

Asia Rising Podcast – China One Child Policy

Guest: Dr James Leibold (Politics and Philosophy, La Trobe University)

Matt Smith

Welcome to Asia Rising, the podcast of La Trobe Asia where we examine the news, views and general happenings of Asian States and Societies. I'm your host Matt Smith and today we'll be looking at China's One Child Policy, the effects it has had on the country and how an impending change to a two child policy could change things.

With me to go through these matters is Dr James Leibold, Senior Lecturer in the Department of Politics and Philosophy at La Trobe University. Jim welcome to you.

Doctor James Leibold

Thanks Matt.

Matt Smith

The One Child Policy has had an effect on almost every aspect of China. Why was it initially established? What problems did the country have that were trying to be addressed?

James Leibold

Yeah, I think the roots of the issue are quite deep, there's long been a kind of tension running throughout Chinese culture and civilization between man and nature. Let me share with you a little parable, a very famous story from Chinese history.

In Chinese it's known as Yu Gong... Yu Gong moves a mountain and it tells a story of an old man Yu gong who lived in a rather remote part of China, he had a very good life, he had lots of sons, he had a nice field in which to grow his crops. He had though one problem, where his house was located and where his fields were located were separated by a massive mountain. So every morning he would have to get up, climb over the mountain, hoe his crops, return of course at lunch time for lunch and a sleep and then back out into the fields and then back home at night. One day he woke up and he said, "Gee this is really frustrating, I'm going to move that mountain." And so literally he started to pick away at the mountain with a pick axe and chip, chip, chip, chip and an old wise man came along and said, "Yu gong what are you doing?" Yu gong said "Well I'm going to move this mountain, it's very inconvenient for me." The wise man said, "You're such a fool Yu gong, what are you going to do, you'll never be able to move this mountain?" And Yu gong said, "Yes, you're right I won't be able to do it, one day I will die but I have sons and they will continue on and they will have sons and they will continue on and one day we will move this mountain."

And that shows that belief running throughout Chinese culture and society that mankind ultimately can shape its environment. And this gets tied up with beliefs that the more men the better and so when Mao Zedong and the Chinese Communists came to power in late 1940's, Mao believed that was their secret weapon, particularly against the United States. Mao also once famously said that "Everybody comes into the world with two hands but only one mouth, so they have the ability to produce more things than they can consume. You know China's large population was good and needed to continue to increase its population as an asset against the struggle against foreign imperialism that results in this booming Chinese population that you see, starting in the 19th and into the 20th Century.

Early on, and even in the 1950's you had economists and demographers warning Mao and the Chinese Communists that this could become a problem. The President of Beijing University at the time Ma Yinchu warned that this was going to be detrimental to Chinese economy and he

advocated this back in the 1950's, a one child policy but he was attacked by Mao, labelled a Malthusian and essentially sacked from his position.

And so you go into the 1950's, 60's and the Cultural Revolution and China's population really begins to rapidly increase, so you go over the billion mark and continues to climb, and it wasn't until the 1980's after the death of Mao that some of the followers of Ma Yinchu once again put on the table that if China's population continued to rise at a rapid rate, this would be detrimental to the economy. Deng Xiaoping was quite sympathetic to these calls and so beginning in around 1979 they being to draw up plans for what became known as the One Child Policy that was implemented in the 1980's and continues to this day some 35 years later.

Matt Smith

So the 1980's, that's really quite a recent phenomena, but, it's become so heavily entrenched in part of what China is now is that you can only have one child. They went from a fertility rate of about 6-7 per person, wasn't it, it was really a problem that was out of control? Once it came into effect what are some of the biggest ways that it's had an impact on China?

James Leibold

So the birth rate in 1960's is around 6 per couple, it's dropped now to 1.5 so it's estimated that the so-called One Child Policy has saved about 400 million births. Clearly it's had a massive impact on Chinese society. I should point out though, of course that the policy never really was a One Child Policy per se, I mean the Chinese don't refer to it as that, they refer to it as a Family Planning Policy. From the very beginnings there was exemptions for minorities, for people with disabilities, even in the countryside quite quickly they realised they needed to provide exemptions if the first child was a girl, due to the preference that Chinese in general have for boys over girls, but particularly in the countryside where it's seen as very important for carrying on the family name and so it was never really a One Child Policy. I think the best way to think about it is a 1.5 child policy of sorts.

But as you said it's had massive implications for Chinese society and I think everything to the direct interference of the Party State in the lives of women in particular, but also lives of young couples in terms of the punishment if people violated the policy, forced sterilisations, forced abortions for people who violated the policy. There's around 117 boys for every 100 girls in China today and that's a result of this preference for male off-spring that resulted in selected abortions as well as female infanticide, so you've created this gap between men and women in China that has all kinds of implications.

It's estimated there about 25 million extra men out there that can't find brides, so-called bachelor villages in the countryside, it's led to increased bride prices, it's hard to get a good bride so men had to invest a lot into it. Whether it be buying an apartment in the city or offering all sorts of clothing and furniture for their bride and an increase in the trafficking of women. Of course, the rise in prostitution, even bringing in brides from overseas is a healthy trade and bringing women in from South East Asia to supply these excess men, so the gender implications of this have been quite big.

But I think the one that probably gets the biggest attention, the one the authorities in Beijing are most concerned about, the ageing nature of the Chinese economy, I mean, China is going to get old before it gets rich. It's estimated that about 1920 – 25, that about one fourth of all Chinese will be over the age of 60, so this means that - a) they're not productive parts of society engaged in labour production, but - b) also they will require care – someone's going to look after them, they will need a social safety network that is going to become increasingly expensive.

It's estimated again by 2030, that about 40% of Chinese GDP will go towards providing pensions and aged care support for this aging population, in that I think is the one that really tipped the authorities in Beijing to act – finally.

Matt Smith

It's a sort of policy that can keep academics busy for years to come, looking at the little nuanced ways that this had an effect on employment in different places, how cities have grown. What are some of the subtle ways that you've noticed have been cropping up in academia circles?

James Leibold

There's many different angles to it, one I'll talk about, it doesn't get as much press but, I mean what are the implications for social relations and family life of a society in which you have single children families? What is it like to grow up without any siblings, to live in a family where you're it, you are the prized possession?

Chinese culture has always valued large families and all of a sudden to turn it on its head and to say, 'Well you're just going to have one child'. There is a syndrome known as The Little Emperor Syndrome in China today where ideally the sons, but sometimes daughters are showered with affection, family resources are pooled together to ensure that they get the best possible education, that they land the best possible job.

And this comes with tremendous pressure on these kids, so what if you don't succeed? What if you can't succeed academically, what if you can't land that good job? Big implications for social relations in China and I think China is still dealing with the implications of that and the fall out, I mean a lot of these One Child Families, the children are now starting to enter maturity and this is going to play out for many years to come.

Matt Smith

How about something say directly in your interest area, have you noticed how it's played out amongst ethnic minority groups in China?

James Leibold

Yeah, this is going to be something that will be of great interest to watch. There have always been exceptions to the One Child Policy and one of the areas in which they've occurred is among ethnic minorities. Ethnic minorities traditionally have much larger families, so it would be a bit unfair to impose this One Child Policy on them. Most ethnic minorities can have two children, some if they're in the city – only if the first child is a girl, but some groups, particularly the Uyghurs and the Tibetans who live in rural areas have been allowed to have three, in some cases even four or five.

Of course the policy's varied over time, but what we've seen in the last couple of decades is an increased tightening of these exemptions particularly amongst the Uyghurs and the Tibetans try to reign-in the birth rate amongst these two groups, which would exceed three, particularly amongst rural women in both these societies.

You know, you have two counter trends, one an attempt to reign-in the birth rates among Uyghurs and Tibetan's in particular, and then this loosening of birth rates amongst the Zhuang, so there's a natural tension there, but a lot of that has to do with the fact that there is this very strong eugenics culture running throughout modern Chinese society. A belief that not all children are born equal, that some have what the Chinese refer to as 'A better *shuzhi*', or a quality to them, so the children among Zhuang urbanites are born of a better quality and so what you want to do is encourage more of these high quality births while you decline the births among rural people,

ethnic minorities etc.

There is a tension there, when the party clearly wants urban Zhuang families to have more children, at the same time it wants to reign-in ethnic minorities, but that is potentially quite dangerous. Thus far the way they have been doing that is essentially provide cash rewards to women to agree to be sterilised after they have one or two children.

Matt Smith

That's harsh.

James Leibold

But it's a carrot approach as opposed to the stick approach which is then mainly used amongst the Zhuang. The stick approach has been fining people for having extra births. And so whether it can navigate the tricky politics of that without being seen as being...

Matt Smith

Discriminatory?

James Leibold

Discriminatory, so we'll have to wait and see.

Matt Smith

China has announced that the One Child Policy will become a Two Child Policy, I'm sure they are not using either of those names to apply to this, but it's likely going to happen, at the moment they're saying from March 2016. What are some of the implications for that kind of thing going forward?

James Leibold

It's likely that the implications are going to be quite minimal, at least in the short term. First of all it'll take 20 odd years for any of these additional children to reach maturity, so the impact on the economy will be quite minimal at least in the short term. Demographers out there would argue that the birth rate has naturally declined so there is less of an incentive, particularly in urban areas, for families to have more than one child, it's simply too expensive. It's a natural tendency in human societies as you become more wealthy and prosperous, you decide you're going to have fewer children.

Probably the biggest implications might be in the countryside where there might be some additional births but many in the countryside are already able to have two children particularly, and so some argue that there'll be very few additional births as a result of this policy. So the question then is, will China go the next step and completely eradicate the family planning policy entirely?

Matt Smith

Coming into effect next year, this is something that isn't going to have an impact for years to come. Have they left it too late?

James Leibold

Many demographers and economists believe that that is the case, they've left it way too late. The impact has already been done, it's much easier to turn off the baby tap, to reduce births than it is to turn it back on, particularly when you've got a far more prosperous society that's become quite used to one child families. But again we're going to have to wait and see, these things are going to play out over decades not years.

Matt Smith

And I think that could be the problem, because China is going to hit problems in the near future quite quickly before any new babies have time to contribute to society.

James Leibold

Yeah, it's going to have fewer working people, it's going to have a very grey old society that it somehow needs to look after.

Matt Smith

Within the next decade.

James Leibold

Within the next decade. It might also bring up some interesting implications for the need to bring in migrants to take up lower paid jobs. The secret of China's economic miracle is this great pool of cheap labour that's come off the countryside from places like Guangzhou and Fujian and elsewhere producing all these things that we can buy at Kmart and Wall Mart and other places. But what happens when that pool of unskilled labour dries up? Will China need to import labour from overseas, what are the implications of that? China doesn't really have a tradition of immigration.

I think ideally they would think, well we'll move up the value chain and we won't be producing widgets and stuffed animals and we're moving into a knowledge economy but that's easier to plan for and more difficult to implement.

Matt Smith

So if academic and demographers were raising flags about the One Child Policy and its effects on China as early as the 1990's, why has it taken this long to be scrapped?

James Leibold

Well the short answer is it's all about money. The policy has brought in tremendous amounts of money to locals, particularly rural county governments. The structure of the family planning segment of the Chinese bureaucracy is massive, there's about half a million people that are full time employed in the family planning units to enforce the policy. There's also probably another ten million who work part-time, some of them as paid thugs to enforce this policy, and most of the enforcement; while some of it does result in forced sterilisation or forced abortion, most of it comes in the form of fines. Families that have extra births have to pay a so-called 'Social Compensation Fee', and this brings in billions of dollars into the coffers of local county governments.

And that money is becoming increasingly important, particularly in the countryside. This is probably one of their biggest sources of revenue, that's created a vested interest group that's very difficult to tear down. In fact while the policy has been announced and still needs to be approved by the National People's Congress in March, that doesn't mean that it will necessarily be implemented in a way that policymakers in Beijing hope. They're not going to dismantle the bureaucracy, but how are they going to wean these local county governments off this form of revenue? The implications of that will take years to play out.

Matt Smith

The Chinese government would point at this policy and say, 'At least we can say it did what we wanted it to, it was really effective, the fertility rate was up around 6 before it was implemented now it's down below 2'. But you can also point to Hong Kong and say 'High fertility rate now low,

no One Child Policy, the same for South Korea.' So has this One Child Policy been effective in reigning it in or is this the kind of change in fertility that you would have seen naturally otherwise?

James Leibold

Yes, I think it's quite clear if you look at the international comparisons, you talk to demographers that this is going to happen naturally. I mean you go back to the 1970's, China implemented this policy known as 'Later, Longer and Fewer'. So Later – marriages, Longer – gaps in-between the birth of children and Fewer – children. And that reduced the birth rate from 6 down to 3. So this was already in train before they went that radical next step and introduced the so called One Child Policy so this is going to happen.

As countries get wealthier, families tend to have fewer children, so the party of course is going to claim success, but you have to ask yourself what was social, now economic consequences of this policy? The economic implications are quite clear and will become even sharper in the years to come. What we probably don't see as much is the social implications of that, the way the party has penetrated directly into the lives of individuals in ways that no previous government was able to do, and to interfere and to regulate the bodies of young Chinese women. And then the implications of that, whether it be the human rights violations, female infanticide, the forced sterilisation and then now the gender imbalance that China is dealing with. Unmarried men, some argue it's one of the most volatile aspects of Chinese society. If you've got all these young men with testosterone pumping through their blood and they can't find women, where are they going to let off steam?

Matt Smith

I'll tell you what they'll do, they'll move mountains.

James Leibold

Excellent, they'll move mountains.

Matt Smith

That's all we have time for today, thanks for a fascinating discussion Jim.

James Leibold

No worries Matt.

Matt Smith

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