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MACSS 18

Understanding the Transforming Biopolitics:

Shifts and Continuation in the Official Discourse of Birth Planing Policy in China, 1956-2003

1. Studies on China's Birth Planning Policy: Why a Biopolitical Perspective?

While most studies on China's birth planning project concentrate on the demographic changes and social ramifications brought about by the project (Bulte, Heerink and Zhang 2011; Fong 2002; Li, Yi, and Zhang 2011; Peng 1991; Scharping 2003), few researchers have examined the shifting political dynamics within or underlying the evolving population policy (White 1990; Winckler 2002; Greenhalgh and Winckler 2005). Among this small body of literature with a political perspective, Greenhalgh and Winckler's work (2005) creatively combines a regime capacity approach and a biopower perspective under the analytical framework of governmentalization to study the birth planning policy in China.

Biopower is a form of Foucauldian modern power over human life itself (Foucault 1978, 2003). It operates via both the functions of the individual body and, more importantly, the regulation of the population (ibid.). Biopolitics, accordingly, refers to the politics of governing vital human functions (e.g. fertility, genetic quality, etc.) "in the name of optimizing individual or collective life, health, and welfare" (Greenhalgh and Winckler 2005, p. 27; see also Foucault 1978, 2003; Greenhalgh 2009). The birth planning project in China has been probably the world's most striking case of applied biopolitics (Greenhalgh and Winckler 2005). It deserves scholarly attention from a biopolitical perspective -- not only for its notable and profound intervention in the lives of the largest human population on earth, but also because it has evolved in tandem with China's gradual and momentous transition from socialism since the late 1970s.

Hence, the transforming biopolitics embedded in the evolving birth planning project epitomizes and reflects the broader historical, political and sociocultural changes that have unfolded in contemporary China.

Based on analyses of the official documents, ethnography and intensive interviews with core officials, professionals and population scientists, Greenhalgh and Winckler (2005) skillfully chart the broad shifts in the governance of population from a spectrum of variants inherited from Leninist biopolitics to a mixed mode incorporating a neoliberal approach. The field of biopolitics entails a variety of rationalizations, in other words the "formulations of population problems", and interventions, namely, "techniques or strategies designed to optimize population" (ibid., p. 27). Greenhalgh and Winckler (2005) have identified six policy tendencies under the umbrella of Chinese Leninism that serve as analytical lenses for examining the changing biopolitical rationalizations and interventions in China. Framed under three major variants of Leninism in China--Maoism, Stalinism and Reformism--the six policy tendencies include revolutionary, mobilizational, bureaucratic, professional, socialist and marketizational approaches (ibid.). Through tracing and analyzing the transitions from one policy tendency to another, Greenhalgh and Winckler (2005) demonstrates how China's birth planning policy evolved in relation to the historical and regime change in China.

Inspired by Greenhalgh and Winckler's work, I plan to empirically extend their effort with a specific focus on discourse, the distinctive emphasis of the Foucauldian approaches to modern power. I would document, chronicle, and analyze the shifting major discourses appropriated by the Chinese state to frame and rationalize its reproduction policy. In doing so, I seek to address the following questions: What is the nature and transformative agency of biopower governing

reproduction and population in China? What broader historical, political and sociocultural dynamics have shaped this biopolitics?

2. Discourse of the Birth Planing Policy in China

According to Foucault (1978), discourses are ways of constituting "historically specific bodies of knowledge that structure how things can be said" (Greenhalgh and Winckler 2005, p. 27; see also Weedon 1997, p.105). Being politically productive, discourses not only reflect but also constitute politics and power itself (Foucault 1978). Therefore, discourse analysis has long been an important approach in studying politics. (Apter and Saich 1994; Kluver 1996).

Many previous studies have documented the discourses produced or harnessed by the Chinese state in propagandizing its birth planning project. The most prominent discourse cited is the "crisis-crackdown" narrative, which diagnoses "unchecked population growth" in China as a crisis to be blame for all the country's social and economic problems, and more importantly, a crisis impeding national modernization (see Wang, Gu, and Cai, 2016; Greenhalgh 2001, 2009, 2010; Greenhalgh and Winckler 2005; Lee and Wang 1999). Greenhalgh (2001) has also pointed out a branch of state feminist discourse that claims the birth planning project as a driving force for the liberation of women. Besides, there is another body of discourse centering upon women and children's health, which narrates the birth planning project as "human-centered reproductive health services" (Attané 2002).

Greenhalgh and Winckler (2005) have systematized the discourses on China's birth planning project into three modes: "institutionalized population discourse" produced by the state, "broad political and cultural discourses" harnessed by the state, and "popular discourse circulating in Chinese society" (p. 207). The first mode, being central to the birth planning program, is a

mixture of "population crisis", modernization, scientific norms, and socialist planning narratives

(ibid.). Rooted in China's century-long history of modernization struggles since the 19th century,

the second mode includes discourses on sexuality, women's liberation under socialism, and

rupture from "the feudal past" (ibid.). The third mode mainly entails framings regarding family,

children, and gender, e.g. the value of children and especially of daughters (ibid.). In addition to

all discourses introduced above, Greenhalgh and Winckler (2005) have also mentioned the

"sustainable development" discourse and the "human capital development" discourse, which

have emerged and proliferated since the late 1990s (see also Wang, Gu, and Cai, 2016;

Greenhalgh 2009).

This study focuses on the official discursive framings that embody biopolitical policy

tendencies in terms of the rationalization and implementation approaches in order to decode

China's transforming biopolitics. While previous works on this topic all solely rely on qualitative

methods, this study incorporates a computational grounded theory framework to mitigate the

shortcomings of both qualitative and computational content analysis through inductively

identifying and meaningfully interpreting discourse patterns (Nelson 2017). The three-step

computational grounded theory framework includes a computationally-based pattern detection

step that allows pattern emerges in an unbiased and reproducible fashion, a pattern refinement

step of computationally guided deep reading of typical texts and a pattern confirmation step that

uses different computational techniques to evaluate the validity of the inductively detected

patterns (ibid.). In the first step, I plan to use dynamic topic modeling, an unsupervised learning

method that has potentials to either confirm existing theories or discover unknown categories and

patterns not immediately apparent to human readers. (Evans 2016; Nelson 2017; Nelson, Burk,

Knudsen and McCall 2018). Besides, by incorporating the temporal dimension in the model, the dynamic topic modeling could trace the shifts and continuation of the various discourses in a more rigorous and detailed fashion. It would be complementary to previous studies that could hardly chronicle the discourses due to methodology limitation.

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