[4]<!--[endif]-->, as has the very operation of the birth planning regime in the face of widespread resistance<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[5]<!--[endif]-->. However, as this essay has shown, the extent to which the antinatalist discourse of the state has been internalised among the population speaks not only for the power of that discourse but, indeed, for the pervasiveness of biopolitical regulation and the peculiar governmentality of sex in the People's Republic.

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<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[1]<!--[endif]--> Greenhalgh notes that political demography and population studies tend to neglect the significance of (Marxist and other) discourse (2003:198), rather focusing on policy, totalitarianism, and coercion – or else the Malthusian preoccupation with the balance between resources and human consumption.

<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[2]<!--[endif]--> Chairman Hua Guofeng, in a 1978 speech to the State Council meeting of the Birth Planning Leading Group.

<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[3]<!--[endif]--> Given such an understanding of the relationship between personal conduct and the success of the nation, clearly deviance is not to be tolerated. In the words of prominent Chinese sociologist Pan Yunkang (1986:37-8), "abnormal families" such as gay cohabitants or unmarried couples actually disrupt the progression of society toward its socialist utopia, and must therefore be strongly discouraged.

<!--[if !supportFootnotes]-->[4]<!--[endif]--> Zhao (2006) has drawn on recent evidence to challenge prevailing notions that China's population has historically been unchecked and out of control before the introduction of the one-child policy. It is a commonly held assumption that China's culture is strongly pronatalist, and that Chinese people desire "as many children as possible, preferable sons" (Chandrasekhar 1967:59); that "[t]he Chinese not only liked to have children, they liked to have many" (Hassan 1980:49). In fact, Zhao argues, historical China was characterised by lower birth rates than pre-industrial Europe, and that there was "a strong tendency among people not to maximise their family size", instead finding methods by which to deliberately self-limit fertility (2006:15). Suggested motivations for such practices, which include infanticide or 'Sheng Zi Bu Ju' – literally "having sons or children but not bringing

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them up” – include famine, heavy taxation, and inheritance and marriage customs such as large dowries and the continuation of the family line (Zhao 2006:14-19). Contrary to the conventional logic that cites poverty as an incentive to have *more* children, Zhou argues that in fact poorer families often had fewer children than wealthier families, wanting ‘Ji Chan Yu Zi’ or ‘Ji Chan Shou Kou’ – meaning “having children according to their ability and wealth” (2006:15). Zhou also cites studies showing that during the twentieth century people did actively seek to control their fertility before state intervention made it compulsory.

<![if !supportFootnotes]-->[5]<![endif]--> According to Greenhalgh (2003:205-7) resistance in rural areas has been very great. Different strategies have been employed, such as migrating elsewhere, hiding the children, or co-opting local cadres; but almost all result in the existence of unregistered – and thus unregulated – persons. This has caused the creation of an enormous, though incalculable, *hei renkou* or ‘black population’. These “unplanned persons” exist alongside China’s planned population, and are simultaneously free from the totalising governmentality of the state – a “gypsylike population... able to slip through the bureaucratic structures of control” (Anagost 1995:38) – and suspended in a liminal realm of enforced marginalisation, lacking access to education, housing, legal employment, and all the other benefits of full citizenship (Greenhalgh 2003:199).

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