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CHINESE AND OTHER EAST ASIAN political leaders have repeatedly pointed out that religious-based schools such as those dominating Western debates on using human embryos in research do not exist in their societies (Bleeker-Waaldijk and Hafte 2008). In China, to some extent at least, such fears are reflected also among philosophers and bioethicists. According to Ren-zong Qiu (2007), for example, the Confucian-based view that a person comes into being only at the moment of birth is, still valid. The human embryo, from this perspective, is a being and entity, it is neither a person, with corresponding moral status, nor is it a determinate entity, without any moral status. For Qiu, therefore, the embryo is best described as a proceeding person. A form of human biological life that deserves due respect. At the same time, however, it can be manipulated or destroyed if there is sufficient reason, from the perspective of Qiu and other bioethicists in China, to treat it as a purely biological subject of the hESC research.

A few philosophical arguments for the permissibility regulatory approach to hESC research in China have been provided by a number of Western observers, who have linked the widespread support for hESC research to the one-child policy. Cookson (2005), for example, has assumed that as a result of the high number of abortions carried out during the last three decades in the context of the family planning policies, embryonic forms of human life are generally held to have lesser value in China. Therefore, permissibility-regulation argument would be easily introduced.

A striking feature that underlies these diverging assumptions is that they are formulated in the complete absence of those who are actually confronted with the decision to donate their embryos, women and couples undergoing IVF treatment. What value do these people ascribe to their embryos and what are the culturally mediated assumptions and concerns that impact their decision to refuse or accept donation of their embryos? These are the questions that shall address here in the basis of data gathered during fieldwork conducted in February and March 2008 in two IVF clinics in South East and Central China, and on a survey carried out at that time among 74 patients of IVF clinics and a control group of 426 students from three universities in Central China. The survey included multiple choice and open-ended questions to which respondents could provide handwritten comments.

Attitudes towards life, value, and death

Research findings indicate that attitudes among embryo donors are much more varied and complex than the three perspectives introduced above suggest. The survey, for example, that ethical couples regarding the use of human embryos do not exist in China cannot be upheld. Although the overwhelming majority of survey participants regarded hESC research as making meaningful contributions to medical and cancer, only 6.7% of all respondents of the survey said that they actually agree to the donation of their embryos for hESC research, while 53.4% indicated that they would refuse to donate (0.9% were undecided).

Among this last group, 12.8% (28.5% of all respondents) characterized their refusal by supporting the statement that ‘using the embryos is as a misusing a child’, an argument that echoes one of the key complaints against hESC research in Western societies. The issue was qualified in several of the survey respondents’ handwritten comments:

"To donate an embryo to research is equal to killing a life. I think life cannot be destroyed casually".

(IVF patient, 29)

and

"it is a moral issue. The embryos also a life and has its right to live".

(Student, Medicine, female, 23)

It is a matter of fact, the survey results also suggest that attitudes and perceptions of the starting point of human life significantly mismatch with the actual perceptions of potential embryo donors; it also became clear that arguments proclaiming that moral concerns regarding the donation of embryos for research are absent in China cannot be upheld. Equally flawed appear the assumption that due to the high number of abortions carried out in the context of the one-child policy, the value of early forms of human life are generally of low regard among Chinese people. Instead, as the findings of this study suggest, perceptions of embryonic life in China, as elsewhere, are entangled in a rich web of overlapping and sometimes contradictory layers of meaning, values, emotions and social relations of which assessing, policy makers, scientists and clinical staff are insufficiently aware.

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References