Thomas Scharping, *Birth Control in China, 1949-2000. Population Policy and Demographic Development*

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Élisabeth Allès

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NOTE DE L'ÉDITEUR

Translated from the French original by Michael Black

- 1 Family policy and the growth of the population in China have been the subject of continuous attention for many years, but there was no research which provided an overall view of the policies and outcomes for these areas. This remarkable work by the German demographer Thomas Scharping, on birth control and demography in China from 1949 to 2000, fills this gap. It recounts and analyses demographic growth, the policies of the Chinese state in this field and the reactions of the population over the last fifty years, and sketches a projection of trends for the future. The author emphasises that demographic research remains a sensitive subject in China, particularly because it reveals the major contradiction of the reform period: the liberalisation of the economy on the one hand, and the maintaining of tight control over the social and political sphere on the other (p. 4).
- 2 Thomas Scharping draws on a large number of primary and secondary sources (statistics, laws, directives, internal documents, conferences, etc.) at local, national and international levels, collected over ten years. The bringing together of this mass of data was necessary in order to assess as accurately as possible the validity of Chinese statistical data, and the real effects of the measures on birth control. Four themes make up the main body of this book, which is a revised and augmented translation into English of an initial publication in German that covered the years 1978 to 1992.

- 3 In the first part, the author reconstructs the debates on birth control in China since the establishment of the Republic, between the supporters of such measures, including scientists and politicians like Zhou Enlai, and opponents, ranging from Sun Yat-sen to Mao Zedong, who believed that a strong and sovereign China needed major population growth. The shifts in demographic policy since 1949 reflect the internal debates in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). It was the women in the Party who, in a note by Deng Yingchao (the wife of Zhou Enlai) in May 1954, were the first to launch the debate by raising the question of the emancipation of women, and referring to the existence of contraceptive methods in the Soviet Union. But it was not until the end of the 1970s that the single child policy was introduced, as a result of a population growth which had long been underestimated and of the economic crisis (p. 33). The author sees the relaxing of the constraints of this policy between 1984 and 1985 as revealing internal changes and the balance of power between Hu Yaobang and those who opposed the policy of reform. After the events of Tiananmen in 1989, the conflict was between supporters of a hard line on birth control and those who favoured some flexibility, in particular the acceptance of a second child. It was the position of the former which prevailed in the law of December 2001, with, however, some relaxation on having a second child. Thus it has taken twenty years to reach a natural increase of 1%, despite the 1978 objectives which aimed at 0% by the turn of the century. However, the persistence of a gap between state regulations and practices in the countryside, as well as regional imbalances, remain a source of anxiety for political leaders (p. 80).
- 4 The author then tackles the application of demographic policies by examining the fluctuation of legal norms and practices by region, the bureaucratic variations between provincial and national levels, and the distortions and degrees of autonomy of the former (slowness of application, rules which are in contradiction with those promulgated nationally, etc.). He shows the vital role played by the CCP at all levels. He carries out a finely detailed study of the rules (late marriages and births, procedures for a second child, methods of contraception, abortions) which have gradually been established. He notes that between 1979 and 1999, the proportion of women of reproductive age using contraceptive methods has increased from 60-70% to 80-90% (pp. 110-111). The IUD and female sterilisation — particularly in the provinces of Anhui, Fujian, Jiangxi, Gansu and Hainan — are the most widespread methods of contraception. China also has the world's highest rate of male sterilisation (which is used particularly in Sichuan), but it remains low, however, when compared with that of women. The author emphasises that the data from 1990 make it possible to identify general trends and differentials in time and by region, even though they remain subject to political pressures and to the recurring falsification of statistics.
- 5 Thus, in the 1980s, appeared a major increase in rates of contraception in poor rural regions and national minority regions which are officially exempt from birth control. The only exception is Tibet, which remains 25 points below the national average. The author notes that Document number 7, dated April 1984, on the application of birth control to minorities (authorisation of a second child for minorities whose members number less than 10 million, permits for a third child, and opposition to multiple births) has been used by local authorities with great flexibility and prudence, particularly in sensitive areas (Tibet, Xinjiang and Ningxia). While strictly applying the directives concerning the Han, the regions and provinces have applied the rules differently (acceptance of a third or fourth child) according to whether the marriages

are endogamous or not (in the provinces of the northeast) and depending on the zone (urban, plain, hill, mountain, cattle-rearing or border zones). We should note that the reclassification of nationalities, which was authorised between 1982 and 1990, led to major increases in the Mongol, Manchu and Tjua populations (p. 155).

- 6 The author then describes in minute detail the bureaucratic application of the birth control campaign. The structures and variability of the measures taken show the influence of the CCP, as well as its renewed capacity to control the population by means of rank and file organisations (street and neighbourhood committees, etc.) down to village level. An example is the obligation for half the women between 20 and 34 years old, to participate in village birth control associations in the mid-1990s (p. 171).
- 7 Nevertheless, the author considers that the campaign has not been a complete success with regard to the preferences of the population in the matter of family size. The preferred size has fallen compared to the 1970s, but remains at two children, especially if the firstborn is not male. Also, birth control in rural areas is due more to administrative pressures than to spontaneous changes brought about by economic development. Moreover, the list of penal and administrative penalties, which has recently been broadened, demonstrates that the resistance of the population remains. Thomas Scharping emphasises the various tricks used by those concerned (giving birth in secret places, failure to declare girls, falsification of documents, failure to register deaths, abortion after a scan, etc.), as well as cadres who do not report second children or multiple births, for fear of penalties or salary deductions. To this must be added corruption, personal relationships, and the difficulty of registering migrants. Births outside the plan are estimated overall at about 30.5% in 1992 by Chinese experts, 90% of these births being attributable to couples who have only a daughter. The author nonetheless finds a significant decrease in multiple births in rural areas in the mid-1990s, and a reduction in the fertility rate between city-dwellers and country people.
- 8 In conclusion, the author shows the near-impossibility of this working in the long term because of the decisive role of policy, which sets up wide fluctuations in the statistics. The under-assessment of the population is estimated at 11% to 12% for 1953 and 1980, and at 5% to 12% for 2000. However Thomas Scharping believes that recognition of the fact that the growth in the population cannot be manipulated at will seems to be gaining ground in China.
- 9 While this study does not incorporate the data from 2000, which will have to be studied after the publication of complementary statistics which are essential because of the difficulties encountered at the time of the census, both researchers and non-specialists will find in this book a large amount of detailed and analysed information, as well as a deeper understanding of the processes taking place.