

Stunting the Family: An Economic Theory of Autocrats and China's One-Child Policy

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Abstract: The Chinese Communist Party enforced the one-child policy from approximately 1979 to 2015. This extremely ambitious campaign is one of the most notorious social engineering efforts in human history. This economic history paper will utilize the theories of autocratic behavior offered by Austrian economists, Clara Piano and Hans-Herrmann Hoppe, in constructing a cogent theory of autocrats that may be applied to the one-child policy's enforcement. I then set out to explain highly distinct variations in the degree to which this policy was imposed upon the Chinese populace, as well as its eventual decline. As the analysis proceeds, a detailed history of the one-child policy, as enforced by each successive Chairman/General Secretary of the CCP, will be relayed. Finally, additional proxy variables will be incorporated to reinforce this paper's prime analysis. This paper finds that Chinese autocrats regulated birth rates to varying degrees, depending on their perceived time horizons.

Keywords: Time Horizon, Autocrat, One-Child Policy, Family Economics, Chairman, General Secretary, CCP

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“The family is the test of freedom; because the family is the only thing that the free man makes for himself and by himself. Other institutions must largely be made for him by strangers, whether the institutions be despotic or democratic. There is no other way of organizing mankind which can give this power and dignity, not only to mankind but to men.”

– Gilbert K. Chesterton

I. Introduction

In 1979, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) announced its intentions to henceforth impose a One-Child-Policy (OCP) throughout the nation, achieved via birth control and abortion procedures performed *en masse*. While the Chinese government was by no means the first of states to claim sovereignty over familial ties in such a way, its national birth planning campaign was one of the most ambitious of human history in terms of its scope and regulatory severity. However, the CCP did not consistently adhere to such a vehemently contra-natal policy, and variation in enforcement did eventually emerge and undergo fluctuation over the coming decades in conjunction with subsequent regime changes.

As this paper analyzes the economic history of the Chinese one-child policy, it will apply the analysis of state enforced fertility regulation as offered by Austrian economist, Clara E. Piano, in her 2021 paper, *Autocratic Family Policy*. By doing so, the following paper sets out to explain the, at times very substantial, changes in the CCP's enforcement of family planning policy. The following analysis describes the growth of anti-natal legislation, culminating in the one-child policy of 1979. The OCP's evolution, and its eventual decline into a less strictly enforced two-child policy, will then be closely examined. This paper borrows additional insight from economist Hans-Hermann Hoppe, who utilized the concept of time preference in explaining the varying degrees to which a State engages in exploitation of the value individual economic actors produce.

This paper proceeds with a literature review that emphasizes the foundational contributions made by the economists Hans-Hermann Hoppe and Clara Piano to the study of regulatory incentives possessed by autocrats. While this paper primarily seeks to corroborate the findings of Piano's publication, *Autocratic Family Policy*, it will also supplement her theoretical

framework of family policy with the work of Hoppe. Thus, after a coherent theory of family policy has been established for the purposes of this paper's analysis, a thorough and historical account of the CCP's regulation of fertility rates from the late 1940's to the present day will be presented. The varying degrees of intensity with which different chairmen of the CCP enforced fertility regulations will be, of course, highlighted. However, the analysis will lastly incorporate other proxy variables to determine how the relative time preferences of each chairman differed. In sum, this paper finds that the Chinese autocrats of the mid 20th century unto the present day have selected family policy depending on their personal time horizons and, consequentially, their willingness to bear the short-run costs of familial production in return for long-run benefits.

II. Literature Review and Analysis

Clara E. Piano, Visiting Assistant Professor of Economics at the University of Mississippi, constructs a theoretical framework of fertility regulation in her work, *Autocratic Family Policy* (2021). She then applies this theory to the Soviet Union, whose family policy was initially crafted so as to curtail fertility rates and “[transfer] resources and loyalty away from families to the state” (Piano 2021, 12).² However, there arrived a dramatic change in legislative tune within the period of 1936-1944. The Soviet Union implemented its 1944 Family Code, effectively subsidizing childbearing in hopes of maximizing reproduction rates on the part of the Soviet populace. To accompany this sudden switch, the USSR marshaled out waves of definitively pro-natal and pro-family propaganda.

² It is no coincidence that the USSR was the very first nation to officially legalize abortion in 1921. Piano also notes that “In addition to banning religious marriage, inheritance, and adoption, the 1918 Code also legalized abortion, recognized the full equality to women, and abolished the legal notion of “illegitimacy” which required all alleged fathers to share child support payments. These policies effectively increased the utility available outside of their families for both men and women” (Piano 2021, 13).

It is the incentives faced by the USSR autocrats, in conjunction with their chosen family policy, that Piano explains in her paper. More specifically, what induces autocrats, such as those who directed the Soviet Union, to systematically curtail familial production when the institution of marriage and the raising of children has proven fundamental to the productivity of the regime in question? Doing so may prevent parents from inculcating a greater number of children with seditious beliefs to some extent, but nonetheless, repression of fertility rates will most likely reduce the size of the labor force to a drastic extent. Thus, the value of any future earnings the autocrat hopes to expropriate for himself will commensurately decrease.

Conversely, what apparent incentives induce autocrats to revoke contra-natal policies already in place, and even adopt a pro-natal stance? Doing so results in parents diverting labor and wealth away from the state and, instead, towards the nourishment and raising of children. The individuals existing within the family possess the most accurate knowledge as to the costs and benefits of bearing an additional child. Because of this, we may also assume that the family is, more often than not, capable of restructuring itself to sustain the new cost of raising an additional child. This could occur, for example, in the form of a working-age mother leaving the workforce to care for her child. The family is capable of making such sacrifices, but the government merely loses out on potential revenue it would have otherwise taxed, and gains nothing. Thus, is state enforced fertility restriction a means of applying economic breaks, given the significant drop in labor force size, or the means by which economic production increases, as the sovereign no longer has to compete with children for the earnings of their parents?

In either case, Piano theorizes that it is the time horizons possessed by the autocrat that alters his resulting level of tolerance towards familial production. Her framework for testing this hypothesis consists of three predictions that are as follows:

- “1. Because of the threats inherent in familial production, an autocrat will seek control over it through family policy.
2. The more value an autocrat places on short-run control, the less familial production will be tolerated in his family policy.
3. The more value an autocrat places on long-run control, the more familial production will be tolerated in his family policy” (Piano 2021, 6).

Essentially, the degree of tolerance reflected in the autocrat’s family policy is positively correlated with the expected duration of his reign, and thus his anticipated ability to benefit from his right to expropriate the value created by the citizenry. With regards to those factors influencing time horizons, Piano argues that it is a secure and high level of control over the citizenry that governs the autocrats perceived time horizon. This, in turn, changes the value he places on future earnings and his resulting willingness to relinquish control in the short run. His family policy, including the government regulation of birth levels, will submit to his goal of maximizing control over wealth either in the short or long run. While Piano correctly identifies political control, the effectiveness with which the autocrat may impose his will upon all subordinates as a determining factor upon the autocrat’s time preference, the components of this “political control” will be fleshed out in more detail through the work of Hans-Herman Hoppe.

Hoppe, writing in *Democracy: The God that Failed*, begins his argument by making a distinction between a privately and publicly owned government. First, a privately owned government entails ownership by the supreme head of state, such as a monarch. What distinguishes this type of government is the fact that resources and the monopoly privilege of future expropriation are individually owned by the ruler. To elaborate, money and/or taxed resources go to his estate, and the rights to rulership are his to bequeath to the successor of his choice (typically his offspring or another relative).

Next, Hoppe then describes the publicly owned government, in which control over the state apparatus is undertaken by a “caretaker” or “trustee” who is also able to use the government for his own personal gain. He is not, however, acting as the “owner” of the government - so he can’t legally sell it to someone else. Moreover, the caretaker often faces term limits that the monarch of the privately owned government does not. Thus, the position of caretaker is far more open to other individuals who may wish to run as candidates, and this role most often comes with the condition of an attached expiration date.

Hoppe then goes on to argue that the private owner of a government will attempt to maximize his gains to personal wealth, namely that of his estate and his current income. What is key, however, is that he will not want to increase his earnings at the expense of a more than proportional drop in the present value of his assets. He will no doubt use his position to glean benefits, but will not, per se, commit grave expropriation. To offer an adequate definition in Hoppe’s words, “acts of expropriation are by their nature parasitic upon prior acts of production on the part of the nongovernmental public” (Hoppe 2001, 46). The ruling government owner won’t, however, want to exploit the subjects serving him so as to reduce his future earnings to such a great extent that the money he earns in the present, in the form of monetary taxes or maybe a percentage of the crops made by farmers, decreases to a dramatic extent.

Hoppe argues that private ownership will itself lead to economic calculation and promote an invested interest in the long term, or “farsightedness” (ibid). So, the owner will systematically restrain himself from carrying forth policies of economic exploitation to the hilt. This is because if there is a low degree of exploitation then the productive population will be, as a result, far more productive, especially in the long run. If the population is more productive, then the perceived “value of the ruler’s parasitic monopoly” will increase (Hoppe 2001, 47). He will use

this certainly monopolistic privilege to privatize certain benefits but won't per se *exploit* the people. He will merely draw from the resources on increased material prosperity produced by individuals within the economy, because this would increase his own wealth and the personal prosperity of his assets.

In contrast, the caretaker of a publicly owned government is going to maximize his current income- which inevitably leads to capital consumption. He won't attempt to enhance the value of the government's estate. Instead- he will use up as much of the government's resources as he possibly can during his expectedly brief tenure. After all- he doesn't have any hope of benefiting from some policy of moderation in any private fashion as he would like. The government as a whole may receive a higher capital value if a policy of moderation is employed and more taxable value is consequentially produced. However, the government caretaker is far more interested in just a sheer increase in personal revenue because such gains can be privately reaped.

Thus, the two components of ownership rights and expected duration of reign both contribute to the autocrat's time horizon and subsequent time preference. This theory of correlation may be applied in the considering of fertility regulations as imposed by an autocrat. Should he anticipate a short stay in office, his time preference will be higher, and he will engage in far more expropriation of the family than in the case of his having a longer time horizon. In the case of the latter, he will place more value on the long-term benefits that he can eventually reap, and he will lower his time preference accordingly. In relation to the analysis of the one-child policy to soon follow, the actions undertaken by the Chairmen/General Secretaries of the CCP will be examined through the lens of their apparent ownership rights and expected duration of reign.

There exist several important nuances involved in transposing the analysis of Clara Piano onto that of my own which must be mentioned. In focusing on the One-Child- Policy in post-communist revolution China, the reliability of certain statistics regarding birth rates, annual abortion rates, and general population indicators are difficult to validate. Throughout my research, I have found that most independent researchers find that the CCP, whether intentionally or not, tends to underreport statistics regarding population. Another difficulty faced in researching the CCP is the fact that they, unlike the USSR as analyzed by Piano, have not undergone total collapse. Thus, access to certain sensitive and political information that was available to Piano was not necessarily retrieved by the author of this paper, at least to the same degree of accuracy.

Lastly, it is difficult to establish a direct monetary correlation between annual remunerations awarded to the General Secretary (formerly “Chairman”) of the CCP and the tax rate. This is because the compensation of previous General Secretaries has remained rather secretive, as accurate accounts of salary are not typically publicized. There remains great speculation with regards to the actual net worth of the man holding the highest rank within the CCP. Thus, this paper assumes that the General Secretary of the CCP has enjoyed, via his capacity as the highest ranking CCP member, many privatized benefits. For example, several estimates published in 2022 assumed Xi Jinping’s net worth to be approximately \$1.2 billion (Jones 2022), in spite of having a stated salary of barely \$20,000’s worth of annual pay. If both of these statements hold to be even close to true, it may be reasonable to assume holding the rank of General Secretary of the CCP offers very unique and great privileges to the autocrat and his family, pecuniary or otherwise.³

³ We do indeed find, in such studies as this one, that family members of the General Secretary do receive much prestige and professional privileges. See: “China ‘Princelings’ Using Family Ties to gain Riches”. As written by

III. Early Chinese Natal Policy

The CCP was established in 1949 after the Chinese Nationalists retreated to Taiwan, thus concluding the Chinese Civil War. After decades of political revolution, civil war, the massacring of Chinese civilians by the Japanese Imperial Army during the Second World War, and a series of widespread famines, the Chinese population was thoroughly ravaged by the time the communists finally established themselves as the sovereign political entity. Mao emphasized the need to mobilize human capital and material resources towards the industrialization of the very backwater agrarian nation that China was at the time. He was initially rather pro-natalist in both his rhetoric and his policy, denouncing rumors of China's inability to sustain a rapidly growing population with enough food. He claimed that such were the ridiculous ideas of the capitalist West. Moreover, he labeled them as being "Malthusian, and "utterly groundless"" and instead argued "that China's large population was a great asset" (White 2006, 19).

With regards to family planning, China initially followed in lockstep with its ideological contemporary, the Soviet Union, which took upon itself a very pro-natalist stance by 1949. Early on, this Chinese policy arrived in the form of tightened access to contraceptives, sterilization, and abortions, all of which were only deemed legal in very rare and specific cases. Severe illness or the woman's life being in serious jeopardy were the only acceptable reasons for obtaining abortions or sterilization. In the case of sterilization, the woman had to be over thirty-five, a mother of at least six children already, and with one of her children being at least ten years of age (White 2006,). By 1953, the importation of contraceptives was made illegal and domestic production was largely discouraged. It was also at this time that the first national census was

David Barboza and Sharon LaFraniere in May 18, 2012. <https://www.pulitzer.org/files/2013/international-reporting/princelings518.pdf>.

passed, and concerns over the decreasing mortality rate and the increase growth rate began to concern some of the leaders of the CCP. The insertion of anti-natalist policy became a topic of debate among the Party itself within the following years, with Vice Premier Deng Xiaoping being one of the primary advocates for birth control, arguing that “contraception is completely necessary and beneficial” (White 2006, 25). There did exist some birth planning policies throughout the 1950’s and 1960’s, but these were not uniformly enforced, proved rather ineffective, and “were mostly instituted in urban coastal areas and did not have much effect on overall population numbers” (Riley 2017, 39). Such efforts were likely prompted by growing concerns of increases in population, especially after the first official census revealed the population to stand at approximately 600 million in 1953.

However, the CCP later shifted its stance on the need for what it termed “population control”, and the belief that the government regulation of the population went hand in hand with the need for economic regulation was nearly unanimous among party members. Even Mao Zedong, who attempted to maintain an optimistic position with regards to population, assented to the need for state intervention. Here we see Clara Piano’s first prediction hold true.

A rise in regulation thus began in the beginning of the 1970’s, in which the campaign known by the acronym of Wan Xi Shao (WXS), which roughly translates to “Later, Longer, Fewer”, officially began. These three promoted efforts loosely translate to the goals of delayed marriage (Wan), longer intervals between births (Xi), and fewer births (Shao). While no official birth limitations were imposed, the two-child standard for urban families was heavily promoted, with the standard being three for rural families. Birth control was made widely available to virtually all women throughout the country. This came in the form of abortions, sterilizations, and IUD insertions (Riley 2017, 40).

However, it was the structure of the “Later, Longer, Fewer” campaign’s enforcement mechanism that proved crucial as China moved towards its one-child policy. “Perhaps most important in terms of the ways that the WXS campaign was the harbinger of later policies, it was at this time that the state set up structure and processes that connected national goals to local implementation” (Riley 2017, 41). State leaders first began to establish population targets within the economic agendas in 1973, and the state created an intricate network of “birth planning leading small groups” to execute their plan. These groups were comprised of party leaders and government cadres, such as deputy party secretaries and vice governors, or other various positions within the existing bureaucracy (White 2006, 60). These groups were all given jurisdiction over a local region. These widespread efforts to corral and reduce the rate of population growth, that did not come in the form of strict legal mandate, still seemed rather successful at first glance. “Mass mobilization with high-pressure tactics, coupled with delivery of effective contraceptives, led to a fertility reduction of 50% in just eight short years, from 5.8 children per woman in 1970 to 2.8 in 1977” (Cai 2021). Although the “Later, Longer, Fewer” campaign was the most coercive family planning campaign launched by the CCP to date, it was far less authoritarian and restrictive than the one-child policy to follow at the end of the decade (Zhang 2017,145).

It is key to note that these increasing constrictions upon the Chinese family, initially at the behest of Mao, took place in tandem with very sudden decreases in the Chairman’s physical health and mental stability. The policy was initially introduced in 1971, just a year after Mao’s bronchitis had progressed unto the point of pneumonia. He, being strictly averse to medical treatment, finally consented to undergo a radiological exam in 1971, which revealed he had “contracted severe respiratory infection and potentially suffered from early heart failure” (Retief

2009). During the last five years of his life, his health declined exponentially. Further examinations revealed he had congestive cardiac failure, ventricular extra-systoles, and strong ECG evidence of coronary disease (ibid). Furthermore, “Mao realised that he was losing his grip on national affairs, becoming progressively more paranoid and irritable, and suffered from a speech defect, progressive muscle weakness, deafness and blindness.” (Retief 2009). Mao was officially pronounced dead on September 7, 1976.

IV. The Initial Introduction of the One Child Policy

The one child policy (OCP) was implemented in September of 1980, exactly four years after Mao’s death in September of 1978 after a long nearly four-decade long tenure as the official chairman⁴. The OCP was passed during a time of great political rivalry between Deng Xiaoping and Mao’s chosen successor, Hua Guofeng. While Hua was recognized as the successor of Mao and as being chosen *by* Mao, he made the fatal mistake of reinstating the formerly purged Deng Xiaoping to a position of CCP leadership. This led to the swift undermining of his legitimacy and would explain his apparent emphasis placed upon short-run control. This was clearly demonstrated by his family policy.

Political tensions ran high as Deng attempted to have Hua branded as a radical, “Between 1976 and 1980, however, the threat of a political reversal was more or less constant, as virtually every policy area and work unit became an arena of political battle” (White 2006, 62). The one-child policy was officialized just as Deng and his acolytes were prepared to form a coup and usurp Hua. The intensity of this new policies enforcement would only increase throughout the decade. “In 1982 the 12th Party Congress defined birth planning as ‘a fundamental state policy’,

⁴ It should be noted that Mao emerged as the Communist Party leader after the Great Trek in the 1930’s.

and the newly revised Chinese constitution included it among citizen duties” (Scharping 2019, 330).

The one-child policy heavily relied upon the pre-existing network set into place during the “Later, Longer, Fewer” campaign, though its formal enforcement, in comparison to its predecessor, was ratcheted upwards by a significant degree. All couples of childbearing age were limited to having merely one child, but could even then only do so with the requisite approval from local government officials. The intended goal was to tailor the Chinese population to approximately 1.2 billion people by 2000 (Riley 2017, 43). The policy was enforced via the preferred mediums of cadres existing at local levels, namely those existing at the commune, brigade and team levels (White 2006, 101). Political scientist Tyrene White, who conducted many interviews pertaining to enforcement and structuring of the one child policy offers the following example of the Donghu commune:

In Donghu commune, for example, five targets were set for 1981: achieving a birthrate of 13.5 per 1,00, persuading 85 percent of all single-child couples to sign a certificate guaranteeing not to have another child, achieving a 90 percent rate for late marriage (...), assuring that 90 percent of all births were within the plan, and assuring that all couples of childbearing age were using birth control (White 2006, 101).

To fully understand the degree of enforcement of the one-child policy, one must understand how the state government penetrated the most local basic levels of civilization through the utilization and control of the cadre “birth planning leading small groups” composed by the previous regime. The cadre played something of an intermediary role between the village and the authorities just above it. “At the lowest level of government administration, the village level, cadres serve as double agents, serving their superiors as they must and serving their villages as they are able” (White 2006, 12). They were comprised both of bureaucrats and of locals who resided with the village. Additionally, it was key that each cadre contained local

women who were familiar with the local residents. It was far less costly for these women to engage in surveillance of all local childbearing-age women within the village, many of whom they knew and lived among for years. Their service proved crucial for the enforcement of the one-child policy.

In considering the policing of the cadres themselves, this was done in accordance with their ability to meet the rigid standards set by superiors from the central government. They were assigned targets pertaining to increasing the grain production and per capita income within their jurisdictions, while lowering the birth rate (White 2006, 101). Additionally, these cadres were strongly incentivized with monetary benefits such as pay raises and bonuses for compliance. During the initial implementation of the one-child policy, families themselves were also faced with a variety of incentives to comply with the state law. Families with but first order births, that is to say no secondary births or beyond, received special compensation in the form of extra grain allotments and even a guaranteed retirement income (Riley 2017, 52). Furthermore, children without siblings would frequently be awarded admissions preference at schools and universities and better access to particular jobs within the hiring process (ibid).

As for those families opting to have children “out of plan”, a term which denotes an illegal pregnancy, the state would intervene with strict punishment. In some locations, the woman may be forced into aborting the child, even if the pregnancy was in a later stage (Riley 2017, 53). In other instances, heavy fines would also be imposed for births “out of plan”, or the salaries of both parents would be reduced by ten percent for the following fourteen years (ibid). For some families, this would entail an unsustainable 20% total reduction in income, and therefore was regarded as a severe punishment.

Moreover, should a woman resist the one-child policy, others within her village could have been potentially subject to punishment as well. “For example, in some production teams, if one member had a child out of plan, not only was that member fined, but in addition, the birth planning workers were fined and even the other members of the production team were fined 1 yuan each”. (Milwertz 1997, 89). This tactic of enforcing collective punishment did not merely exist in the urban context of villages, however. In the city, one study revealed that factories within urban areas were permitted to cut off special payments made to families with one child, “until a woman agree[d] to an abortion” (ibid).

Hua Guofeng would not have long to reap the benefits accrued to him by his status. It is apparent that Hua Guofeng himself realized that he possessed a rather short time horizon while he served as the Chairman of the Communist Party and prosecuted the inaugural years of the one-child policy. Although he was initially received as a legitimate leader, especially after having quashed the “Gang of Four” that attempted to usurp control over China after Mao’s death in 1976, it became clear that he was inexperienced in some respects and would require the supervision of Deng Xiaoping to compensate for his own deficiencies (Wong 2002, 37). Bit by bit however, Deng and his coalition began to marginalize Hua, with this eventually devolving into blatant and open attacks by late 1980’s (ibid, 38).

It is at this point that the political rise of Deng was solidified, and he could then essentially function as the de facto ruler of China, and exercise great influence. Thus, in 1980, the CCP “approved the long-awaited resignation of Hua Guofeng as Party Chairman” (Chang 1981, 1). Following this, the CC Plenum elected the successor, Hu Yaobang, and the protégé of Deng. While Hu Yaobang was theoretically elected, it is infinitely more accurate to understand his ascension as the tailored result of Deng himself. Moreover, following the fall of Mao’s

chosen successor, the Plenum reinforced Deng's political comeback by electing him as Chairman of the Party's Military Affairs Commission (MAC), what was considered to be the nation's highest military position. The role of Deng as the appointer of the following Chairmen, a position that would later come to be known as General Secretary of the CCP, was also set into place. In the 1980s through 1992, the selections of Hu Yaobang, Zhao Ziyang, Jiang Zemin, and Hu Jintao as successors were all decisions made primarily by Deng, though sometimes in consultation with several other elders (Wang 2016, 33). Thus, Deng operated as the technical subordinate of Hu Yaobang, but was functionally the politically dominant insofar as the duration of Hu Yaobang's reign was concerned.

The height, so to speak, of the one-child policy was undertaken by Hu Yaobang. It was in April 1980 that he instructed the General Office of the Central Committee to immediately gather a series of meetings containing highly ranked officials. This meeting would unite the elites and population experts, including Song Jian, a Soviet trained engineer who used cybernetic theory to project models of China's anticipated population trends. While the inner workings of the Party have been difficult to retrieve, one author, Greenhalgh, of the Harvard Department of Anthropology, asserts that the "the key decisions on the strict one-child policy were made not by any individual, but by a group of leading officials throughout the government and a handful of influential scholars" who via collective deliberation would eventually arrive at some consensus with respect to concerns of growing populations and the appropriate solution (Greenhalgh 2008, 278). However, before giving the impression that this process was by any means an impartial or democratic process, Greenhalgh also notes that "[s]cholars and officials whose views were sharply different from the emerging middle ground were, of course, not invited to the meetings" (ibid). However, the decisions made with regards to effectuating certain policy was still

ultimately dictated by the Chairman/General Secretary, who still exercised a significant amount of control over his government and apparently policed the convictions of those invited to his meetings. We see this played out in the urgent framing of the one-child policy as the nation's "only choice", at the direct behest of Hu Yaobang. Under his direction, this slogan was continually re-emphasized, and the population was made to understand that there were merely two available choices: the scientific and effective and the unscientific and ineffective (Greenhalgh 2008, 301).

Hu, like his recently ousted predecessor, also maintained a high time preference with regards to the enforcing of the one-child policy. One may also rationally assume that he had a short time horizon, due to the swiftness with which Deng could remove him from the office and replace him with a successor. In the many meetings Hu convened, he urgently pressed for the dissemination of propaganda and tightly controlled its very wording. He personally requested a letter, defending the one child policy and reiterating that adherence to it was non-negotiable, be constructed by Song and made public. The letter was to make clear that the one-child policy was mandatory for but one generation (Greenhalgh 2008, 298). The Hu administration did not merely drive propagandizing efforts upward, but also pushed for one of the most notably aggressive sterilization campaigns in Chinese history.

Beginning in 1983, this campaign followed the model of a shock tactic, or rapid show of force meant to quickly impose cooperation of the citizenry. Such shock attacks had, to lesser degrees, been performed during the "Longer, Later, Fewer" campaign of the 1970's. The stated goal of this shock was the quick sterilization of all couples of childbearing age who had two or more children by 1985, as many families had multiple children prior to the still recent passage of the OCP, and some outright refused to have but one child. The campaign occurred within one

year, in which more than 25 million people across the country were sterilized; with abortions and IUD insertion reached its peak (Riley 2017, 55). According to the Johnston's Archive, 40.86% of all pregnancies of citizens residing within the country in 1983 were terminated via abortion, compared to 35.41% in the previous year (Johnston 2023). In total, this shock campaign resulted in an estimated performance of 20.7 million sterilizations and the insertion of 17.8 million IUDs (Wang et al. 2016).

The stringent upholding of the policy continued until the arrival of Zhao Ziyang in 1987. Prior to this, Hu Yaobang fell into disfavor with many party leaders, who largely viewed him as being incompetent. Moreover, they were rather frustrated by his desire to direct economic matters himself. "Apart from his inevitable conflict with conservatives in the propaganda apparatus (...) Hu's penchant for issuing directives on a wide variety of matters offended the responsible bureaucracies and their leaders" (Teiwes 1995, 88). This was particularly the case when it came to his alleged interference in economic matters (ibid). Deng thus removed him from his position and replaced him with Zhao Ziyang in 1987. It is very hard, for the purpose of this paper's analysis, to fully understand what time preference Zhao maintained. Of all the Chairmen/General Secretaries, his tenure was by far the shortest, as it ended after two and a half years. Prior to his final political ascension, he was reportedly in favor of "controlling population quantity and improving population quality" (Zheng 1983).

However, Zhao proved to be far less conservative than hoped, as demonstrated in his desire to negotiate with the student protestors of Tiananmen square in 1989. So, Deng announced "In the recent turmoil Zhao Ziyang has exposed his position completely. He obviously stands on the side of the turmoil, and in practical terms he has been fomenting division, splitting the Party,

and defending turmoil” (131). Thus, it was Deng who stripped Zhao of all authority and titles, and who had him placed under house arrest for the remainder of his life.

V. Later Enforcement of the One Child Policy

Jiang Zemin was the chosen replacement for Zhao Ziyang and was selected by Deng to act as General Secretary in the wake of the Tiananmen Square massacre and public outcry. Thus, succession was quickly undertaken, and there was little to no reason for Zemin to believe that his rule could end any differently than that of his predecessors. “Of course, that could hardly be seen as an orderly succession, since the selection of Jiang Zemin to take up the top leadership position was made in haste, during the aftermath of a major political crisis in 1989(...)” (Wang 2016, 29). With such turmoil serving as the background to his reign, that Jiang began his career.

As Jiang Zemin became more grounded in his position of authority, he enforced rather strict limitations upon fertility. In the latter half of 1989 and throughout the 90’s, a sudden rise in coercive, heavy handed, and imposed birth control (IUD insertions, vasectomies, and tubal ligations) was driven by the Zemin administration. There was a rise in the percentage of births terminated via abortion in 1990 from 29.91% in 1989 to 35.91%, as well as the total quantity of births resulting in abortion. In 1989, the total quantity of abortions stood at 10,379,426, moving upward to an estimation of 13,493,926 in 1990, and then finally culminating in 1991 at 14,086,313 abortions (Johnston 2023). For further context, this estimated number of deaths via abortion in 1991 is one of the highest total quantities of abortions performed in a single year by any country in recorded history⁵ (ibid).

V. Political Alterations and Concessions to the One-Child Policy Made

⁵ With, according to a recent study, a far more recent exception of India. It is estimated that approximately 15.6 million abortions took place in 2015. For further research, please see: Lancet Glob Health. 2018 Jan;6(1):e111–e120. doi: [10.1016/S2214-109X\(17\)30453-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2214-109X(17)30453-9).

The quantity of the aforementioned sterilization procedures started to decline in 1992, however (White 2006, 136). In 1992, congress dissolved the Central Consultative Committee. In the same year, Deng and his cadres formally resigned from their political involvement. Before leaving, Deng pushed for term age-based term limits being placed on CCP leaders based on their age. Loosely following in line with this policy, Jiang allegedly persuaded a senior colleague in the Politburo to retire at age 73, arguing that Party leaders should voluntarily renounce their positions by age 70. However, Jiang, who was 71 at the time, argued that an exception ought to be permitted on his account due to his role as prime leader, while making it clear that his specific case would remain the sole exception to the rule (Wang 2016, 32). To make matters better for Jiang, his chosen successor was Hu Jintao, one of his close colleagues. The selection of Hu Jintao as the heir apparent was the decision of a very small circle of elderly leaders of Deng Xiaoping's cohort or possibly the single-handed decision of Deng Xiaoping himself (Wang 2016, 33). Nonetheless, the choice seemed a favorable one. It would then appear that the rights to governance, although not ascribed to the man of Jiang's exact choosing, would be awarded to someone he was on apparently civil terms with. This was not a luxury afforded to any of his predecessors, save for Mao himself. This great loosening of Jiang's political constraints would seem to have lowered his time horizon and subsequently permitted him to maintain an increasingly low time preference and prioritize long-run control over short-run control. This is borne out by an increase in tolerance in his family policy.

For the remainder of his role as leader of the CCP, a notable increase in exceptions were made by Jiang to the one-child policy and its enforcement declined. The Jiang administration remained heavily involved in any relaxations made in the one-child policy throughout the mid 90's to the year 2000, however, as overseer of the 22 exceptions permitted within the provinces

(Riley 2017, 60). Such exemptions were awarded for ethnic minorities, families with handicapped children, singletons (referring to couples who had no siblings themselves), and even for families whose firstborn child was a daughter.⁶ There was also a noticeable emphasis upon economic development promoting lower fertility, rather than suppressing childbearing to permit economic growth (Riley 2017, 60).

China held the fifth population census in November of 2000. This census revealed “highly contentious figures that showed spectacularly small cohorts in the young age brackets, indicating greatly reduced birth numbers in the years before” (Scharping 331). It was at the beginning of this century that officials also realized that the rate of population growth was plummeting, but that the one-child policy had led to widespread skewering of the national gender ratio. In fact, “cohorts born between 1980 and 2000 included 22 million more men than women, a phenomenon known as the “missing girls” of China. (...) [with] approximately 10.4 percent of the men in these cohorts can be expected to fail to marry” (Ebenstein 2009, 400). Thus, recognition of China’s dwindling population and “news about manpower shortages on the supposedly inexhaustible labor market for migrant workers (...)” (ibid) sparked much debate as to the merits of the one-child policy and whether the shrinking rate of population growth and its systematic warping could be reversed. This debate continued as the Jiang administration transferred authority to that of Jiang Zemin. In 2002, hopes for reversal of the policy increased with the transfer of power moving into Hu Jintao administration. The political debates as to the efficacy of the OCP continued throughout this administration, and reveal how the elites of China,

⁶ Not only was this crucial for rural families, to whom a son contributed much more marginal value product through his labor on the farm, but families everywhere typically preferred sons to daughters. Daughters within both urban and rural demographics were traditionally seen as merely temporary members of the family, assuming eventual marriage, who would not carry on the family name.

including the General Secretary, were growing ever concerned with maintaining long-term control over an unfortunately shrinking population⁷.

With Deng long since inactive in Chinese politics, Hu Jintao was the first of General Secretaries to pick his own successor, more or less. Xi was not the favored successor by all powerful members of the CCP, however Jintao chose him as his successor in 2005, with the alternative candidate being given the next-best position of premier. “Xi Jinping (...) was anointed heir five years ahead of the anticipated succession, and in 2012 his succession took place as had been planned five years before” (Wang 2016, 28). Unfortunately for Hu Jintao, his rise to power was a far more secure one that was not quite so threatened by political rivals, but the population over which he presided was decreasing in population at an alarming rate. While Hu did nothing official to alter the OCP, change arrived but three years after his abdication.

Upon assuming office, Xi was able to start with even more freedom, compared to Hu. “Xi was able to consolidate his power much more quickly upon assuming leadership in 2012 thanks in part to the retired leaders’ weakened position” (ibid). Furthermore, he led a thorough ‘anticorruption campaign’ to clear out potential dissidents or perceived competition.

With regards to the one-child policy, it was Xi Jinping who authorized its reversal after years of debates among bureaucrats as to the need for its revocation. The collapse of the one child policy was largely attributed to the threat of population decline. Hence Xi Jinping’s emphasis upon this when announcing the reversal of the one-child policy in 2015 by stating “This can enable us to achieve balanced development of the population in China. It is an important move toward demographic balance in terms of the long-term development of China”

⁷ Reasons for the birth rates natural decline is difficult to trace back to one single cause. One such factor may be a culture of shame produced during the heyday of the OCP, in which having multiple children was often seen as disobedience.

(Wang et al. 2016, 930). When he finally gave his support to this highly anticipated initiative, “albeit with noncommittal statements as to his precise plans” (Scharping 2019, 336), the effects were rather sweeping in the degree to which they overturned such longstanding precedent. The most significant results are as follows:

First and second births require no permissions anymore, and only minimum formalities must be fulfilled. Birth spacing, late-marriage and late-birth stipulations, as well as all ‘advice’ for contraceptive choice, are abolished, rewards for parents with only one single child discontinued (old cases keep receiving the promised sums), dismissals of employees for having unauthorized children stopped (Scharping 2019, 336-337).

The exact reasoning for the implementation of a two-child policy, as opposed to that of a three, or even four, child policy at this time is largely due to the many series of projections as modeled by elite social scientists during the late 90’s and leading up to the end of the one-child policy. The analysis of this paper extends no further than the initiation of the two-child policy, which itself remains a relatively recent development. However, the eventual introduction of the three-child policy announced in May of 2021, is worthy of further study as the body of research surrounding its effects is extended.

VI. Analysis of certain proxy variables

The analysis of this paper will briefly utilize certain proxy variables to reinforce and check against the analysis above. First, in analyzing long term infrastructure projects, it is noticed that the most significant ones were completed under the reigns of those General Secretaries possessing relatively higher time preference. For example, Zemin began the construction of the Three Gorges Dam, which generates hydroelectric power. According to Britannica, “[w]hen construction of the dam officially began in 1994, it was the largest engineering project in China. At the time of its completion in 2006, it was the largest dam

structure in the world” (Britannica). This bridge was completed under the administration of Hu Jintao in 2012.

Construction of the Hangzhou Bay Bridge, another one of China’s greatest infrastructural undertakings that stretches 22 miles in length, was completed under the Jintao administration as well. One of the last great feats of architecture, the Shanghai tower, was constructed under Xi Jinping’s regime. Such long-term projects that an autocrat with a shorter time preference would not be expected to invest in do not seemingly appear prominent during the regimes of those autocrats with seemingly shorter time horizons.

In observing inflation rates, which are positively correlated with the degree of time preference expressed by those inflating the currency, there is a noticeable trend of such rates somewhat tracking with the severity of the one-child policy’s enforcement. In 1973, inflation rates rose by about 1.5% each year until 1984, the year after the sterilization. The following year, vast monetary expansion ensued with the money supply increasing at an average rate of 23.3 percent from 1985-1987 (Mundell, 1996). We see this rate trending upwards until approximately 1989, in which we see a 15% decrease in the interest rate taking place. As Jiang Zemin re-established a more thorough enforcement of the OCP in the early 90’s, we see this rate bounce upward from 3% to approximately 24.6% by 1994, which would seem to correlate with the rise in sterilization efforts by Jiang’s administration. As China began to abandon the one-child policy and steadily move towards its reform from the mid 90’s onwards, the inflation rate decreases from its 1994 peak to about 0.7% in by 1998. From there on it remains well below 6%, with the exceptions of in 2008 and 2011, when it rebounds upwards to 5.5% and 5.9%, respectively. (China Inflation Rate 1987-2024).

V. Conclusion

This paper finds that there is a strong correlation between the time horizons possessed by Chinese autocrats, within the history of the CCP, and the degree to which they enforce anti-natal policies. All autocrats of the CCP, serving in the role of Chairman/General Secretary, who were able to have more sway over their successor and maintain a longer reign were far less heavy handed in their prosecuting the one-child policy upon the populace. Such chairmen included Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, Xi Jinping, and (prior to his rapid decline in health) Mao Zedong. The two Chairmen/General Secretaries on office immediately following Mao, Hua Guofeng and Hu Yaobang, both had rather short time horizons and little to no control over who would succeed them and when, *per se*⁸. In conjunction with the predictions posited by Piano, we do in fact see that an apparent correlation between the value a given autocrat places on short, versus long, run control and the level of familial production he tolerates within his family policy. To conclude, this analysis of the Chinese autocrats of the Chinese Communist Party corroborates with the findings proffered by economist Clara Piano and serve to bolster her insightful analysis of totalitarian regimes and family planning policy.

⁸ Zhao Ziyang, being an outlier whose time horizon was difficult to effectively assess, is not categorized as having a noticeably short or long time horizon. Some evidence points to his being far more open to change, whereas other evidence hints towards his desire to curb population, especially before his functioning as General Secretary.

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Appendix

Timeline of Chairmen/General Secretaries of the CCP:

Mao's legacy	1943-1976
Hua Guofeng	1976-1981
Hu Yaobong	1981-1987
Zhao Ziyang	1987-1989
Jiang Zemin	1989- 2005
Hu Jintao	2005-2012