

Response for the edge.org 2013 annual question: 'What should we be worried about?'

Chinese Eugenics

By Geoffrey Miller

<https://www.edge.org/response-detail/23838>

China has been running the world's largest and most successful eugenics program for more than thirty years, driving China's ever-faster rise as the global superpower. I worry that this poses some existential threat to Western civilization. Yet the most likely result is that America and Europe linger around a few hundred more years as also-rans on the world-historical stage, nursing our anti-hereditarian political correctness to the bitter end.

When I learned about Chinese eugenics this summer, I was astonished that its population policies had received so little attention. China makes no secret of its eugenic ambitions, in either its cultural history or its government policies.

For generations, Chinese intellectuals have emphasized close ties between the state (*guojia*), the nation (*minzu*), the population (*renkou*), the Han race (*zhongzu*), and, more recently, the Chinese gene-pool (*jiyinku*). Traditional Chinese medicine focused on preventing birth defects, promoting maternal health and "fetal education" (*taijiao*) during pregnancy, and nourishing the father's semen (*yangjing*) and mother's blood (*pingxue*) to produce bright, healthy babies (see Frank Dikötter's book *Imperfect Conceptions*). Many scientists and reformers of Republican China (1912-1949) were ardent Darwinians and Galtonians. They worried about racial extinction (*miezhong*) and "the science of deformed fetuses" (*jitaixue*), and saw eugenics as a way to restore China's rightful place as the world's leading civilization after a century of humiliation by European colonialism. The Communist revolution kept these eugenic ideals from having much policy impact for a few decades though. Mao Zedong was too obsessed with promoting military and manufacturing power, and too terrified of peasant revolt, to interfere with traditional Chinese reproductive practices.

But then Deng Xiaoping took power after Mao's death. Deng had long understood that China would succeed only if the Communist Party shifted its attention from economic policy to population policy. He liberalized markets, but implemented the one-child policy—partly to curtail China's population explosion, but also to reduce dysgenic fertility among rural peasants. Throughout the 1980s, Chinese propaganda urges couples to have children "later, longer, fewer, better"—at a later age, with a longer interval between birth, resulting in fewer children of higher quality. With the 1995 Maternal and Infant Health Law (known as the Eugenic Law until Western opposition forced a name change), China forbade people carrying heritable mental or physical disorders from marrying, and promoted mass prenatal ultrasound testing for birth defects. Deng also encouraged assortative mating through promoting urbanization and higher education, so bright, hard-working young people could meet each other more easily, increasing the proportion of children who would be at the upper extremes of intelligence and conscientiousness.

One of Deng's legacies is China's current strategy of maximizing "Comprehensive National Power". This includes economic power (GDP, natural resources, energy, manufacturing, infrastructure, owning America's national debt), military power (cyberwarfare, anti-aircraft-carrier ballistic missiles, anti-satellite missiles), and 'soft power' (cultural prestige, the Beijing Olympics,

tourism, Chinese films and contemporary art, Confucius Institutes, Shanghai's skyscrapers). But crucially, Comprehensive National Power also includes "biopower": creating the world's highest-quality human capital in terms of the Chinese population's genes, health, and education (see *Governing China's Population* by Susan Greenhalgh and Edwin Winkler).

Chinese biopower has ancient roots in the concept of "yousheng" ("good birth"—which has the same literal meaning as "eugenics"). For a thousand years, China has been ruled by a cognitive meritocracy selected through the highly competitive imperial exams. The brightest young men became the scholar-officials who ruled the masses, amassed wealth, attracted multiple wives, and had more children. The current "gaokao" exams for university admission, taken by more than 10 million young Chinese per year, are just the updated version of these imperial exams—the route to educational, occupation, financial, and marital success. With the relaxation of the one-child policy, wealthier couples can now pay a "social fostering fee" (shehui fuyangfei) to have an extra child, restoring China's traditional link between intelligence, education, wealth, and reproductive success.

Chinese eugenics will quickly become even more effective, given its massive investment in genomic research on human mental and physical traits. BGI-Shenzhen employs more than 4,000 researchers. It has far more "next-generation" DNA sequencers than anywhere else in the world, and is sequencing more than 50,000 genomes per year. It recently acquired the California firm Complete Genomics to become a major rival to Illumina.

The BGI Cognitive Genomics Project is currently doing whole-genome sequencing of 1,000 very-high-IQ people around the world, hunting for sets of sets of IQ-predicting alleles. I know because I recently contributed my DNA to the project, not fully understanding the implications. These IQ gene-sets will be found eventually—but will probably be used mostly in China, for China. Potentially, the results would allow all Chinese couples to maximize the intelligence of their offspring by selecting among their own fertilized eggs for the one or two that include the highest likelihood of the highest intelligence. Given the Mendelian genetic lottery, the kids produced by any one couple typically differ by 5 to 15 IQ points. So this method of "preimplantation embryo selection" might allow IQ within every Chinese family to increase by 5 to 15 IQ points per generation. After a couple of generations, it would be game over for Western global competitiveness.

There is unusually close cooperation in China between government, academia, medicine, education, media, parents, and consumerism in promoting a utopian Han ethno-state. Given what I understand of evolutionary behavior genetics, I expect—and hope—that they will succeed. The welfare and happiness of the world's most populous country depends upon it.

My real worry is the Western response. The most likely response, given Euro-American ideological biases, would be a bioethical panic that leads to criticism of Chinese population policy with the same self-righteous hypocrisy that we have shown in criticizing various Chinese socio-cultural policies. But the global stakes are too high for us to act that stupidly and short-sightedly. A more mature response would be based on mutual civilizational respect, asking—what can we learn from what the Chinese are doing, how can we help them, and how can they help us to keep up as they create their brave new world?