CHAPTER SIX
SANCTIONS AND INCENTIVES: FAMILY AND STATE
REPRODUCTIVE AGENDAS IN RURAL TIBET, CHINA

Demography as Politics

Childs-Play?
Mr Geoff Childs (Tibetan Review, May '02) sees no reason to treat the ‘findings’ of communist Chinese demographic propagandists (Zhang and Zhang) with any caution. Seemingly oblivious to the totalitarian state apparatus that dictates, informs, funds and manipulates demographers and family planning authorities in communist China, he embraces their 1994 claim, of a 3.8 total fertility rate for Tibetan women in China, as reasonable and accurate!

Apparently the thought never crosses his mind that such unquestioning acceptance of communist propaganda, not only falls far below standard academic procedure, but more damagingly exposes him to the charge of complicity in an effort to conceal the harrowing reality of the population programme and the nature and scale of atrocities inflicted upon Tibetan, Muslim-Uighur and Chinese women. One wonders would he have accepted so uncritically statements made by Nazis on the health and well-being of Polish women during the occupation? (Foley 2002)

I begin this chapter with a tirade from a Western supporter of Tibetan independence because it exemplifies the contentious nature surrounding the demography of modern Tibet. The above quote was in response to an editorial I wrote for Tibetan Review, a monthly journal published by members of the exile community in India (Childs 2002). In that piece I highlighted an apparent incongruity: although Tibetans in Tibet were purportedly subjected to a draconian birth control policy, they were nevertheless experiencing a higher fertility rate than women in exile who were free to reproduce at will. By alluding to such a paradox and citing Chinese demographers to support the argument, I courted retribution in the form of an assault on my character and credentials. Others have suffered similar fates.1

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1 For example, see Bowe (2001) who accuses the Tibet Information Network of “denial and deceit” due to that organizations attempt to provide a balanced report on China’s family planning policy in Tibet.
The inanity of my critic’s comments veils an important point: How do we assess the reliability of statistics emanating from China when those numbers are generated by a state that has a less than exemplary reputation for handling empirical data? I address this question in the second half of the chapter by taking a critical look at how demographic data is construed, and in some cases misrepresented, in a quest to support political agendas. That discussion is prefaced by an analysis of the recent fertility transition that has occurred in China’s Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR). Similar to the exile’s situation, Tibetans in the TAR have experienced a rapid reduction in their fertility rates from over six to less than two births per woman in a remarkably short period of time (late 1980s to 2000). Understanding this recent fertility transition provides an essential foundation for the latter part of the chapter in which I explore how political factors shape the ways in which demographic processes are interpreted, portrayed, and ultimately contested in the international arena of human rights debates concerning the recent history of Tibet and the well-being of Tibetans.

A Brief History of the TAR

Shortly after the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, Mao Zedong declared his intention to ‘liberate’ Tibet from foreign imperial powers. At the time, Central and Western Tibet, the areas that roughly correspond to today’s Tibet Autonomous Region, were under the administration of a Tibetan government based in Lhasa. In 1951 Mao sent the Chinese military into Tibet, and the forces easily dispatched an ill-equipped Tibetan army. The subsequent signing of the 17-Point Agreement paved the way for Tibet’s incorporation into the People’s Republic of China.

At first the Dalai Lama, Tibet’s spiritual and secular leader, as well as other Tibetan officials were able to retain their positions in the political structure of the country. Mao recognized the need to move slowly with political, social, and economic reforms, and understood the need to win over the nobility if he wished to accomplish his goals (Goldstein 2007). But Sino-Tibetan relations gradually deteriorated to the point where a failed uprising in 1959 led to the flight of the Dalai Lama into exile—along with tens of thousands of his followers.

The dissolution of the Tibetan government cleared the ground for major reforms. The old system, whereby the government, the nobility,