

Population Governance Without Rights:

Why Contemporary China Fails the Test of Modern Civilization

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Abstract

This article examines population governance in the People’s Republic of China from the 1950s to the present as a continuous institutional system rather than a sequence of disconnected policy errors. Drawing on policy documents, administrative practices, and documented cases, it argues that China’s population management has consistently treated human beings as administrable population stock rather than as rights-bearing persons. Across three opposing phases—birth encouragement, birth suppression, and birth re-encouragement—the governing structure remained unchanged: the state retained unilateral authority over reproduction, while individuals lacked veto power over bodily decisions. This article proposes a minimal civilizational test—bodily autonomy in conflict with state objectives—and demonstrates that contemporary China fails this test. The findings challenge GDP-based or technology-based definitions of modernization and suggest that China represents a form of technologically advanced but pre-civilizational governance.

Keywords: population governance, bodily autonomy, China studies, modernity, reproductive rights, state power

1. Introduction

China is frequently described as a “modernizing” or “alternative modern” society, characterized by rapid economic growth, technological advancement, and administrative capacity. High-speed rail networks, digital governance, and sophisticated demographic planning are often cited as indicators of modernization. Yet such assessments rarely interrogate the civilizational content of governance—specifically, whether individuals are treated as rights-bearing subjects or as instruments of state objectives.

This article advances a central claim:

China’s population governance system demonstrates that technological modernity can coexist with the absence of modern civilization.

Rather than evaluating individual policies in isolation, this study examines population governance as a structural system spanning more than seven decades. It shows that while policy slogans reversed repeatedly, the underlying logic—population as a state resource—remained intact. The result is a governance model better described as human farming with modern tools.

2. Theoretical Framework: Modernity Versus Civilization

Modernity is often conflated with technological capacity or economic output. However, political theory and human rights law define modern civilization more narrowly: as a system in which state power is constrained by individual rights, particularly bodily autonomy.

This study adopts a minimal civilizational criterion:

When state objectives conflict with individual bodies, the individual must retain veto power.

This criterion is intentionally narrow. It does not require liberal democracy, cultural uniformity, or Western institutions. It requires only that human bodies are not instruments of policy.

Using this standard, the article evaluates China's population governance across three historical phases.

3. Phase I: Birth as Political Contribution (1950s–1970s)

3.1 Reproduction as State Duty

In the early decades of the PRC, population growth was framed as national strength. Slogans such as “人多力量大” (more people, more power) were not rhetorical flourishes but operational principles. Reproduction was treated as a political contribution rather than a private choice.

Women were mobilized simultaneously as workers and reproducers, and large families were publicly praised. The concept of “hero mothers” symbolized this logic: the uterus was redefined as a site of political merit.

3.2 Absence of Rights Language

Crucially, no concept of reproductive rights, bodily autonomy, or informed consent existed in policy discourse. The system did not violate rights—it simply did not recognize them. This absence laid the institutional foundation for later coercion.

4. Phase II: Birth as Policy Violation (1980s–2015)

4.1 Quotas and Enforcement

With the introduction of the one-child policy, the same administrative system reversed its message but not its structure. Births became regulated outputs subject to quotas, fines, and enforcement. Medical institutions were incorporated into policy execution, and reproductive procedures were administratively scheduled.

4.2 Documented Bodily Coercion

Well-documented cases, such as forced abortions and sterilizations, were not aberrations but consequences of quota-driven governance. Local officials faced accountability for meeting targets, while individuals had no legally recognized veto.

Children born outside policy limits were denied household registration (*hukou*), effectively rendering them legally invisible—an outcome incompatible with modern conceptions of child rights.

4.3 Responsibility Without Accountability

Despite the scale of harm, no nationwide apology, restitution mechanism, or institutional reckoning followed. Policy reversal occurred without responsibility, reinforcing the instrumental status of human bodies.

5. Phase III: Birth as Moral Obligation (2016–Present)

5.1 Re-Encouragement Without Freedom

Facing demographic decline, the state reversed course again, promoting two-child and later three-child policies. However, this shift did not restore reproductive autonomy. Instead, coercion gave way to subsidies, propaganda, and moral pressure.

The message changed from “you must not give birth” to “you should give birth”—but the decision authority remained external.

5.2 Internalized Control

Blame was increasingly individualized: families who did not reproduce were portrayed as irresponsible, selfish, or insufficiently patriotic. Structural constraints—housing costs, employment precarity, lack of childcare—were reframed as personal failures.

6. Structural Continuity: Population as Algorithm

Across all phases, population governance followed the same algorithmic logic:

1. Population modeled as input variables (quantity, structure, timing)
2. Policy targets derived from state objectives
3. Administrative and medical systems mobilized
4. Human bodies used as execution interfaces
5. No accountability loop for harm

This continuity demonstrates that policy reversal did not signify reform but reconfiguration of control techniques.

7. Why This Is Not “Incomplete Modernization”

A common counterargument frames China’s experience as a transitional phase: modernization without completed institutional reform. This article rejects that interpretation.

Modernization is not a linear scale of technology. It is a binary threshold of rights recognition. A society either treats bodies as inviolable or it does not.

China’s population governance shows deliberate, repeated decisions to prioritize system stability over bodily autonomy. This is not lag—it is structural choice.

8. Comparison With Pre-Modern Societies

Ironically, many pre-modern societies lacked the capacity to systematically control reproduction. Their limitations were technological, not ethical.

China’s system is more dangerous precisely because it combines:

- comprehensive data collection
- administrative penetration
- medicalized enforcement
- ideological legitimacy

This is not primitive brutality. It is rationalized domination.

9. Implications for China Studies and Global Discourse

This analysis challenges three common assumptions:

1. Economic growth equals civilization – false

2. Policy reversal implies learning – unsupported
3. Technological governance is neutral – demonstrably incorrect

China represents a case of non-civilized modernity: advanced tools deployed without rights constraints.

10. Conclusion

This article does not argue ideology. It documents structure.

Where humans are governed as population stock, modern civilization has not been achieved—regardless of technology, infrastructure, or GDP.

China's population governance system provides hard evidence of this reality.

References (APA – sample, expandable)

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