

Grow, but don't multiply

Not even Zhang Yimou, the famous director of *Red Lantern*, was able to escape the close watch of fertility authorities. The director is under investigation for having had seven children with at least three different women and faces a €19 million fine. When it comes to child numbers, China has been taking no prisoners for 30 years. These days, however, the disputed single child law is raising a few eyebrows.

by Sonia Montrella
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“If we don't enforce birth control there won't be enough food and clothing for children and there won't be enough schools. We perform minor acts of inhumanity in the pursuit of the highest moral good.” Such is the conviction entertained also by the main character of Mo Yan's last effort. In his book (*Frog*, 2009) the Nobel-Prize author tells the story of Wan Xin, a zealous midwife in the city of Gaomi, who is later promoted to officer status.

It was 1979 when the Chinese government launched a new crackdown on births, considering it a necessary step to turn a developing country into an industrialized nation. Thus, the national program that went by the slogan “Wan, Xi, Shao”, with which Beijing urged couples to consider reproduction “later, with longer intervals, less” morphed into the Population and Family Planning Statement. Acquiring full legal status in 2001, the plan limits most urban couples to a single child. Exceptions to this rule are rural families provided their first born is a girl or is unfit for work (regardless of gender) or a member of an ethnic minority. In the last few years however, big cities such as Beijing and Shanghai have given the green light to a second pregnancy for cou-

ples on condition that both spouses were single children.

Aside from these exceptions, as the Ministry of Health and Family Planning stated in March, had the single child policy not been in place, China's population would be 30% larger than it is today. Nonetheless, as soon as the news of a lower fertility index reading broke – 1.6 children per woman against the 2.1 advocated by the World Health Organization – the alarm bells rang among Chinese experts. According to scholars at the Centre for Research and Development, a think-tank close to the central Chinese government, the fertility rate will dip even lower after 2026, with repercussions on the labour force and the economy. To avoid this decline, researchers are proposing the most simple of solutions – with the avowal of the UN: two children per couple by 2015 and a repeal of the single-child policy.

But it is not just economic growth that's at stake. Another collateral effect of the Single Child policy, or perhaps a consequence of its introduction, has been the high incidence of abortion, particularly of female foetuses, which has led to a heavy imbalance between the sexes.

Once again according to Ministry information, 330 million abortions have been performed in China over the last 30 years, a figure at which the international community has balked and gone back to pointing the finger at the China Dragon's policy. Constrained by a strict system based on accountability, rewards and penalties, village and town officials have always been instructed to restrain population growth and to comply with quotas set in Beijing. Officials therefore have a direct interest in enforcing the fertility law, and resort to any means to avoid punishment by authorities in the capital. It is not unrealistic to assume that of the 330 million missed births, most would have been pink ribbons. Even though Articles

22 and 36 ban gender discrimination and selective ultrasound scans or abortion, the cultural preference for male offspring is still very much engrained, both in cities and in the rural areas. In these areas in particular the desire to perpetuate the lineage goes hand in hand with another down-to-earth consideration: once married, all daughters become part of their husband's family, and since they move out of their parent's home, rural families are left with fewer hands to help on the land. Be that as it may, the Chinese are paying dearly for their tamperings with reproduction seeing as the gender ratio now stands at 120 males for every 100 females (with peaks of 160/100 in some provinces). In other words: about 34 million women have gone missing.

Is China therefore at a crossroads? Is the policy that allowed the government to feed a greater number and improve living standards for many turning out to be a boomerang? Is an easing of this policy, as discussed by the National People's Assembly, imminent? "As things stand, the strict application of the policy is estimated to affect about one third of the population," we are told by Renzo Cavalieri, professor of East Asian Law at the University Ca 'Foscari in Venice. "Not long ago, however, the National Population and Family Planning Commission confirmed that it is a long-term policy, and there are no plans to abolish it. In China, sweeping change can come rapidly, but for the most part it takes place very gradually." **E**

E The current law limiting families to a single child was first officially introduced in 2001. The law did not apply to rural families who were authorised to have two children providing the first was a daughter or unfit for work and ethnic minorities.



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