
International Perspectives

Recent Developments in Family Planning in China

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In the spring of 1980 one of the first American family practice study tours to visit China explored organization and delivery of health care under the auspices of Professional Seminar Consultants, Inc. Perhaps the most awesome development in the health care field concerns China's emerging approach to family planning.

Government planners believe that over-population is one of China's greatest obstacles to modernization. More than 100 nations have a higher per capita income. Rather poor in food, clothing, housing, and other daily necessities, much of China's production must be plowed back into the provision of these basic needs.

The problem is further exacerbated by two factors: first, there was a post-liberation baby boom during the 1950s which led to the current bulge in the child-bearing population; secondly, life expectancy in China has increased 28 years in the past three decades.

Thus, a national campaign to control births has emerged which employs a variety of political, social, and medical means.¹ First, early marriages are frowned upon. For the vast majority, dating does not begin until one's early 20s and marriage

occurs at around 26 to 30 years of age, cutting the child-bearing period virtually in half. One rarely sees teenage couples in China but groups of teenage boys or groups of girls are often seen arm-in-arm on sidewalks. We were told almost uniformly that there were strong social taboos against premarital sex and if such occurred it was "always" with one's future spouse.

Secondly, birth control pills, condoms, and spermicidal jellies are free at any city drug store or commune health station without prescription. One of the primary functions of the barefoot doctor in the countryside or neighborhood health worker in the city is to educate the public about use and advantages of various contraceptive methods. Yet in a rush to control births, there seemed to be little of the growing concerns experienced in the West about the complications of birth control pills or IUDs. Large scale experiments are currently under way on a male birth control pill, "gossypol," a cotton plant extract that serves as a male contraceptive pill, lowering the sperm count by directly damaging spermatazoa.² Abortions are readily available and heavily promoted for those couples exceeding one or two children. In Shanghai we were told that there are now more abortions than live births.

Finally, economic and social incentives and sanctions have been devised in the last few years to control births. Articles appear in publications throughout China exhorting the population to limit births. A photograph on the cover of the February 4, 1980, edition of the *Beijing Review* showed a smiling mother holding her child with the caption quotation, "Only one child for me!" A couple with

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one child receives five yuan (\$3) per month for the child's welfare until the child reaches 14 years. The child will also receive free nursery and kindergarten tuition and preferential consideration for further education. For the parent's part, they will receive preferential consideration for job placement or housing relocation. If the couple has two children there will be none of these benefits. If the couple has three children, ten percent of their income is deducted, they lose work points and may be passed over for promotion or job preference. In the commune, committees are established to review, on an annual basis, how many new children the commune can support, then which couples will be allowed to have those children.

One sees pregnant women infrequently in China and rarely more than one child with a parent. In Shanghai, China's most populous city with over 10 million, the birth rate is now down to 5/1,000. This can be compared to the 1977 birth rate in the United States of 15.4/1,000.³ Two brief case studies demonstrate attitudes toward this emerging policy concerning family planning.

Case 1

Mrs. W. lives near her two granddaughters in Shanghai. She welcomes the trade-off her granddaughters will receive from late marriage and a limitation to one or two children. Before liberation, she and her husband tried to raise five children on their houseboat on the Huangpu River. With such a large household only her husband could work while she had to care for the children. The single income was sufficient to feed and clothe the children. With today's smaller families, the grandmother feels women are less tied down, can have working careers, and can join their husbands in earning money and raising their living standard.

Case 2

The nuclear family consists of Mr. and Mrs. H. and their six-year-old son. The father, 36 years of age, works in an electronic tube factory, and the mother, a Communist Party member, works as an interpreter in Wuxi. Mrs. H. had been an active leader in the Red Guard during the 1960s. When the Cultural Revolution led to closure of China's universities, her career in languages was terminated after only eight months, and she remains bitter about her lost career. To Mrs. H., China's

modernization means that her son will have a career opportunity she was denied.

When she married, she wanted a number of children, but she is now resigned to only one as her contribution to China's progress. However, this decision, while consistent with national policy, has led to some concern on the part of Mrs. H.'s mother for it is thought that only children become spoiled. Mrs. H. worries that this might be so and consciously tries to teach her son to share and cooperate. She notes that things could be worse. Grandparents are often worried if the only child is a girl, since traditionally, especially in the countryside, daughters leave home to live with their husband's family. Mrs. H. said the government is now pushing for newlyweds to stay with the bride's family to remove the stigma from female offspring. Finally, Mrs. H. worries that someday when her son is grown, he might be called to work in another part of China and she and her husband will rarely see him (workers have only one day off per week and seven days vacation per year).

There is much speculation about the reasons for the relative success of China's family planning efforts. Stokes summarizes the impressions of many that a mixture of Chinese culture, current political organization, and economic gains are all involved.

Chinese family planning officials in countless interviews over the last five years have insisted that patient persuasion by peers, and not coercion, is the key. Indeed, tight community bonds typify Chinese society, and these have been strengthened by a mutual self-interest born of the remarkable improvement in the standard of living over the last generation. Such shared sentiments suggest that individual desires may be more easily subordinated to the will of the community in China than in most other societies.⁴

References

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