
Radical Disagreements in Chinese Views of Abortion and Fetal Life: Implications for Bioethics

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- Semistructured interviews with thirty women who had experienced abortion and thirty doctors who had performed terminations.
- A survey of 601 questionnaires collected from a range of individuals, including urban residents, rural people, Catholics, Protestants, Buddhists, doctors, biomedical and traditional Chinese medical students, university students, and scholars of the medical humanities and ethics.

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- A pilot study among twenty Chinese students and scholars living in the United States, most of them in Galveston, Texas, in the late spring and early summer of 1997.

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- A pilot study among twenty Chinese students and scholars living in the United States, most of them in Galveston, Texas, in the late spring and early summer of 1997.
- Numerous primary historical and contemporary written Chinese sources.
- Personal experience of growing up and working as a “peasant” in a remote village in south-central China and living for thirteen years in Changsha, the capital of Hunan Province.

A summary statement

This study provides overwhelming evidence about a wide range of Chinese perspectives on abortion and closely related issues such as fetal life and the national birth control program, highlighting areas of consensus as well as sharp disagreements.

Findings

- The Chinese silence on abortion is eloquent, with multilayered meanings, indicating not only the acceptance of abortion and a number of complicated personal meanings, but also the widespread fear resulting from political repression.

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- The official and public discourse emphasizes a collectivist and statistical ethics in which fetal life is not given significant attention and human life is not always accorded the highest respect. But the official standpoints on abortion, not always the same historically, are far from necessarily in accord with Chinese traditions such as Confucianism and the views of the contemporary majority.

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- The official and public discourse emphasizes a collectivist and statistical ethics in which fetal life is not given significant attention and human life is not always accorded the highest respect. But the official standpoints on abortion, not always the same historically, are far from necessarily in accord with Chinese traditions such as Confucianism and the views of the contemporary majority.
- Chinese moral understandings of abortion, in both the past and the present, are not as “liberal” as usually assumed. Although abortion is acceptable legally and socioculturally in contemporary China, a significant proportion of the population, especially religious groups including Catholics, Buddhists, and Protestants, oppose it in principle. (see Table II.)

Table II: Percentages of Respondents who Agreed That Abortion Was Equivalent to Taking a Life, Killing an Infant, or Killing a Human Being.

Equivalent to . . .	taking a life	killing an infant	killing a human being
Catholic	92	96	88
Buddhist	54	58	59
Protestant	64	60	57
Chinese Med. Student	38	23	30
Village B	37	36	25
Village C	36	36	25
University Student	32	26	24
Village A	30	31	23
City (South)	21	19	19
City (North)	23	14	18
Med. Humanities Scholar	37	11	11
Biomedical Student	22	19	8
Overall	36	31	27

Note: The order of the samples is arranged by the highest to lowest percentage who agreed that abortion was equivalent to killing a human being.

Findings

- Chinese people differ greatly on the question of when a human life begins—whether at conception or at birth or sometime during pregnancy. Most consider the fetus a life. In other words, the great majority of Chinese believe that human life starts either at conception or sometime during pregnancy. Historically speaking, China owns its own sophisticated knowledge on fetal development. (see Table I.)

Table I: Responses to the Question, “When Does a Human Life Begin?”

Sample groups	Conception	“Quickening”	Viability	Birth
Catholics (23)	87% (20)	9% (2)		4% (1)
Buddhists (26)	62% (16)	19% (5)	8% (2)	12% (3)
Chinese Medical Students (57)	65% (37)	12% (7)	4% (2)	19% (11)
Protestants (39)	64% (25)	15% (6)		21% (8)
City (South) (105)	47% (49)	18% (19)	14% (15)	21% (22)
University Students (43)	42% (18)	19% (8)	16% (7)	23% (10)
City (North) (45)	53% (24)	18% (8)	4% (2)	24% (11)
Biomedical Student (26)	42% (11)	12% (3)	19% (5)	27% (7)
Village C (84)	36% (30)	18% (15)	10% (8)	37% (31)
Village A (50)	40% (20)	18% (9)		42% (21)
Village B (43)	37% (16)	12% (5)		51% (22)
Med. Humanities Scholar (17)	19% (3)	6% (1)	12% (3)	64% (11)
Overall (558)	48% (269)	16% (88)	8% (43)	28% (158)

Note: The order of the samples is arranged by the lowest to highest percentage which agrees that a human life begins at birth.

Findings

- Although most would prefer two children, Chinese people accept and support the national birth control program because the policy is viewed as being both necessary for the country and good for individuals. Due to the lack of full public discussions on all related issues, this acceptance and support is conscientious on the one hand and insufficiently informed on the other.

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- The experiences of women who have had abortions are diverse and their narratives complex. For nearly all, the experience is both bitter and unforgettable. Some clearly see the aborted fetus as their lost “child.”

Findings

- Most doctors who routinely perform abortion (almost all are female) exhibit no overt moral conflict in their professional work because they believe they are serving both women and the country. They usually neither have reservations about the national population policy nor express feelings about the aborted fetus. Nevertheless, at least one doctor felt that she was totally lost with her professional work because of her attitudes toward the fetal life, the methods employed in the birth control program, and the sufferings of her patients.

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- Three sociological factors that have led to the practice of coerced abortion include the strong state control, the complexity and pressure in the local world, and people's support of the birth control program. Ethically speaking, it is highly objectionable, though not completely impossible to argue as a lesser evil, according to not only Western but also Chinese moral-political traditions.

Conclusions

- The most important conclusion of this study, however, is on the great diversity of Chinese perspectives. In other words, there does not exist, and there never has existed, a single and unified Chinese perspective on abortion. Despite the apparent silence, contemporary mainland Chinese speak with diverse and often radically different voices on abortion.

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- As a result, to develop an effective cross-cultural dialogue, the popular modern myth of a communitarian and homogeneous China, in striking contrast with an individualistic and plural United States (West), must be overcome. An interpretative approach, which maintains the crucial importance of taking seriously the various kinds of internal plurality within China, is needed.

For more information on these findings, see

- Nie Jing-Bao

Behind the Silence: Chinese Voices on Abortion

(Rowman & Littlefield, 2005)

<http://www.rowmanlittlefield.com/isbn/0742523705>

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