

Chinese Bioethics?

“Voluntary” Eugenics and the Prospects for Reform

A series of scientific and technical experiments in China over the past several years have combined to raise yet more troubling questions about the ethics of biotechnology in that still-authoritarian country.

The recent progress in biotechnology in China has its roots in Deng Xiaoping’s 1986 approval of a grand strategy to bring science in the straggling socialist state up to speed with the developed countries. Biotechnology in particular became a priority in the 1990s, after it became clear that American companies had a stranglehold on the information technology sector. Determined to seize upon the next commercially lucrative technology revolution, the leadership in Beijing began to ramp up biotech research and development.

Despite China’s cash-strapped economy and sparse patent protections, the country’s biotechnology project has racked up some impressive results. In 2001, Chinese researchers grew dog bladder tissue on the back of a mouse—a freakish bio-engineering “success” performed in a military medical research institute. In April 2002, a team of researchers at the Beijing Genomics Institute released a rough draft of the genome of one strain of rice. Even though the Chinese results were not as complete or accurate as those announced in December by a Japanese-led international consortium of rice genome mappers, the Chinese researchers managed to shock observers by producing their draft in just three months.

In addition, Chinese scientists claim to

have been cloning human embryos (using rabbit eggs and human DNA) since 1999—two years before U.S. researchers accomplished this ghastly feat using only human materials—reportedly for the purposes of isolating stem cells and possibly harvesting spare organs and tissues. The Chinese Ministry of Health recently approved plans for the country’s first state-run stem cell bank, and although the facility is smaller than stem cell banks in the U.S., it will likely become the largest such bank in Asia.

So the question now arises: With China conducting cutting edge biotech experiments, what limitations will be placed on research there? This question has international ramifications because of the global nature of modern science. If the Chinese attempt biotech research that Western scientists now avoid for ethical or legal reasons, competitive motivations—the lust for fame and fortune, personal and national—may erode the ethical and legal limits in the West, too.

The fact that Chinese scientists don’t share the ethical concerns of their Western counterparts is confirmed by a 1993 survey of 255 Chinese geneticists: An overwhelming majority said that public health and the “quality” of the population should be improved through practices that would be rejected in the West as eugenics. The scientists strongly supported government-mandated genetic screening before marriage, and more than 90 percent favored forbidding couples with certain genetic mutations from having children. Although the survey was conducted before the major biotech breakthroughs of the late 1990s, there is reason to think that attitudes haven’t changed. “Chinese culture is quite different,” said the Chinese scientist who performed the survey.

“Things are focused on the good of society, not the good of the individual. It would shock people in the West, but my survey reflects cultural common sense.”

Not quite. Eugenics is an historical aberration in China, consonant with modern communist thinking but hardly “common sense” to China’s ancient Confucian culture. Under the guise of its family planning programs, the Chinese state has pursued its own political ends and promulgated the eugenic ideal. China’s longstanding one-child policy was codified in a new law enacted last September. The law obligates the civil sector—media, business, educational and other civic institutions—to popularize and advance the state’s family planning programs. It also rewards parents who have only one child with preferential treatment in the administration of welfare programs and other social initiatives, while imposing financial penalties on those who fail to comply with the family planning policies of the People’s Congress. The result of these policies is a “voluntary” eugenics state, in which parents are under enormous pressure to ensure that their one and only child is of “good quality.”

There are two other ominous developments worth noting. The first is a 1998 policy that requires scientists to get government permission before using China’s “human genetic resources”—a category that includes organs, tissues, blood samples, and any genetic materials, products, or even information. This policy gives the Chinese state enormous administrative control over these human “resources” to make sure they are “rationally utilized”—not exactly the kind of regulatory system we’re pinning for in the United States.

Second, there are plans to develop a new “genetic identification card” that would convey certain genetic information about

the cardholder. It is not yet clear how this new high-tech card will be used, but surely such biotechnology creates new possibilities for governments that seek to control their people.

Fortunately, there is also growing interest in bioethics in China. According to a 2002 report from the U.S. embassy in Beijing, small activist groups “were successful in pressuring scientists from working on human-rabbit chimeras and stopping funding to another researcher who sought to develop human-bovine chimeras.” The report adds that institutes for bioethics are forming in major biotechnology centers on the eastern seaboard and in several places in Sichuan.

The report also notes that, in 2001, two national committees on bioethics “proposed ethical guidelines on human embryonic stem cell research” and cloning, including a ban on producing children through cloning. Still, the only government regulation regarding the creation of cloned children is a one-sentence Ministry

of Health directive, which *Wired* magazine describes in its January 2003 issue as “toothless, because Ministry of Health rules don’t apply to the other branches of the government that are actually funding the research.”

It is therefore a distinct possibility that the Chinese government will permit and perhaps secretly encourage the creation of cloned or genetically modified children for the “good of society.” Given Beijing’s desire to seek profit and international acclaim through biotechnology—and keeping in mind the country’s official disregard for human rights—China might become a haven for researchers hoping to attempt experiments considered ethically unjustifiable by the rest of the world. (Interesting how totalitarianism might be good for “scientific freedom.”) It remains to be seen whether China’s nascent bioethics community will reject these abuses, or whether it will become the mouthpiece of the state’s biotechnology interests.