

# Reflection on the BBC Documentary 'My Future Babies'

*Tiantian Chen, October '17*

The debate about egg freezing became widespread in 2015 due to the influence of social networks. In July 2015, *VISTA*, a popular magazine in China, posted an interview between a *VISTA* journalist and Xu Jinglei, who is a famous 41-year-old actress in China, on Sina Weibo (a Chinese version of Twitter). Xu Jinglei said she froze her eggs in the United States in 2013. She made the decision because she wanted to delay motherhood and because the current policies on egg freezing in China are too restrictive. As she said, "Egg-freezing technology is the only way for me to go back and rectify my decision of not having babies now if I later regret this decision" (Telegraph, 2015). *VISTA*'s Weibo was retweeted by more than 7,000 Weibo users and attracted 1,958 replies in two days. Then one week later, the predominant state media CCTV produced a video on Weibo to respond to *VISTA*'s report. During the video, CCTV interviewed clinicians and Ministry of Health officials. Both the clinicians and the officials highlighted some of the risks associated with the technology and said they did not allow single women to freeze eggs because of family planning policies.

The ban was not new. The birth of the first test-tube baby in China occurred in 1988. The Ministry of Health legalized (or regulated) human-assisted reproduction technologies in 2001 and refined some of the clauses in 2003. According to the Ministry of Health, only two groups of women are able to access human-assisted reproduction technologies including egg freezing. The first group of women are either single or married patients with serious diseases such as cancer or tumors. They are allowed to freeze eggs in order to have children later in life. The second group of women are married women with infertility issues or genetic diseases. Ovulation disorders, endometriosis, immune infertility, infertility because of certain environments, chromosomal diseases, and sex-linked genetic diseases are among these diseases. Women belonging to this group must provide marriage certificates and birth certificates before they access any reproduction technologies. In other words, it is illegal for single women without serious diseases to freeze their eggs in modern China. Even if some hospitals now allow single women to freeze eggs, they can only use frozen eggs when they are married.

Banning single women's access to egg freezing suggests that single women in China cannot have children. Women should have sex and conceive children after they marry. In fact, single mothers are discriminated in China in different ways. For example, single mothers have to pay a fine referred to as a Social Maintenance Fee (as the government thinks it shoulders a huge responsibility raising children born from single mothers, though in reality individuals rather than the government raise children). Since single mothers do not have marriage certificates, they cannot apply for marriage certificates. As a result, their children cannot register for household. As such, it is nearly impossible for their children to go to school or work in China.

According to some of my informants during my fieldwork, banning single mothers is responsible for the next generations. A clinician in a state clinic said, "We do not support that single women have children. It is neither good nor acceptable. For children, it is really important that they grow up in two-parent families. If they are born, they should know who their fathers are and who their mothers are. Otherwise, it is unfair for their children. Absolutely unfair. Children who grow up in single-parent families behave worse than children who grow up in two-parent families. Children born in lesbian families need fathers' love." Not only do the clinicians I interviewed think it is harmful for children to grow up with single mothers, they also argue that single women are not able to raise children independently. Another clinician in the same clinic said, "the advanced human-assisted technology is valuable only if few people can access it. Rich people are smart, and they can afford IVF. Poor people are stupid. We cannot do IVF for them. Rich people can wear beautiful clothes and have dinner in luxurious restaurants. One can lead such elite life if he or she is rich. If one is smart, he or she is able to make money. If one can make money, he or she is smart. We do not support Hitler's racism, but we will limit the access of ARTs and implant at most two embryos in order to ensure the population quality."

The notion of population quality was emphasized by the government since the implementation of the One Child Policy. It followed that since each couple was allowed to have only one child, that child should be healthy and smart. the government noted that population quality was essential to economic development. According to Lisa Handwerker, an American anthropologist, in order to improve the population quality, government leaders and public health experts began to promote eugenic campaigns (Handwerker, 2002). In fact, when the word "eugenic" (in Chinese you sheng) was introduced in China in the late 19th century, revolutionists such as Yan Fu, Yu Songhua and Zhang Bingyan used the concept to advocate political reform in order for China to catch up with western countries.



The Promotion of The Two Children Policy from [www.JHWCW.com](http://www.JHWCW.com)

Nowadays, improving population quality is connected with Chairman Xi's ideology of the Chinese Dream. According to a legislator I interviewed, "The advocacy of Two Children Policy comes from the scholars that Chairman Xi trusts. Liu He's Middle Income Trap and other scholars' aging theories aggravate party leaders' concerns about population decline.....The announcement of Two Children Policy was by party leaders rather than People's Congress." Liu He argues that a growing skilled labor force is essential to avoiding Middle Income Trap and realizing the Chinese Dream. After the announcement of Two Children Policy, an official document by Yichang government in Hubei Province which urged party members to conceive two children was debated on internet. As the document suggests, conceiving two quality children "is an important way to deal with the relationship between population and environmental resources, re-balance development of population, ensure the happiness of future generations and thrive our country." The Chinese Dream is an collective effort rather than individual glory. And conceiving children is a co-production project.

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文件

宜卫生计生发〔2016〕47号

## 关于实施“全面两孩”政策致市直机关事业单位 全体共产党员共青团员的公开信

市直机关、事业单位全体共产党员、共青团员同志们：

党的十八届五中全会提出，“全面实施一对夫妇可生育两个孩子”政策。这是党中央立足国情，遵循规律，正确处理当前与长远、总量与结构、人口与资源环境的关系，促进人口长期均衡发展的重要举措，关系到中华民族世代繁衍和子孙后代健康幸福。

多年来，市直机关、事业单位广大共产党员和共青团员带头宣传，模范执行计划生育；广大人民群众广泛参与，积极支持计划生育；历届党委政府高度重视，取得了辉煌成就。人口过快增

The document which urged party members to conceive two children from [www.news.sina.com.cn](http://www.news.sina.com.cn)

Man Man knew egg freezing from Weibo. The heated discussion of egg freezing on internet not only empowers women with reproduction knowledge but also endows them carnivalistic subversive power against the patriarchal society and policies.

The discourse on egg freezing centered on advocacy of individualism and criticism of state control. For example, a Weibo user whose nickname is Night Owl with Light Make-up said, 'though I am not a big fan of Xu Jinglei, I support her attitude towards child birth. If I like children, I will give birth to more children. If I do not like children, I will live my own life. People who like children never conflict with people who dislike children. Do not pressure other people's attitude and experiences on me.....' A Weibo user called Kitty is a Lace Lover said, "we do not even have control over our own ovaries anymore." Another Weibo user whose nickname is Xiao Qi Out of Charge said, "if someone has money, please settle down in other countries. Even if the government allows single women to freeze their eggs or give birth to children, there is still much trouble after the children are born."

Weibo can effectively trigger phenomenal events due to its large number of users. In addition, Kong (2013) found the replies in Sina Weibo correspond with Bakhtin's carnivalesque theory. The participation, the narratives, and the ideas are emotional, recreational, and carnivalistic. Weibo users retweet posts blindly rather than becoming well informed of what occurs. Many "political

protests" were instigated and occurred in Sina Weibo. For example, Deng Yujiao was a 21-year-old waitress in a hotel in Hubei Province. On May.10, 2009, a group of government officials came to the hotel for dinner. When Deng served these officials, they asked for sexual service. Deng fought against these officials and killed one of the officials accidentally. The police arrested Deng and sentenced her to death. The incident was widely known due to Sina Weibo. Microbloggers were angry at local police and officials. Due to the pressure from the public, local police re-investigated the case and charged Deng with lenient sentence.

Chinese civil society remains weak. The public discussion of social and political issues are limited by the lack of communication. In addition, most social organizations are led by the government. And organized protests are still strictly prohibited by the government. Internet, to some extent, forms a new type of civil society in China. Despite governmental censorship, the development of social networks has also created an ideal space for people to freely voice their opinions on gender, ethnics and even policies.

Man Man said egg freezing gave her more choices, as she can focus on her career while still being able to conceive children in future. In fact, when I attended events organized by egg freezing agencies in Shanghai, the events focused on women's rights and freedom. In the documentary, Man Man not only talked about individual choices but also revealed the intersection of different forces from her family and workplace. Is it true that women's reproduction is irreconcilable with their career? Are women too greedy if they want both work and family?

It can be argued that egg freezing provides an opportunity for women to exercise control over their own reproduction behaviors, but it can also be argued that egg freezing reinforces gender norms that women should have children. Having children mainstreams women into society. In China, it is especially important for women to have children. Egg freezing is still situated in patriarchal contexts, as women have to give birth to children in order to maintain femininity. In this sense, egg freezing only reflects women's lack of reproductive choices, as they cannot choose not to give birth to children. Egg freezing provides an option to solve individuals' late childbirth problem, but it does not offer any structural or social support such as childcare or parental leave for women. Work and family conflicts should be solved by changes of policies and social perceptions. What the women really need is a relaxing social environment that will not punish women when they ask for maternity leave and affordable childcare centers.

[Watch the BBC documentary here.](#)

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