

Disturbing the Descendants of the Dragon: One Child Policy and Women in China

by Nina Somera

The imperial dragon which has symbolised the greatness of Chinese civilisation and history has never been more vibrant and aggressive.

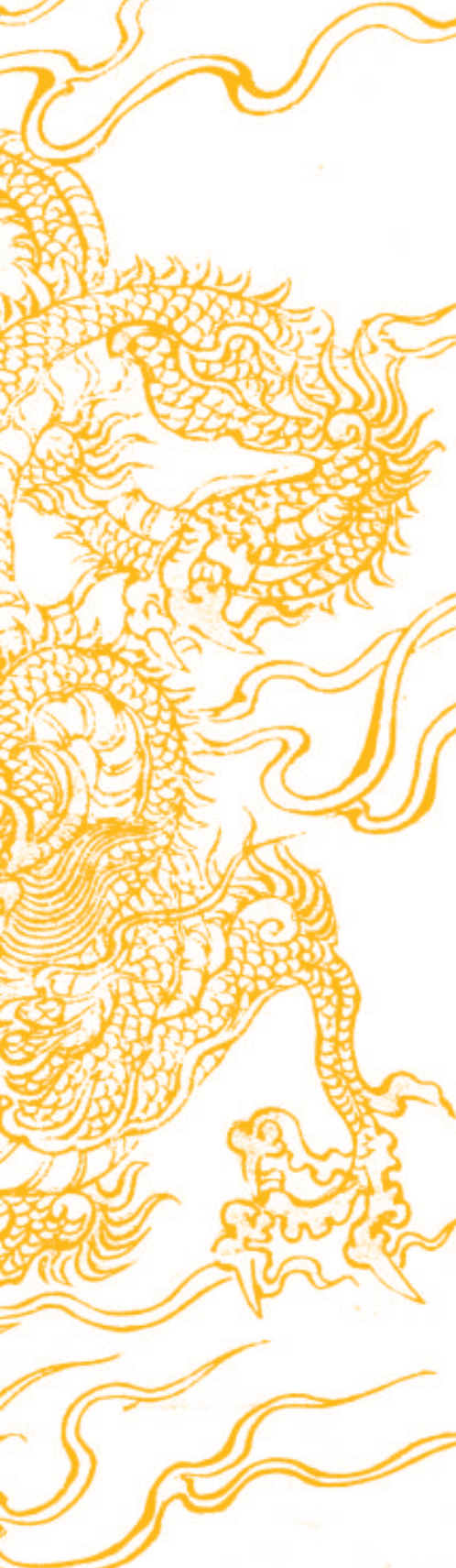
China has hogged the headlines lately, stunning the world, particularly stalwarts like the United States, United Kingdom, Russia, and other members of the European Union, and Japan, with its increasing influence both in the political and economic spheres. Such power appears even more prominent given the dragging wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the subprime mortgage crisis, and the soaring cost of fuel, among many other issues which have weakened China's counterparts.

The recent issue of *The Economist* makes a point, describing China in its cover page as the site of the "new colonialists." With its growing economy and subsequently, a thirst for raw materials and other resources, China has helped fuel dictatorships in Africa, Latin America, and Burma with generous loan packages.

China's emergence, apart from causing greater insecurity to the West, has also increased the strain on the country's natural and human resources. Its smokestack industries have taken a tremendous toll on both the environment and workers. For instance, its coal mines which emit pollution into the air, which sometimes, even contaminates water reservoirs killing thousands of workers every year.

Aside from exploring and exploiting the natural resources of other countries and pushing the limits of its own environment, China has also tapped its classic solution: the one-child policy.

Illustration from Wikimedia Commons.



In March 2008, the Chinese government announced that it will continue to enforce its one-child policy, partly as a response to the burgeoning problem of climate change. Mr. Zhang Weiying, director of the State Population and Family Planning Commission said, “Changes to the family planning policy now could lead to population rises, posing higher pressure on China’s future development.”¹ This, as nearly 200 million Chinese would enter the child-bearing stage in the next ten years. China has also claimed that the policy which has prevented the births of more than 300 people since it was introduced in 1979, has prevented the emission of 1.3 billion tons of carbon dioxide every year.²

The one-child policy appears to have mitigated the fear of former Chinese premiere Deng Xiaoping that the country would not be able to feed its people. Now that capitalism has cemented China’s global political and economic foothold, and has flung open China’s doors to the world, Beijing seems to have a greater purpose in maintaining its one-child policy.

But regardless of the national principles, priorities, and plans; communism and capitalism; culture and consumerism; and scarcity and abundance, women have been largely absent in policy decision-making, much less, genuine political discourses on reproductive health. This, even as their bodies bear the brunt of the practical consequences.

One – Child Policy

The People’s Republic of China adopted the one-child policy in 1979. Back then, China’s population was about to hit 1 billion, or nearly a hundred per cent

growth in just 30 years. Seven hundred million were under 30 years of age.³ While occupying only seven per cent of the world’s arable land, China, at that time, had a quarter of the total world population.

A massive population was perceived to be a burden on China’s process of mainstreaming economic reforms. Thus, Beijing approved the Population and Family Planning Law which prescribes family planning as a fundamental state policy and compels couples to maintain only one child.

Couples in urban districts are expected to have only one child. A second child may be permitted in certain cases: couples manage to have several years spacing between births; the first child is physically or mentally challenged; or for the purpose of progeny, particularly when couples are divorcees or when they come from one-child families. Meanwhile, rural folk are allowed to have a second child, owing to the labour demands in the field. A second child is also permitted if the first-born happens to be a girl.

The policy operates through a system of rewards and penalties. Couples who volunteer to have only one child are given money, subsidies for child care, preferential treatment in land allocation and other social security benefits, especially when couples work in the public sector.⁴ Meanwhile, law violators are usually forced to undergo abortion and pay penalties which are sometimes even greater than one’s annual income. Failure to pay a “social maintenance fee” would mean additional fees.⁵ Penalties also come in the form of job termination, particularly for government employees, and denial of future increases in land allocation for farmers.



Propaganda posters of the one-child policy, from the collection of Stefan R. Landsberger, PhD at the International Institute of Social History in the Netherlands. These posters were featured in his book, *Chinese Propaganda Posters: From Revolution to Modernization*. (Amsterdam and Armouk: Pepin Press and M.E. Sharpe, 1996).

Source: <http://www.iisg.nl-landsberger>

Fees are also levied upon individuals who have conceived a child but are unmarried, parties of an extra marital affair or women below the legal age for marriage.⁶

The State Family Planning Bureau oversees the implementation of this policy and provides guidance to family planning committees down to the local levels. The latter are authorised to design what could be more appropriate reproductive health programmes and strategies, including the imposition of their own social compensation fees.

Bound Bodies

The project of population control and economic development have been carried out at the expense of women's bodies. To begin with, reproductive health is usually a task attributed to women. Data from a *New England Journal of Medicine* research show that among the reversible birth control methods, intrauterine devices remain the most popular with 46 per cent usage rate in 2001, condoms with six per cent and oral contraceptive pills with three per cent of the same year. In a 2003 survey, 80 per cent of women respondents disclosed that they have not been given choices in their reproductive health; thus, they merely followed the prescription of local family planning workers.⁷ Female sterilisation rate was also comparably high than male sterilisation, 35.9 per cent to 10.2 per cent.⁸

Abortion has been widely recognised as a complementary measure for the one-child policy. This service may be administered free of charge. But there has been a number of reports suggesting that this has also been given sans the consent of mothers, particularly in cases where pregnancy is not sanctioned by the State. Forced abortions usually take place in rural areas, where the traditional preference for sons remains quite strong. Women who refuse to have forced abortions and have no resources to pay social compensation fees end up bringing their babies to term and giving birth within the confines of their homes; thus, increasing the risk of maternal and neonatal mortality.

According to the United Nations Population Fund, 25 per cent of Chinese women of reproductive age underwent at least one abortion in 2005. It is however unclear whether this figure also account for forced abortions.

Women, likewise, become victims of forced sterilisation which usually result





from forced abortion. According to the Centre for Reproductive Rights, forced abortions and sterilisations usually occur in the villages where women are harassed by local family planning workers. “These workers allegedly use threats, such as threat of the social compensation fee, to pressure women to terminate their pregnancies. The combination of the burden of these fees, as well as harassment from officials, leave women ‘little practical choice but to undergo abortion or sterilisation.’”

The Chinese government is also encouraging sterilisation. Incentives are given to those who voluntarily undergo

the procedure. Sterilisation has also been set as a condition for couples who are found to be capable of transmitting disabling congenital defects to their children.⁹

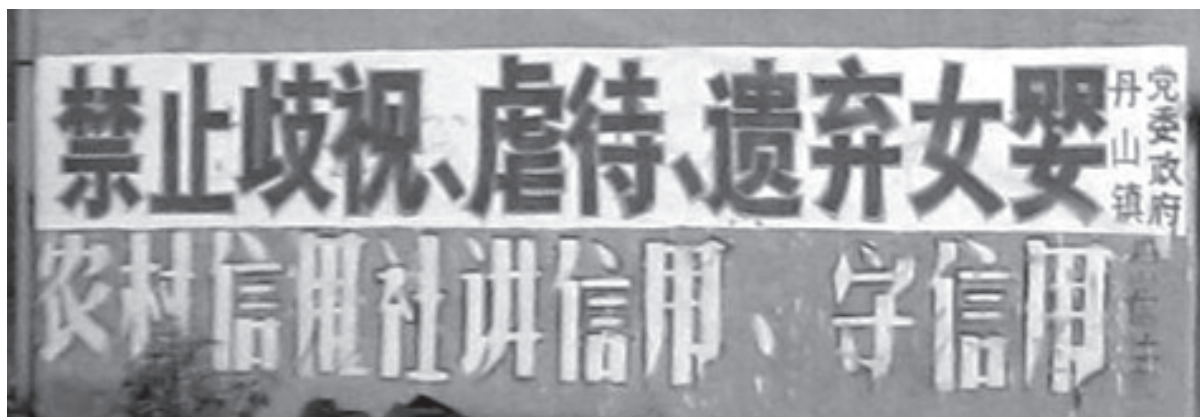
Early this year, China’s higher courts decided to hear a criminal case against the police filed by 20-year-old Jin Yan, in Changli county, Hebei province.¹⁰ In 2000, on her ninth month of pregnancy, Jin was brought by the police to an abortion centre for forced abortion. The reason for this was she was five months pregnant at the time she married her husband Yang Zhongchen. Her husband initially attempted to bribe officials, and agreed to pay a fine of US\$1,000.

“I got on my knees and begged them after they took me to the clinic and said I wanted to give birth to my daughter. I had already named her Yang Yin,” Jin narrated to UK’s *Telegraph*. As a result of police action, Jin was hospitalised for more than a month and is now infertile. The couple has demanded US\$ 169,000 as compensation and moral damages.

Indigenous populations have not been spared from the draconian implementation of the one-child policy. Albeit having a second child is allowed in underpopulated areas, the one-child policy was allegedly used as a form of genocide in the case of the Uyghurs in Eastern Turkistan in the 1990s. It was reported that in a town of 200,000 people, 35,000 women were subjected to government checks, 993 of whom were forced to terminate their pregnancies, and more than 10,000 underwent sterilisation.¹¹

Likewise, Tibetans have not been spared from the one-child policy and its practices of forced abortion and sterilisation, even as this exempts minorities. It has been widely claimed that even before

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Some mothers who wish to save their baby girls from forced abortions move from one place to another, and deliver their offspring in secret.

A road sign in Sichuan province reads, "It is forbidden to discriminate against, mistreat, or abandon baby girls."

Photo by David Cowhig, Wikimedia Commons.

1985, when China clarified the exemption of minority populations from the policy, family planning workers had already begun their usual checks and performed procedures.¹² By 1990, 18,000 of the 600,000 Tibetan women of child-bearing age "volunteered for sterilisation operations."¹³ There are also accounts of Chinese doctors being instructed to meet certain quotas, therefore forcing them to kill newborns as well.

Where have all the girls gone?

The one-child policy has also been a site of the complicity of capitalism and culture as the method has been used to uphold the traditional preference for sons. Prior to the formation of China as a modern nation-state, it had a tradition of infanticide. The practice was supposed to have been relegated to oblivion until it was revived by the one-child policy.

According to Gendecide, there was a decline of "excess mortality" after the establishment of the People's Republic but the number of 'missing' women

showed a sharp upward trend in the 1980s linked by almost all scholars to the one-child policy." Meanwhile, Hesketh, Lu and Xing also attributed the high sex ratio to the emergence of medical technologies such as ultrasound machines. According to them, "It is likely that even in the absence of the policy, sex-selective abortion would continue, although it would probably be less common."

In 1997, the World Health Organisation's Regional Committee for the Western Pacific reported that more than 50 million women have banished due to the "institutionalised killing and neglect of girls."¹⁴

Hence, the one-child policy has also led to a gender imbalance in the population. The 2000 census revealed that there are 117 males to 100 females in China. This imbalance increased by 2005: 119 boys to 100 girls.¹⁵ Gender imbalance in the provinces is even greater: in the same year, a ratio of 138 to 100 prevailed in Guangdong and Hainan. As of 2007, there were already 37 million more males than females.¹⁶

The chasm in these ratios have been filled by psychological stress experienced by men who would have wanted to get married and have their own families. The situation has also encouraged criminal activities such as kidnapping and trafficking. Prostitution is also on the rise, consequently increasing China's vulnerability to HIV-AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases.

The traditional preference for sons was one of the customs people had begun struggling to unlearn until the introduction of the policy.

Some mothers who wish to save their baby girls from forced abortions move from one place to another, and deliver their offspring in secret. For those who survive, their daughters remain unregistered and consequently, deprived of the benefits and opportunities of full citizenship.

Because of international pressure, Beijing reiterated its opposition against infanticide and outlawed some provisions of the Population and Family Planning Law, particularly those which allowed the determination of the fetus' sex for the purpose of sex-selective abortion. In 2003, China also amended the Law on Maternal and Infant Health Care which used to compel couples to undergo pre-marital exams. These exams would determine whether couples are physically and mentally fit to bear children. However, these changes have not been thoroughly translated into practice, especially at the local levels.

Another option for parents with more than one child is to surrender their children to orphanages. The latter earned the scorn of the international community in the mid-1990s. In 1996, Human Rights Watch (HRW)-Asia released its report on Shanghai's Children's Welfare Institute, already considered the Institute receiving the most substantial financial support from the government and international organisations. But it was found that children at the Institute were maltreated, some of them starved to death, physically and sexually assaulted. For the period of 1986 to 1992 alone, 1,000 children died of unnatural causes.

In *Death by Default*, HRW-Asia reported that, 'the vast majority of children's deaths recorded at the Shanghai orphanage resulted, not from lack of

access to medical care, but from something far more sinister: an apparently systematic programme of child elimination in which senior medical staff played a central role. By making unfounded diagnoses of mental retardation and other disorders, these doctors have helped promote the inaccurate belief that virtually all of China's abandoned children are physically or mentally handicapped."

Reproductive Health Gone Wild

Horrifying stories of women, children, and families behind China's one-child policy continue to contribute cracks on the cauldron of development the country has made for itself. Forced abortion and sterilisation, infanticide, and maltreatment of children, and even ethnic cleansing, have made the one-child policy an ugly strategy in strengthening the independence and integrity of a nation. The blatant violation of human rights has rendered treacherous what could have been a comprehensive health care infrastructure and network. The latter could have been used in educating women and couples on various reproductive health options and in facilitating abortion as a recourse, that is based on social justice.

The nature of the one-child policy is also quite exclusionary, denying women, girls, and indigenous peoples, opportunities for stakeholding and ownership in the project of nation-building. The traditional preference for sons was one of the customs people had begun struggling to unlearn until the introduction of the policy.

Moreover, this era of wealth may not necessarily call for China's continued grip on its population control strategies,

especially now that the average fertility rate is pegged at 1.5 children per couple. The problem of 4-2-1 (four grandparents, two parents, and one child) may have greater implications to the economy. As sociologist Wang Feng noted in his study, “With the birth rate below replacement level, the country faces serious negative consequences in the long run if it fails to phase out the policy.”¹⁷

In fact, the policy has even created tensions among people of different social strata as bureaucrats, popstars, and businesspeople have managed to flout child-birth permissions and requirements through bribery or their influence. Others have the money to fly to other countries and give birth there. One

cheaper option is Hong Kong which is exempted from the one-child policy.¹⁸

As Hesketh, Lu and Xing wrote, “What was appropriate in 1979 may not be so now. China has undergone massive socio-economic change during the past 25 years. With the freedoms that have resulted from wealth and globalisation, the one-child policy seems increasingly anachronistic.”

But Beijing would hear none of this for now. In the meantime, the cauldron continues to boil, shaking the mighty dragon adorning its cover. ■

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Endnotes

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