

The New York Times

May 21, 2013

China's Brutal One-Child Policy

By MA JIAN

LONDON — ZHANG YIMOU, the celebrated film director and arranger of the 2008 Summer Olympics' opening ceremony in Beijing, was accused last week of being the latest high-profile violator of China's one-child policy. The People's Daily, the Communist Party mouthpiece, alleged that Mr. Zhang had fathered seven children with four different women.

The news has ignited an angry online debate, with Internet users condemning the unequal application of a 1979 law that stipulates every couple may have just one child (or two for ethnic minorities and for rural couples whose first child is a girl). The truth is: for the rich, the law is a paper tiger, easily circumvented by paying a "social compensation fee" — a fine of 3 to 10 times a household's annual income, set by each province's family planning bureau, or by traveling to Hong Kong, Singapore or even America to give birth.

For the poor, however, the policy is a flesh-and-blood tiger with claws and fangs. In the countryside, where the need for extra hands to help in the fields and the deeply entrenched patriarchal desire for a male heir have created strong resistance to population control measures, the tiger has been merciless.

Village family-planning officers vigilantly chart the menstrual cycle and pelvic-exam results of every woman of childbearing age in their area. If a woman gets pregnant without permission and is unable to pay the often exorbitant fine for violating the policy, she risks being subjected to a forced abortion.

According to Chinese Health Ministry data released in March, 336 million abortions and 222 million sterilizations have been carried out since 1971. (Though the one-child policy was introduced in 1979, other, less-stringent family planning policies were in place before it.)

These figures are easy to quote, but they fail to convey the magnitude of the horror faced by rural Chinese women. During a long journey through the hinterlands of southwest China in 2009, I was able to find some of the faces behind these numbers.

On ramshackle barges moored on the remote waterways of Hubei and Guangxi, I met hundreds of "family-planning fugitives" — couples who'd fled their villages to give birth to an unauthorized second or third child in neighboring provinces.

Almost every one of the pregnant women I spoke to had suffered a mandatory abortion. One woman told me how, when she was eight months pregnant with an illegal second child and was unable to pay the 20,000 yuan fine (about \$3,200), family planning officers dragged her to the local clinic, bound her to a surgical table and injected a lethal drug into her abdomen.

For two days she writhed on the table, her hands and feet still bound with rope, waiting for her body to eject the murdered baby. In the final stage of labor, a male doctor yanked the dead fetus out by the foot, then dropped it into a garbage can. She had no money for a cab. She had to hobble home, blood dripping down her legs and staining her white sandals red.

It is not surprising that China has the highest rate of female suicide in the world. The one-child policy has reduced women to numbers, objects, a means of production; it has denied them control of their bodies and the basic human right to determine freely and responsibly the number and spacing of their children.

Baby girls are also victims of the policy. Under family pressure to ensure that their only child is a son, women often choose to abort baby girls or discard them at birth, practices that have skewed China's sex ratio to 118 boys for every 100 girls.

The Communist Party argues that the means justify the ends. When Deng Xiaoping and his fellow economic reformers introduced the one-child policy as a "temporary" measure in 1979, after Mao's death and the end of the calamitous Cultural Revolution, they claimed that without the one-child policy, the economy would falter and the population would explode.

Thirty-four years on, despite mounting criticism, the Party still clings to it. But their argument is based on shoddy science: the birthrate, already falling before the policy was introduced, is now officially 1.8, or nearer 1.2 according to independent demographic experts like Yi Fuxian — much lower than the necessary 2.1 population replacement level. Mr. Yi and others have warned of China's impending demographic disaster: a rapidly aging nation that a dwindling work force will be unable to support.

Rising incomes and urbanization generally lead to falling birthrates. If the one-child policy were scrapped tomorrow, most Chinese wouldn't rush to produce as many offspring as Zhang Yimou. And despite recent signals that the Party might be considering gradually relaxing birth restrictions, there is still considerable resistance.

Stubborn hard-liners will not willingly abandon population control measures that have provided the government with **an estimated two trillion yuan** in revenue from fines, according to the demographer He Yafu, while allowing it to maintain firm control over people's lives.

The public outrage voiced against Mr. Zhang during the last week plays into the Party's hands. Instead of attacking the government's barbaric policy, the people are being encouraged to criticize the rich for escaping its claws.

Ending this scourge is a moral imperative. The atrocities committed in the name of the one-child policy over the last three decades rank among the worst crimes against humanity of the last century. The stains it has left on China may never be erased.

Ma Jian is the author, most recently, of the novel "The Dark Road." This essay was translated by Flora Drew from the Chinese.



◀

OPEN

MORE IN OPINION (20)

Op-Ed Column
How This Ends

Read More »