

## FAMILY POLICIES IN CHINA

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*Chinese policies towards families and children have long fascinated observers in the West, for two reasons. First, because there seem to be clearly formulated and implemented policies on such matters as child care and population policy, a situation very different from the ambiguities prevailing in the West. Secondly, because the content of the Chinese policies frequently challenges our assumptions. The Chinese policy of universal group child care from infancy runs against well entrenched Western ideas about the nature of early mother-child attachment. The state in China takes far more of a hand in marriage and divorce than is the case in Western countries. There is plainly much to be learned from the mass social experimentation that is going on in China today.*

*This article analyses changes in Chinese family policy since the end of the Great Cultural Revolution. In 1980 the one-child per couple policy was introduced as part of an urgent drive towards population stabilisation. In 1981 a new marriage law came into force. A number of family life education programs have recently been introduced, and in October 1981 the China Society for the Study of Marriage and the Family was launched. There are new developments in child care including an agreement negotiated in 1982 for the setting up of a Child Development Institute in Peking.*

*In addition to describing these new policies and the ways in which they are being implemented, the article points up areas of contrast with the West, and raises some questions as to possible developments. The Chinese material is partly based on the author's experience as a member of the Australian Women's Delegation which visited China in October 1981 as guests of the All-China Women's Federation.*

### A. INTRODUCTION

Family and child policies in contemporary China present some fascinating comparisons with the West. To begin with, the goals towards which the policies are directed are somewhat different from Western goals. Continuous workforce participation by women is regarded as both a right and a duty. Following a short period of maternity leave, mothers are expected to resume full-time employment. Universal group care for pre-school children is the Chinese goal, and rearing by grandparents, now a common practice, is regarded as far less desirable. Home-

reared children are considered likely to be spoilt and backward in moral development, a view quite contrary to the thrust of Western thinking. The state in China takes far more of a hand in marriage and divorce than is the case in Western countries. Young people are expected to delay marriage, into their late twenties for preference, and to marry "suitable" partners in terms of political background and attitudes. Once married, they are expected to live harmoniously, and the community is mobilised to promote this goal. Divorce, although legal, is discouraged. Where a couple nevertheless insist on taking the matter to court, the final decision rests with the judges, who have the right to deny divorce if they feel that this is in the best interests of the community. In such cases the couple are likely to be urged by the judge to work together to repair the marriage in order to further the good of society. Western notions of personal fulfilment and choice have little place.

China is massively over-populated, and in consequence the goal of limiting families to two children, introduced at the end of the Cultural Revolution, was replaced in 1980 by a policy which urges couples to restrict themselves to a single birth. The battery of anti-natalist strategies associated with this policy form a sharp contrast with the mildly pro-natalist stance of Western nations (Kammerman and Kahn 1978). For example, the 1981 marriage law makes the practice of birth control mandatory.

In contrast with the West, family policy in China is very explicitly formulated and vigorously publicised. Posters everywhere announce policy goals and details of current programs. Regular meetings, study and discussion groups are held in the workplace and in the local neighbourhood area. The use of positive role models is a notable feature. For instance, under the "Five Goods Families" campaign, one of the current family life education programs, model families are selected in each local area and receive certificates of honor. Once selected and certificated, a family is expected to endorse or take part in other community campaigns of one kind or another. The respect accorded to such models is considered to provide a powerful incentive for emulation by others (Munro 1975). Negative role models are also widely used to point up the nature of wrong attitudes and behavior. In recent years, the Gang of Four and the excesses of the Cultural Revolution provide a ready source of such negative role models. Diagnosis of attitudes is also an important feature of the Chinese approach. For instance, the disrespect for elders that was encouraged among young people during the Cultural Revolution is now regarded as just one aspect of the pervasive disease of "ultra-left extremism", a mistaken form of thinking which then prevailed and which still needs to be combated in all areas of life.

The way in which policy is implemented also differs from that of Western countries. A little background on the structure of the Chinese bureaucracy is needed to comprehend this system. After it came to power in 1949, the Chinese communist party faced the problems of unifying the country and setting up an administrative structure of honest officials. Drawing at first on its own soldiers for staff, the party created a centralised hierarchical bureaucracy, designed on the Russian model, to implement policy made at the top by the central party committee in Beijing. There are national offices of the various governmental instrumentalities in Beijing and below these are provincial, regional and district offices. The district level is further subdivided: in the country into commune, production brigade and production team;

in the cities into neighbourhood committees and street committees. The bureaucracy thus provides a means of implementing centrally decided policy that reaches downward into every village and every city street.

### *The All-China Women's Federation*

“Mass organisations” like the All-China Women’s Federation and the Youth League are further arms of government, have assimilar structure, and liaise at each level with other government sectors. The All-China Women’s Federation is one of the organisations with a major role in implementing family policies. There is really no comparable organisation in the West, so a little detail may be helpful. The federation was set up in 1949 by Mao Zedong in line with his view that “women hold up half the sky” and that “the task before us is too great without the help of the women”. The federation was not operative during the Cultural Revolution, but was revived in 1979. Its function is essentially to help implement government policy at the “grassroots” level. As well as affiliations with other government sectors, it has representatives in the various “work units” such as factories and hospitals, where they liaise with party, management and union officials. The secretariat in Beijing also has other activities, including a publications department which puts out *Women of China*, a mass distribution monthly which explains current programs within a “human interest” format. The activities of the federation include community education, welfare and anti-discrimination work as well as conciliation. These activities are known collectively as “woman work”. The federation is also required by its constitution to funnel up to the national level the various problems, needs and feelings of “the masses” and to make suggestions for change. From all accounts this is a distinctly secondary function. In general there seemed to be no questioning by federation officials of the federation’s role as an instrument of government policy nor was there any breath of feminism as understood in the West. Most federation officials appeared to be in their fifties, had plainly lived through many twists and turns of national policy already, and seemed very committed to current programs and policies. Younger staff are mostly interpreters, and seem to stick firmly to the interpreter role.

In China all jobs are assigned by the state. One does not apply for a job, and one does not easily change jobs. When the Women’s Federation, for example, decided it needed two new English interpreters, it approached the principal of the Foreign Languages School, who selected suitable appointees. These will probably stay with the federation for a lifetime. The work unit is generally the route through which housing, health, child care and education is obtained and has an important say in choice of marriage partners and timing of births. This high level of control over the workforce obviously makes it easier to implement government policy than is the case in the West.

The degree to which the bureaucracy thus intrudes into family life in the process of policy implementation strikes the Westerner as very high, indeed startlingly so. This feature is analysed in more detail in the context of specific policy areas.

### *Family policies*

Chinese family policies have undoubtedly achieved successes, although falling short so far of their own lofty aspirations. The birth rate declined from 26 per 1000

in 1970 to 11.7 per 1000 in 1979, even before the switch from the two-child to the one-child policy (Liu 1981). The incidence of divorce in the population is estimated at 2%, compared with 48% in the USA (Cherlin 1981) and 33% in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1982). In contrast with many Western countries, there is not a large group of lone-mother-headed families receiving far less than national average income (Cherlin 1981). There are said to be 40% of preschoolers currently in group child care, a figure far higher than that obtaining in most western countries (Kamerman and Kahn 1981). Chinese statistics are notably "rubbery", in part a legacy of Mao Zedong's breaking up of the central statistical service during the Cultural Revolution (Butterfield 1981) but even critical Western observers agree that there have been significant achievements in these areas (Bonavia 1981; Butterfield 1981). It should be noted however that while family and child policies appear by Western standards remarkably unambiguous and consistent, some economic policies collide with them. The allocation of husbands and wives to jobs in different parts of the country is a case in point.

In considering the Chinese example, a number of questions recur. Firstly, insofar as some programs may appear to hold promise for other countries, is it necessary to take the whole package? Could the same results be achieved without the same centralised and rigid bureaucracy and without the same pervasive intrusion into family life? It seems likely that most Westerners would find these aspects so unattractive as to outweigh any possible advantages. To take one example, the Chinese system of community mediation in marital conflict provides support that western families all too often lack, to their cost. It comes however at the price of constant mutual surveillance. Would it be possible to have the one without the other?

The second question is also related to this issue of exportability. Where the programs are successful, to what extent is this due to government activity, or to the supportive framework provided by long-standing aspects of Chinese culture? The use of positive role models and of the incentive value of peer respect, for instance, derives from Confucianism, and predates the communist government by some 2,000 years (Munro 1975). The striving after harmony and belief in the perfectability of society also comes from Confucianism (Bonavia 1981). In addition, family interaction has never been considered an area of privacy, in part due to the impossibility of privacy within the large extended family (Yang 1980). The communist party has plainly built on these features of Chinese culture, and in their absence the outcomes of the various programs might be very different.

The third question relates to the likelihood of change. Despite the continuities noted above, there is no doubt that the communist victory in 1949 brought a major restructuring of Chinese life. Policies such as a commitment to equality between men and women, or the provision of associated services like child care have remained stable since then. But there have also been some dramatic policy changes. In the mid 1960s Mao Zedong became unhappy about the growth of the central bureaucracy and the resurgence of "capitalist roaders" and initiated the Great Cultural Revolution, which subsequently came under the control of the now-reviled Gang of Four. Schools and universities were shut down, intellectuals and bureaucrats were sent to the countryside to "learn from the peasants" and governmental regulation of family life became somewhat haphazard as various

factions struggled for control (Bonavia 1981). Ten years later, Hua Guofeng (then the premier) mounted the rostrum in Beijing's immense Tian An Men Square to announce that the Gang of Four had fallen. Rather cautiously at first, but more rapidly since 1978 there has been a rehabilitation of the bureaucrats and intellectuals, an opening up to the West and a movement towards economic and social pragmatism. At the Party's 12th Congress, held in September 1982 and described by Party Vice-Chairman Deng Xiaoping as "the most important party meeting in more than 30 years", a "rectification" campaign was announced, which will involve expulsion from the party of all members no longer considered acceptable. In general these are those still considered tainted by the "impurities in ideology, style and organisation" prevalent during the Cultural Revolution, and judged intractable to re-education (Walker 1982a). A new constitution was approved on 6th September, 1982 which is said to have erased the "leftist mistakes" of the previous document (Walker 1982b). There are as yet, no indications of changes in family and child policies, but the Chinese leadership is plainly capable of making rapid and drastic changes where it judges these appropriate. Hence in discussing family policies it is important to remember that these are far from static, and that further changes may be around the corner.

There are of course many family-related policies in China, but in this article only three are discussed: marriage and divorce, population policy and family life education programs.

## *B. MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE*

### *Marriage Law*

Along with the land reform movement of 1950-52, the Chinese Marriage Law of 1950 radically altered the status of Chinese women. For the first time it gave women the right to divorce and outlawed the old feudal system under which marriages were arranged by parents. Under the old system, child betrothal, concubinage and polygamy were permitted, and daughters-in-law became unpaid and frequently abused servants within the husband's family. The suffering of women was very great. A traditional Mongolian ballad sings that "Pearls can be found in the sea but the happiness of Mongolian women is nowhere to be found; the pebbles on the beach are uncountable, but there are so few when compared to the sufferings and disasters of us women".

The land reform movement was a crucial accompaniment to the new marriage law, since until 1949 women held no property and had no means of subsistence outside marriage. If a husband was not available, a girl might be "married" to a hitching post, a saddle or a rooster belonging to parents-in-law who needed extra help but had no sons. Following this she coiled up her hair and was treated henceforth as a married woman, that is, a servant. Following the implementation of land reform and the Marriage Act there was a wave of divorce among women who seized the chance to escape from marriage and to support themselves on the share of land or livestock allotted to them (Zhu 1981).

It is considered by officials that the feudal marriage and family system was largely destroyed during the 1950s, but that in the ten year turmoil of the Cultural Revolution the 1950 marriage law was ignored and some feudal practices such as the exaction of money and gifts for marriage again became common (Luo 1981). It was

not until 1978 that the marriage law began to be enforced once more. In January 1981 a new marriage law was promulgated. This 1981 law reaffirms the principles of the 1950 law, but deletes or revises certain sections no longer considered appropriate and adds some new provisions. These include the stipulation that children have the duty to support and assist their aged parents, a traditional custom which is considered to have been undermined by the "moral degeneration and egotism" encouraged during the Cultural Revolution (Luo 1981).

The new law also makes it the duty of couples to use family planning and allows the husband to become a member of the woman's family. It affirms the principle of late marriage and raises the minimum marriage age two years above that set by the 1950 law, to 22 years for men and 20 for women. There was some consideration given to raising the age by a further two years, a move which it was estimated would cut population growth by 15 million a year. However, this proposal was rejected on the grounds that it would encourage unmarried cohabitation and ex-nuptial births. These are already considered a problem, despite frequent official denials (Tan 1981).

The 1981 law reaffirms the principles of free marriage, monogamy, equality of men and women, protection of the legitimate interests of mothers and children, the right of both partners to keep their own names, and to be free to work, study and take part in social activities. Except by special agreement both have the right to own, use and dispose of property held in common. Both partners are obligated to support one another and each has the right to inherit the other's property (*Peking Review* 1981). Free choice is much more of a reality than in the past, but it is not quite what most Westerners would understand by the term. In the cities and more sophisticated communes people generally make their own choices, but the partner chosen is expected by both family and work unit to be a "suitable" person. Meeting prospective partners is often a problem. Clubs, pubs, bars or discos, and social dances and entertainments, condemned during the Cultural Revolution, are only now reappearing. The match-making gap is filled by marriage introduction services organised through work units, street committees and the Communist Youth League. In more rural areas the "modified free choice" system involves parents and a go-between, who first meet to consider the economics of the match. When a decision is struck, the young couple are introduced and "try to develop compatibility". A survey in one province in 1979 found that among recent marriages 15% were by free choice, 75% were "modified" choices, and 10% had been arranged by parents. The latter were said to be mainly young people who, because of political circumstances during the Cultural Revolution or extreme poverty, could not find partners, so that families agreed to exchange daughters (Tan 1981).

Divorce is somewhat less restrictive than previously. The major legal change concerns the discretion of the courts. The new law states that "in cases of complete alienation of mutual affection, and when mediation has failed, divorce should be granted". Under the old law, the stipulation was that "divorce *may* be granted" in such cases.

Judicial interpretation of the older wording is considered to have erred towards the moralistic, with many courts refusing divorce even where both parties desired it. Where one party, particularly the woman, did not want the divorce, the court was not likely to grant it. The outcomes are now considered to have been too harsh; however, the new law by no means encourages divorce. Adultery, desertion, and

“minor” disagreements are not grounds for divorce, nor can a man petition for divorce when his wife is pregnant, or within one year of the birth of the child, although the wife can. However the most important discouragement to divorce lies within the practice of mediation, which is not necessarily instigated by the court. The emphasis is on community intervention.

The case is likely to go first to the street committee, not necessarily at the instance of either marital partner. In an example described proudly to the delegation by members of the street committee who had been involved, a husband, Wang, suspected his wife of having a lover. There were loud and frequent quarrels, which led neighbours to call in the committee and the Women’s Federation. Mediation attempts failed however, and Wang’s wife, a school teacher, moved out and took up residence in the school dormitory. Wang continued to look after the two children of the marriage, aged 7 and 12. He was regularly visited by Federation, street committee and work unit representatives who urged him to conciliate. They also urged the children to put pressure on both parents to come together. The couple nevertheless continued to live apart, and after two years the wife requested a divorce. While the divorce was being considered, a Women’s Federation member saw Wang’s wife walking along the road with a sad expression on her face, an expression ill-fitted to the spring festival being celebrated. She spoke to her: “I see that you are alone and I think that you should return to your husband”. The wife replied: “Yes, but it would be too embarrassing to go back”. The official “took some hope” from these words and returned to Wang, who had not originally wanted the divorce but had been so annoyed by his wife instituting proceedings that he now refused to have her back even should she wish to return. The official asked the children to work on their father, and she and others continued to work on both partners, for instance sending them adjacent tickets for cinema shows from time to time. Eventually the couple agreed to reconciliation, but said that they wished to move, as they had lost too much face among the neighbours. The neighbourhood committee arranged to consult the State Housing Bureau so that this could be arranged. Committee members and staff from the wife’s school carried her mattress and bedding back from the school to Wang’s apartment. They then stood outside the street beneath the marital window late into the night in case quarrelling broke out, but silence prevailed. Later the couple moved away from the district.

More commonly, it is the husband who seeks to cast off his wife in favour of a new partner. In these cases community censure is exerted through work unit and neighbourhood groups, and in the last resort the court may deny the divorce following a public hearing in which the views of colleagues, neighbours and relatives are considered. In a recent case coming before the Beijing Municipal Intermediate People’s Court, Liu, a 48 year old office worker asked for divorce from his wife on the grounds that his parents had chosen his wife for him and he felt there was no affection between them. He was quoted as saying “I don’t see any point in going on this way”. He had previously asked his wife to agree to the divorce, but she had refused on the grounds that she had been a good wife, had done nothing wrong, that the marriage had been happy, that there were children involved and that “Besides, I believe I still love him”. The court agreed that their married life over the last 27 years had on the whole been satisfactory. Liu should value his marriage and take into consideration the happiness of the children and refrain from insisting on a

divorce. It is to be hoped that both the husband and the wife will be considerate towards each other and do their best to improve family relations, work for unity, and contribute to the building of socialism. The decision is final. Any appeal to a higher court will not be accepted (Zhong 1981).

### *Problem Areas*

There are a number of notable conflicts both between Chinese marriage policy and community attitudes, and between marriage policy and economic policy. Reference has already been made to cohabitation and ex-nuptial births, which occur despite strong official disapproval of premarital sex. Tan (1981) sees these as caused by unrealistic official restrictions on marriage, and describes a growing practice of holding unofficial "weddings" among family and friends so as to gain social recognition without official legal sanction. Another area of conflict relates to definitions of "suitability" in a marriage partner. Families and work units, which have an important say in marriage choices, sometimes clash over who is "suitable". The communist party and its representatives in the work unit want good matches in terms of political background and attitudes. Families are alleged to often want good "catches" in terms of money and connections. *China Reconstructs*, an official monthly, recently featured (Tan 1981) the story of a suicide pact between two young commune members who had fallen in love while working together. The girl's father thought the boy's family was too poor, resisted the marriage, and sent his sons to beat the boy up. In despair, the young couple hanged themselves with a single rope. The story ends with a description of how such "non-socialist attitudes" are being overcome.

Marriage remains expensive, particularly in rural areas, where parents are expected by tradition to put on a good wedding and to dower the bridal couple substantially. This practice causes debt, extortion, bitterness and recrimination among family members, and is officially, but not very effectively, discouraged (Tan 1981). Bonavia (1981) however suggests that the government unofficially tolerates these practices because they act as a brake on marriage and hence on population growth. The buying, selling and kidnapping of women persists in parts of the country (Walker 1982c).

A further major area of conflict, this time between sectors of the bureaucracy, is the not infrequent posting of husbands and wives to jobs in widely separated parts of the country. Separated couples are entitled to twelve days each year to see one another, but it may be years before one spouse can manage a job transfer. It may not be possible at all. Naturally this encourages extramarital affairs and family conflict. One important characteristic of a "good" boss at one's work unit is his or her willingness to help organize job transfers for separated spouses (Yang 1980).

### *Comparison with the West*

As noted earlier, the Chinese approach to marriage and divorce has kept the incidence of divorce very low, with the obvious consequence that Chinese wives and children are much less likely than their Western counterparts to experience abandonment and lack of support. Cherlin (1981) estimates that in the USA among women born in 1950-54 four out of ten will divorce, of whom one in three will remarry. An unknown number will separate or be deserted without proceeding to



divorce. As a result, there were in the USA by 1979 5.3 million mother-headed single parent families, an increase of 81% since 1970 (US Bureau of the Census 1980). Not all single parent families are poor, but most are. A 1979 US Bureau of the Census survey found that only 43% of divorced or separated mothers were receiving maintenance from husbands (Cherlin 1981). In Australia the figure is estimated to be similar (Burns 1980; Thomas 1983).

Responsibility for recouping outstanding maintenance payment is usually left in Western countries to the abandoned wife, who must on each occasion of default take out a separate court order. Such wives usually give up quite quickly in the face of the time and humiliation involved, the husband's hostility and the court's lack of success in enforcement (Chambers 1979; Burns 1980). Child-care responsibilities and the male-oriented job market offer little opportunity to compensate for the husband's default. Hence female parents and their children constitute the new poor, a rapidly growing underclass. In Australia in 1980 their average income was under half (47%) that of two-parent families and they comprised an estimated 12.9% of families (English 1983). In the USA the median income in 1979 of a two-child mother-headed family was 36% that of an equivalent two-parent family (Cherlin 1981).

Chinese mothers, even when divorced, are protected from this accumulation of disadvantage. Equal pay and the more or less universal employment of married women strengthens their financial position. Both spouses are considered responsible for children after a divorce, and since the neighbourhood must pick up the tab for defaulting parents, it has every incentive to enforce these payments. State control over job allocation and movement makes it very difficult for defaulters to decamp elsewhere, as they frequently do in Western countries. The network of child-care centres, the long school day, and the persistence of close extended family ties provide further support.

The Chinese divorce ground of "complete alienation of mutual affection" makes an interesting contrast with recent Western concepts of no-fault divorce and "irretrievable breakdown". As in the case of Liu and his wife, the claim by one party that he or she still feels some love can be interpreted by the court as indicating that alienation of affection is not complete, and that marital harmony can be rebuilt. Such a belief runs against the grain of Western thinking. There has of course been widespread opposition in the West to the introduction of no-fault divorce, on the grounds that it is likely to increase the exploitation of women by legitimating the abandonment of wives and children innocent of any offence. However, where no-fault divorce has been introduced, it has generally been accepted that if either party feels that the marriage has irretrievably broken down, then it indeed has, and that it is not the role of the court to decide otherwise. Associated with this has been an interest in concretising the criteria of breakdown as for instance, a certain period already spent by the couple living apart. The aim has been to reduce the inequitable variability between individual judges which proved a notable feature of fault legislation (Rheinstein 1972).

A more spectacular contrast concerns the notion of mediation. Western courts of course commonly make use of mediation. The Australian Matrimonial Causes Act 1959, for example, made it mandatory for lawyers to inform their clients of the existence of mediation facilities and under the Family Law Act 1975 the court itself

provides a counselling service, and makes referrals to other agencies. In contrast to the Chinese system however, the emphasis is on assisting couples to reach their "own" decision. Relatives, friends, and occasionally employers and social workers may attempt conciliation and moral pressure. But in general the Western community intrudes very little into the divorce decision, and is likely to be equally uninvolved when subsequently one or both parties (but usually the woman) may stand in great need of help and support (Schlesinger 1978).

Why do these differences between the Western and the Chinese approaches to divorce exist? Firstly, limiting divorce in China meets some community needs not usually considered in Western proceedings. The stipulation in the law regarding support of parents is relevant here. Divorced persons are unreliable sources of support for aged parents, who must otherwise be provided for by the local community. With housing in short supply, a second residence is hard to find. Other persons are, in consequence, likely to be discommoded. If, as well, a disaffected spouse seeks permission to change jobs and move away, the work unit's success in meeting its output quota and earning bonus awards may be jeopardised. Hence, many people have a very material interest in the preservation of marriage.

Bonavia (1980) gives another reason for the Chinese approach to divorce: a traditional belief in both the perfectability of human society and the power of persuasion and positive thinking in overcoming social problems. The examples of the Wangs and the Lius exemplify these attitudes. The neighbourly concern and mediation in the Wang case appears to be based on a conviction that husband and wife can be persuaded to see "sense". In the case of Liu, the court's injunction to husband and wife to do their best to improve family relations, work for unity and contribute to the building of socialism implies, a faith in positive thinking that few Western judges or counsellors would share.

To these long-term attitudes may be added a particular attitude towards the use of courts. We had quoted to us several times an old Chinese saying: "If you go to court, the hatred will last for ten years and several generations". The Chinese policy of avoiding court intervention where possible may be, as well, a function of the shortage of legal personnel in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution. However, there is every evidence that rapid recourse to the law in the West can indeed breed hatred that "lasts ten years" and more. The subsequent relationship of couples reconciled by the Chinese system of community mediation is impossible to assess, since the official attitude is that all conciliations are successful, unless proved otherwise by subsequent dissolution of the marriage. However, the work is acknowledged by practitioners to be difficult, exemplified in the frequently quoted aphorism that "even the best justice cannot cleanse family affairs".

In the West the recent large-scale movement of women into the workforce has often been cited as a reason for the upturn in divorce (Cherlin 1981). The argument is that employment opens up opportunities to unhappy wives who previously saw no alternatives to staying in marriage. This was one of the original purposes of the 1950 law in China. The premise was, however, that only those marriages which had been forced on one or both partners would be unhappy. In China, given free choice and suitable guidance, one is not supposed to make mistakes. It will be interesting to see whether China is able to continue to contain its divorce rate at the present low level as contact with the West increases and as the one-child policy comes to

confer more freedom on women.

### C. POPULATION POLICY

#### *Nature of the policy*

The Chinese population has doubled since 1949, to an estimated 980 million, overcrowding every aspect of daily life, and swamping the effects of many economic successes. The average living space per head in Beijing is 3 square metres (Yang 1980). The goal of the new one-child policy is population stabilisation at around 1.2 billion by the year 2000 and subsequent population reduction. Large families, however, and particularly sons, are traditionally highly valued by the Chinese, for economic, cultural and emotional reasons. In the country, where 80 percent of the population lives, the family with many sons is still economically advantaged. Restricting couples to a single child, who may well be female, constitutes a herculean task.

The Chinese appear to be approaching the task, nevertheless, in an equitable, rational and thorough manner. The policy applies equally to all parents except the ethnic minorities, who represent a small proportion of the total population (some 5 percent) and commonly live in remote and sparsely populated border areas. Parents whose child dies, or is born or becomes handicapped, are allowed a second child without penalty. Under the Marriage Law 1981 couples are in duty bound to practice family planning. Birth control advice and equipment is readily available through a network of primary health care clinics in neighbourhood areas and workplaces. The availability of these services is widely publicised by means of posters, meetings, study groups and family visiting by the Womens' Federation and other groups. (To be more precise, birth control is readily available to the married; pre-marital sex is officially deplored.) The techniques employed for policy implementation include continuing publicity campaigns, appeals to patriotism, the use of positive role models, and unflagging group pressure exerted through the work unit, the street committee and the discussion groups arranged by the various mass organisations. A variety of material and prestige rewards and penalties have been introduced along with programs aimed at compensating for the loss of children. In addition, hostility has been deflected wherever possible on to the Gang of Four who, it is claimed, were partly responsible for over-population by virtue of their encouragement of population growth.

Of these various techniques, group pressure appears to be the most important. The work unit can exert powerful pressure through its control over food and clothing rations, marriage, housing, timing of births, schooling, medical services, recreation, correspondence and travel. The street committee, in association with Women's Federation representatives, watches behaviour, visits homes and monitors marital relationships (Bonavia 1981; Butterfield 1982). Overcrowding and the housing shortage drastically reduce privacy.

#### *One-child pledge*

By Western standards, the force and intrusiveness of group pressure appears very great. Meetings are held at which couples come forth and pledge themselves to one child. In factories and other workplaces, banners and stars proclaim the number of

employees in each section who have taken the pledge or have undergone voluntary sterilisation. Women who have taken the pledge receive up to 180 instead of the normal 56 days paid maternity leave. In China, being a full-time housewife and mother is not considered acceptable; all able-bodied women under 50 years are expected to be in the work force. Mothers are, however, sometimes referred to as "half able-bodied".

After the birth of a child, pledged parents receive a bonus, generally equivalent to five days pay per month for mother and father, and other benefits such as better housing and perhaps better career opportunities. The child is also promised priority access to medical and hospital treatment, to child care centres and to the more sought-after schools, and in subsequent job assignment. This package is justified on the grounds that the parents are giving up something by making the pledge and deserve some recompense. (One official referred to them as "one shoe" families.) If a wife does become pregnant a second time, there is heavy pressure on her from the work unit, street committee and other sources, to have an abortion. If she goes ahead with the pregnancy all privileges will be lost, both by the new and the first child, and the parents must pay back the bonus they have received, as well as the cash equivalent of the extra maternity leave. The punishments are partly hypothetical of course, since the policy is so new. The suggestion was made that the repayments could be made by instalments, and that in any case, the bonus payments would in many cases have been banked by the parents and interest received so that the hardship would not necessarily be great. Officials seemed vague about the details, and made it clear that they considered prevention rather than punishment to be the crucial issue.

Ancillary policies include the encouragement of marriage in the later twenties; thirty is considered a good age for a male official to marry and the housing shortage acts as a powerful *de facto* influence. Sons who marry are now encouraged to regard it as equally appropriate after marriage to live and work with the wife's family as with their own, as has previously been the tradition. The aim here is to remove one of the crucial reasons for wanting a son, and hence to make parents more complacent about the situation where their one child happens to be a girl.

As noted earlier, the use of positive role models and the incentive of community prestige are long-standing and powerful aspects of Chinese culture, rooted in Confucianism (Munro 1975). A widespread system of honouring individuals for socially desirable achievements accordingly creates a pool of models of all kinds which can be used for the promotion of various policies. An example of such role modelling for the one-child policy was the Eight Sisters Manure Collection Team, a village group which in 1981 received a Labour Standard Bearers' Certificate of Honour (a prestigious award). The delegation met several team members who had recently returned from a national conference of Standard Bearers and Labour Heroes. It was explained that the Eight Sisters were not actually sisters, but changing members of a team of unmarried girls which has been in operation since 1965, and which has been particularly zealous in its duties, having collected 3 million kilos of manure from fields, public toilets and the insides of old clay beds. Girls leave the team on marriage, and it is considered a great honour to be asked to join. The Eight Sisters in their role as Standard Bearers and models had all taken the one-child pledge, had vowed to marry late, and had agreed to ask their husbands to move in

with their own families after marriage. Like other Standard Bearers, they were very active in birth control publicity.

Group monitoring of reproduction is assisted by the fact that a woman's reproductive cycle tends to be fairly public knowledge. Under the "five periods protection" law, women workers are given lighter duties and the possibility of time off during five periods of life: menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, nursing and menopause. This means that co-workers are all aware of, and affected by, each other's reproductive cycles. It also means that in addition to family limitation, couples are required to time births to fit in with the work group, since generally speaking when a woman is absent on maternity leave her co-workers pick up the extra work load. The rostering of pregnancies is arranged in consultation with the work unit and street committee.

It is claimed that the one-child policy is highly successful and that some 90-94 percent of eligible couples have taken the one-child pledge. As stated earlier, however, Chinese statistics must be treated with caution.

### *Problem Areas*

Chinese over-population constitutes a mammoth and urgent problem, obvious to all. The solution is also fairly obvious, but runs strongly against the traditional desire for large families and many sons. The view presented by officials is that the policy will not prove too difficult to implement in the cities, where the normal city pressures towards family limitation already operate. Control in rural areas is expected to be much more difficult.

It seems likely that the vigour of policy enforcement varies with local population pressures and labour needs (Bonavia 1981). Newspaper reports indicate some sinister trends: infanticide and maltreatment of infant daughters, father-ordered abortion in cases of conceptions occurring in April, May and June (months traditionally associated with the conception of girls) and forced abortion and forced sterilisation carried out by officials (Walker 1982c). Recent figures show that over the period 1979-1981 the sex ratio of newborn infants surviving the first few days changed from 51 males: 48 females (a normal distribution, as male births usually slightly outnumber females in human populations) to 58 males: 42 females. This suggests the occurrence of a hair-raising incidence of female infanticide (officially recorded as stillbirths), and the Women's Federation at its recent annual conference called for action in ending this persecution of females (*The Economist*, April 16-22, 1983, p 36).

There are no exemptions for more important officials. On the contrary, it was stressed that such people were "giving the lead" by embracing late marriage and voluntary sterilisation after the first birth. Many Western observers, however, consider corruption to be widespread within the Chinese bureaucracy and that in this, as in all other areas, those who can flout the rules do (Bonavia 1981).

One major area of conflict with economic policy involves the official encouragement of "family plots" for the private growth and sale of foodstuffs and of private "sideline production" of various goods. These practices naturally increase the value of family labour and thus militate against the one-child policy.

The question of whether a generation of "only" children might not present a discipline problem was regularly raised by delegation members in official

discussions. Some officials saw this as a real problem. Others discounted the issue with comments such as "children in a family of ten can be spoiled, if the parents have that attitude".

The pre-schools, however, take the issue seriously. The educational problems associated with classrooms of "only" children are currently being debated in the pages of *Psychological Sciences Information*. A six-month survey in one Shanghai kindergarten found "only" children to have more behaviour problems, including bad temper, selfishness, food fussiness, carelessness with property, timidity, and to be less able to take care of themselves (Huang 1982).

The delegation also queried whether the group monitoring of reproductive life involved in the one-child policy and the five periods protection law might not be regarded as over-intrusive by Chinese women. We were told that this was not the case, as everyone could see the need for population limitation. In contrast, there is great reticence about sexual behaviour. This was made clear to us when discussions with senior staff at a large maternity hospital turned to the topic of sexual counselling. Contraceptive information and sex education is not provided until the eve of marriage, and the latter is likely to be basic (Bonavia 1981). One woman told how on her own wedding eve her mother had demonstrated the nature of intercourse by means of a press stud on her blouse. When an ex-nuptial pregnancy does occur, abortion is regarded as the appropriate solution.

### *Comparison with the West*

Comparison with the West is not easy. Most Western nations have been more concerned in recent times with under, rather than over, population (Kameran and Kahn 1978). Indeed, a striking feature of contemporary population trends is the voluntary convergence towards a very high degree of family limitation; in fact, towards an average not too greatly above that *sought* by the Chinese. In Western Europe by 1980, 14 nations had fallen below population replacement level, five of them below an estimated lifetime fertility rate of 1.6 children per woman (Eversley 1980). In the U.S.A. the estimated lifetime fertility rate of women born in 1950 is not much more than half (1.9) that of the preceding generation (3.2; Cherlin 1981). In Australia the estimated lifetime fertility rate dropped from 3.55 in 1961 to 1.92 in 1980 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1981).

This decline in births has occurred despite generally pro-natalist attitudes among governments (Kameran and Kahn 1978, 1980), together with religious and other opposition to birth control, abortion and the dissemination of contraceptive information.

These outcomes make it clear that there are other ways of achieving negative population growth. Why does it happen in the West? A number of competing explanations have been advanced. When the bump in the birth rate occasioned by the 1950s baby boom is disregarded, the decline can be seen as just a further extension of the long-term trend towards low fertility, low juvenile mortality and long lives that demographers describe as a natural concomitant of industrialisation and urbanisation: the "demographic transition" that has been going on since the 19th century and in some countries for longer (Borrie 1979). This type of explanation implies a steady state population, such that increases in average life span are compensated for by decreases in births. An alternative and more popular

explanation sees the increased labour force participation of young married women since the late 1960s as the prime cause. It is proposed that lifestyle expectancies are geared to the two-income family, so that time out for child bearing is regarded by parents as very expensive. In addition, it is proposed that younger women do not share their mothers' view of their job as secondary to that of the husband and expect a full lifetime career (Cherlin 1981). Hence the time and energy allotment for motherhood is becoming exceedingly small and may shrink still further. A third type of explanation (Easterlin 1968, 1980) posits an inverse relationship between birth cohort size and fertility and accordingly predicts an increase in Western fertility in the 1980s as the small birth cohorts of the later 1960s and 1970s enter adulthood.

The Chinese would obviously be unwise to rely on any of these presumed effects. Since 1949 most Chinese women have been in the workforce, but the population has nevertheless doubled and the Easterlin explanation is only proposed to hold in developed countries. Developing nations facing acute population pressures may accordingly find the Chinese approach more appropriate to their needs than the Western one.

A clear difference between China and the West lies in governmental response to population trends. In the West none of the trends or predictions described above has led to concerted action by governments, pro-natalist or otherwise. By contrast, the Chinese are committed to the idea of a planned economy and have come to see this as including planning for a labour source of appropriate size and quality. In the trenchant words of the late Premier Chou En-lai:

Family planning comes within the category of national plans. It's not a question of public health, it's a question of planning. If you can't even work out a plan for the population increase, what's the point of working out a national plan? (Liu 1981:47).

#### *D. FAMILY LIFE EDUCATION*

##### *Nature of family life education*

I use this general title to cover a sequence of programs devised over the last four years. These must be understood in the context of the Cultural Revolution. During the Cultural Revolution secondary schools were either shut or the teachers sent to the countryside and traditional education abandoned in favour of political mobilisation into the Red Guards. The Red Guards abjured the traditional Chinese respect for parents, teachers and older people in general and were encouraged to intimidate those considered to be practising "bourgeois thought". The Red Guard brigades are now widely described as gangs of hoodlums politically legitimated by the Gang of Four. (One young woman described how as a fifteen-year-old Red Guard she and her schoolmates broke into the houses of people suspected of hiding bourgeois possessions such as antiques and smashed anything that they could find. She said she and the others felt excited and righteous, but that her grandparents packed up and moved to the country to live, telling her parents that they were going because "We cannot bear your youngsters".) In consequence there is now great determination that the young will not be allowed to get out of hand again and concern to support and "re-educate" those who were adolescents during the

Cultural Revolution and who are now young parents or parents-to-be. The techniques used in promoting the family life program are the same as we have seen earlier: vigorous public education, the extensive use of role models, honorific awards and acclaim, community pressure and an overall emphasis on harmony.

One important current program is the Five Goods Families. The Five Goods (Virtues) are: (1) a good education for the children, (2) a good relationship with the neighbours, (3) a harmonious husband-wife relationship, (4) a good clean environment and (5) a good industrious and thrifty housewife. A number of model families meeting these criteria are selected annually in each local area and receive certificates of honour. To be selected, a family must first be nominated by the local street or courtyard, approved by an inspection committee and finally chosen by mass discussion and voting. The family is then held up as a model to others and may be expected to endorse or take part in other community campaigns. Backsliding is dealt with by group study and discussion. The Five Goods Families is paralleled by the Five Goods Mothers campaign. Four of the Goods here are essentially the same, but whereas to be selected as a Five Goods Family the husband is expected to make some contribution; in the Mothers' campaign this dimension is replaced by one relating to care of parents and relations with in-laws.

These programs are of course not aimed purely at the young. The Chinese are trying simultaneously to raise the cultural level of the peasants (including those who have recently moved into the big cities) and to restrain "bourgeois tendencies" towards, for instance, family advancement through advantageous marriages for children and "decadent Western tendencies" towards sexual experimentation. Family life education accordingly includes community intervention into all forms of family conflict and deviation, including tyranny by parents-in-law, wife beating, maltreatment of aged parents and discrimination against daughters. Sister-in-law relations appear particularly problematic, especially among poorer families where many family members live in a small apartment and possessions like clothes are held in common. In mid-1981 the Five Stresses and Four Beauties campaign was launched. The five stresses are courtesy, moral conduct, public hygiene, social order and family harmony and the four beauties being those of mind, language, environment and behaviour.

A further aspect of family education is the recent launching of the China Society for the study of Marriage and the Family, to be based in Beijing. Its purpose is to study the "theoretical and practical aspects of marriage and family relations", with particular reference to: persistence of arranged marriages; compulsory and mercenary unions and lavish wedding expenditure; alienation of old partners for new ones and the seeking of hasty divorces; wifebeating, maltreatment of the old and negligence in the education of children and "belief in the so called 'sexual emancipation' among some of the young people" (*Women of China*, February 1982).

### *Comparisons with the West*

Western nations share some if not all of the problems referred to above. Domestic violence is a case in point. It is instructive to compare the various control techniques used in the West with the Chinese system of constant community surveillance, admonishment and exhortation.



In the West, police and neighbours are notoriously reluctant to intervene in domestic fights. Neighbours are likely to feel that it is none of their business, and that neither spouse will thank them for intruding. The police know from experience that even badly abused wives rarely press charges. In consequence, domestic violence is poorly controlled, and constitutes a serious infringement of women's rights. Yet it *could* no doubt be better controlled. Alcohol, for instance, is a well-established precipitant of violence. The community could in theory be mobilised to revoke the licence to drink among known offenders. Workmates, friends, neighbours, publicans and shopkeepers could all be apprised of the offender's status and could be urged to act in concert to keep him from drinking and to talk through with him his anti-social tendencies.

The thousand and one objections that present themselves at the thought of such a project — let the reader reflect for a moment on the possible range of community reactions — highlight the very different concepts of privacy and civil rights obtaining in the two cultures. It seems doubtful then whether the Chinese programs have much to offer Western nations. There may be some applicability to underdeveloped countries that share Chinese attitudes to community interaction and that are also currently experiencing social upheaval.

### E. CONCLUDING COMMENTS

In this paper some specific areas of Chinese family and child policy have been examined: marriage and divorce, population policy and family life education. Cutting across these areas, some pervasive features emerge. First, the programs involve by Western standards a very high degree of intrusiveness into family and personal privacy. If this is the price of any successes achieved, it may prove to be one that other countries are not prepared to pay. To the Chinese, it appears acceptable because of the continuity with cultural tradition. In the words of Yang:

China has never had a democratic tradition ... there is no privacy and everyone's personal affairs are known. However, this does not arouse indignation as it had always been the case in the extended Chinese family. On the other hand, there is genuine mutual concern (Yang 1980:145).

Secondly, we have noted that in each of the areas reviewed, there *is* an explicitly formulated policy. Compare the low status of family policy in the West as described for example by Steiner (1981). As one example of the unpopularity of family policy in America, Steiner tells how Walter Mondale's active promotion of family and children's services actually counted *against* him when he sought vice-presidential nomination under Jimmy Carter.

Thirdly, and in partial explanation of the higher status of Chinese family policies, we have noted that in all areas, direction comes from the top. This is a feature repugnant to many Western observers (Butterfield 1981; Bernstein 1981). Butterfield indeed argues that in China the authoritarian state has taken over social life. In his analysis, party dictatorship and the bureaucratic structure have brought every village and every urban family under control. No opposition has been allowed to develop, hence new policies agreed on at the top can be disseminated downwards

with remarkable speed and efficacy. The system in his view is very much a one-way street, with very little in the way of different ideas or demands travelling back up from "the masses" (Butterfield 1981).

Butterfield's picture may be too extreme (Fairbank 1981) but other observers agree that all major social and economic policies are made by a small group of top party officials (Bernstein 1982; Jacob 1981; Bonavia 1981). Commitment to a planned economy is a constant, and has come to be seen as including planning for a labour force of appropriate quantity and quality (Liu 1981).

Family lifestyle, leisure and consumption patterns are also regarded as appropriate areas for central planning. The Chinese subscribe to Stalin's statement of the basic economic law of socialism as "the securing of the maximum satisfaction of the constantly rising material and cultural requirements of the whole of society through the continuous expansion and perfection of socialist production on the basis of higher technology" (cited in Liu 1981:42). They interpret this law as involving centrally planned guidance of the "constantly rising material and cultural requirements" in appropriate directions and away from the "capitalist road". In the words of Yu:

The goal of socialist society is people's happiness: mental and physical health is thus one of the most important aspects of socialism's ultimate goal. Enjoyment which is not healthy is not compatible with the nature of socialism. In socialist construction we should carry out correct guidance regarding leisure time for enjoyment (Yu 1981:23).

The marriage law and family life education programs represent good examples of such guidance.

Finally, we have noted that there have been many changes over the last three to four years. There are a number of reasons to expect further changes. The increasing contact with the West has already been mentioned. In addition, Vice-Chairman Deng Xiaoping has committed himself to increasing peasant incomes and the production of consumer goods, moves which seem likely to increase materialistic attitudes and demands among the general community. Finally, the centralisation of power in a few hands means that shifts in alliances and palace revolutions can bring sudden and dramatic changes of policy, such as the 1981 massive repudiation of heavy industry contracts previously signed with the Japanese (Jacob 1981). The "rectification" campaign announced at the Chinese communist party's 1982 congress is planned as an extensive purge of unacceptable members of the 39 million-strong party. Western diplomats believe that the purge can be conducted without getting out of control (Walker 1982a). But it will be surprising if it does not have some effect on family, as well as on other policies.

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