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# One-Child Policy: A Short-Sighted Solution to a Short-Sighted Created Problem

Allyson Surette

Population is one of the biggest issues that the modern world faces today. For some, there are too many people and for others there are too few. Depending on where you live, the discussions of population often bring different connotations. But for most in what is considered “the developed world,” citizens are often afraid of overpopulation. This is in spite of the fact that in many of these same nations there is actually a trend of lowering birth rates. Many times, the outcry of over population and discussions of its control are often linked to classism, economic fear, and oftentimes misogyny. No better proof of this idea is clearer than the One-Child Policy, the most high profile case of population control by a single government in the history of modernity that was enacted by the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in the early 80s. Overall, this essay will stress that the One-Child Policy was a political move that sought to correct the short-sightedness of the Maoist policies towards family planning with its own short-sighted policy that manufactured a crisis, and in return, that did more lasting damage than good.

To begin, as in all discussions on contemporary China seemingly start, you have to begin with Chairman Mao’s views on family planning. In her book, *Just One Child: Science and Policy in Deng’s China*, Susan Greenhalgh writes that the One-Child Policy was just one of the pieces of legislation born out of the trauma inflicted by Maoist Policies, in a similar trend for many of the policies enacted during the Deng era.<sup>1</sup> She continues to note that while Mao did not have any single ideology on population control during his time as paramount leader of China. Mao, overall, seemed to have believed that the

large population of China was his foremost strength.<sup>2</sup> He praised increasing birthrates and believed strongly that a large population would fuel China’s labor force. This left plans within his government for family planning in a state of limbo. Contraceptives were even banned for some time. Even so, it was clear that there was at least some growing worry within Mao’s government as early as the cultural revolution on the subject of population. While near the end of his life, Greenhalgh puts forth that he may have revised some of his views on the large population, Mao’s actions allowed China’s population to grow from 542 million in 1949 to 830 million in 1970.<sup>3</sup> This was extremely distressing for the government of China, as one can expect. Most of the increasing population remained poor and rural. In the eyes of leaders like Deng Xiaoping, this posed a threat to his plan for furthering China’s burgeoning economic progress and competition in the global arena.

The road to the One-Child Policy within itself is important to acknowledge. As aforementioned, Deng Xiaoping and his government saw the large population, most of which was poor and rural, as a roadblock to the achievement of Deng Xiaoping’s “Four Modernization,” his personal political plan to modernize China after the disasters of the Mao era. He felt that the large and poor population would unnecessarily burden the state. It was throughout the 1970’s that one started to see the government advocate for much smaller families. At first the policy of the government in the early 70s was expressed as “one is best, and two at most.” However, by 1979, this had

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1 Susan, Greenhalgh, *Just One Child: Science and Policy in Deng’s China*, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008), 42.

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2 Susan, Greenhalgh, *Just One Child: Science and Policy in Deng’s China*, 46.

3 Susan, Greenhalgh, *Just One Child: Science and Policy in Deng’s China*, 52.

changed to “encourage one, and prohibited three,” as the policy that would become the “One-Child Policy” stopped existing in the realm of theoretical discussion and started to become much more physical.<sup>4</sup> For their part, the PRC tested what would become the One-Child Policy locally at first, as to gage the results. These small scale ventures were largely successful and showed that government mandated family planning could be a successful way to decrease population. But these tests were done mostly in cities, which would be problematic.<sup>5</sup>

It was through the work of Song Jian, a military scientist turned population statistician, that set the dominos into motion through his mathematical models predicting imminent doom if China’s population continued the way it had without extreme action. This led to the One-Child Policy being passed into national law in 1982, as it was seen as the optimal policy.<sup>6</sup> In a public statement, the PRC announced their justification for this law in their own words in 1980. They stated that if the population kept growing the way it was, it would make it difficult for the modernization programs to make progress and thus “create a severe situation in which we can hardly expect to make any appreciable improvements in lives of the people at large.” This meant that the PRC was basically putting forth that for the economic good of ‘*all of China and her people*’ this policy would have to be put into place.<sup>7</sup> However, in practice it was not a plan to protect the interests of everyone, but a few. Put another way, the government was willing to let some suffer, for the single purpose of not

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4 Susan, Greenhalgh, *Just One Child: Science and Policy in Deng’s China*, 89-91.

5 *China’s One Child Family Policy*, ed. Elisabeth Croll, Delia Davin, & Penny Kane (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1985), 92.

6 Susan, Greenhalgh, *Just One Child: Science and Policy in Deng’s China*, 128-132.

7 *The Search for Modern China: A Document Edition*, ed. Janet Chen, Pei-Kai Cheng, & Micheal Lestz with Jonathan D. Spence (New York, W.W Norton & Company, Third Edition), 517.

burdening the newly rich. It is then in one’s best interest to analyze the troubling ways the policy was implemented.

When examining the One-Child Policy in action, one can immediately understand the damage it’s going to cause to those within at risk populations. Inherently the One-Child Policy always had classist underpinnings. This is why it is best to call the situation China faced in terms of population both a manufactured crisis and a real problem. While it was true China’s population was overly large and an issue, you can see how the population crisis was then manufactured in a way that scapegoated poor people as state burdens giving justification for increased state involvement in their lives to decrease their numbers for the good of Chinese economic aims. Instead of focusing on larger issues of growing class inequality and how growing poverty within China were directly attributed to being the effects of Deng Xiaoping’s own modernization policies allowing for some to get extremely rich very quickly, while many more rural individuals remained poor and started to get poorer.

It was easier to address an issue like population control, than address how the government modernization plan is making a large majority of people poorer. It is understandable why then the One-Child Policy ended up doing more damage to the poorer rural communities than it did to urban communities.

Rural families in China relied heavily on large families to act as an in-house workforce that allowed their farming ventures to function as many small families could not really pay for workers.<sup>8</sup> So to be told that one could now only have one child was problematic. It was clear that for the Deng Xiaoping government enacting this policy, it was more important to protect the economic interests of a few than those of the poor. The less poor there were, the

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8 *China’s One Child Family Policy*, ed. Elisabeth Croll, Delia Davin, & Penny Kane (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1985), 40.

less the state would be burdened, after all. In cities where the policy was still heavily enforced, families had been having less kids anyway.<sup>9</sup> While the government tried to give some financial aid to rural families suffering because of the policy, overall, that aid could not totally take the place of the investment of more than one child for many families.<sup>10</sup> Along with that, while in urban communities authorities had made the business of policing the policy an issue between coworkers or neighbors and threats of revoking government privileges. Inside rural communities, however, family planning was a lot stricter and invasive. Family planners, often volunteers, were required to keep track of everyone in a village. In practice, family planners found it easiest to police the policy through policing women's bodies in increasingly invasive ways. Including keeping detailed records of individual women's past births, contraceptive use, and menstrual cycle.<sup>11</sup>

The One-Child Policy from the beginning was explained as a joint effort between state officials and regular citizens. This was clear in the PRC's own words, as they put it in an open letter to the people, the PRC wrote "[the government] calls on all Communist party members and Communist Youth members, and especially cadres at all levels, to care about the country's future," and going on later to say that compliance with this policy would not only be the responsible thing to do but safeguard a future for later generations of Chinese.<sup>12</sup> While this call to action was meant to strengthen communal resolve, in practice

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9 *China's One Child Family Policy*, ed. Elisabeth Croll, Delia Davin, & Penny Kane (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), 95.

10 *China's One Child Family Policy*, ed. Elisabeth Croll, Delia Davin, & Penny Kane (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), 63-4.

11 Kristal, Sotamayor, "The One-Child Policy Legacy On Women and Relationships in China," PBS, February 5, 2020

12 *The Search for Modern China: A Document Edition*, ed. Janet Chen, Pei-Kai Cheng, & Micheal Lestz with Jonathan D. Spence, 519.

it outlined the way the government would use citizen accountability in the way of family planning volunteers and types of "neighborhood watches" to invade citizens' lives to ensure that they were following the policy. In a way, the policy was basically policed through a kind of government-sanctioned blackmail. Along with the threat of how much a single family could lose from not following the policy. This included being barred from employment opportunities, fines, and restricted or even revoked government assistance to name a few things.<sup>13</sup>

The One-Child Policy remained in place until 2015. So far this piece has spoken only in the realms of the economy. Both because it was the biggest reason for the policy's implication as well as because it is important to understand how the policy negatively affected communities economically. But that is only one side of the story. There was a real human cost that was paid with the implementation of this policy. The government had basically "entered the bedroom," but it went further than that when it came to women. In fact, women were the group that one could argue were most affected by the policy in the most traumatic of ways.

Most of the responsibility of "family planning" fell onto women more than men. This meant it was women's bodies that were highly scrutinized. Many within the PRC, who were mostly men, followed a line of thinking that can only be described as a biological determinist stance. Even though women's liberation was seemingly a tenant of the Chinese Communist Party, it still remained a belief within the party that as it was first and foremost in a woman's biological essence to be the reproducers of the human species. In practice it was then implied that it was a woman's job to take sole responsibility for the use of contraceptives.<sup>14</sup> This goes a long way to explain why

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13 Kristal, Sotamayor, "The One-Child Policy Legacy On Women and Relationships in China," PBS, February 5, 2020

14 Susan, Greenhalgh, *Just One Child: Science and Policy*

female sterilization was more practiced than vasectomies as a prevention method to halt multiple births. It also explained why the reasons cited for this were as baseless and simple as the vasectomy would cause men “to lose their strength” over anything substantial. Especially in rural communities, the most affected group was those communities’ women.<sup>15</sup>

As constantly stressed due to the aforementioned classism and now explained misogynist underpinnings in this policy, those most blamed for the increase in population were rural peasant women. As Greenhalgh explains, it was identified within the party and among scholars, both men and women, that “it was peasant women’s bodies that were overly productive,” and thus required drastic actions such as forced sterilization and abortions, even at late term, to stop them from producing.<sup>16</sup> There was very little to be done about this clear dehumanization of poor women. There were only a small number of scholars who were noted to be lamenting this type of treatment and so the scars of what these women endured were allowed to accumulate as unfortunate but necessary consequences to protect China’s economic interests.

Another important feature of the effects that the policy had on women was the issue of infant girls. Culturally in China, society has mostly been patriarchal. In practice, this meant that the family line is carried through sons while daughters ‘marry out’ of the family and into their husbands. This coupled with the other culturally understood fact that in old age parents stay with their son’s families more than their daughters made it so there was a strong preference within China for male children.<sup>17</sup>

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in *Deng’s China*, 266.

15 *China’s One Child Family Policy*, ed. Elisabeth Croll, Delia Davin, & Penny Kane (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1985), 47.

16 Greenhalgh, Susan, *Just One Child: Science and Policy in Deng’s China*, 266.

17 Kristal, Sotamayor, “The One-Child Policy Legacy On

These culturally understood facts had always left infant girls in a precarious situation, as the problems with female infanticide often plagued China since the Imperial times. A morbid example of this cultural climate would be to imagine that you were a poor couple and you have two children. One an infant girl and the other an infant boy, and you knew you could only feed one. So in the end, the couple chooses to keep the boy while the daughter ‘disappears.’ For many families now forced to have only one child, both wanting old age security and a furthering of their family name, if they gave birth to a baby girl sometimes that would often ‘disappear’ so that a couple could be free to ‘try again’ for a boy.<sup>18</sup> This cultural reality was not lost on the PRC, however, they had expected this may happen. In their open letter to the public, they write that “when girls grow up they work in the labor force just like boys,” as well as to note that women are very skilled in plenty of fields that the Chinese people need. For example, the PRC noted one of these fields was domestic labor, which the PRC makes special note to say that women are better at than men.<sup>19</sup> Despite this ‘glowing’ endorsement of women as species, it still did very little to wipe away centuries of culturally centered bias among Chinese couples for male children.

It remained a reality that the policy led to massive waves of infant girls being abandoned. Sometimes in public spaces in hopes that they would be adopted by some other family, and other times those babies just died or were trafficked into orphanages in which they would be adopted by wealthy families abroad.<sup>20</sup> Despite this obvious humane crisis, the government in China refuses to allow people to talk freely about this topic. Either because they wish

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Women and Relationships in China,” PBS, February 5, 2020

18 Kristal, Sotamayor, “The One-Child Policy Legacy On Women and Relationships in China,” PBS, February 5, 2020

19 *The Search for Modern China: A Document Edition*, ed. Janet Chen, Pei-Kai Cheng, & Micheal Lestz with Jonathan D. Spence, 518.

20 Kristal, Sotamayor, “The One-Child Policy Legacy On Women and Relationships in China,” PBS, February 5, 2020

to not entice criticism or it being a case of “out of sight, out of mind.” But even if the government is unwilling to talk about the issue of the fates of infant girls, it may be forced too. According to one article on the effects of the One-Child Policy, China has become one of the worst, if not the worst, gender-imbalanced countries in the world. As they note, in 2019 the gender ratio in China was 114 men for every 100 women born.<sup>21</sup> This clear imbalance was an effect created by the One-Child Policy. Now within China there is a climate in which there are “not enough” women for men to marry, leading to a further accelerating loss in birth rates which now has become a problem within itself for Chinese government policy. This new reality puts immense social pressure on Chinese women to now get married younger and have kids quicker as the government makes it clear they see this crisis as a threat to social stability.<sup>22</sup> This once again puts the brunt of campaigns to increase the nation’s birth rates on women’s shoulders. This pressure does nothing to erase the years of pain the policy inflicted on women, it only creates more stress on already open wounds. It feels almost like a tragic comedy, that for years women were threatened to be subjected to forced sterilizations, large fines for having a second child that could destroy whole households, as well as traumatic late term abortions and now the government has flipped the script on its women demanding now that regardless of what those women might want, they must now have more children.

Finally, after discussions of class and misogyny, the final group suffering is the elderly, which is an ever growing classification group in China as an after-effect of the Policy. As briefly mentioned above, in traditional Chinese society it falls on children (usually the son) to take care of their parents when they get older. However, as

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21 Alice, Zhang, “Understanding China’s Former One-Child Policy,” Investopedia, November 23, 2020

22 Kristal, Sotamayor, “The One-Child Policy Legacy On Women and Relationships in China,” PBS, February 5, 2020

times have progressed, the reality is that the person who is taking care of the elderly the most is the government. As the workforce in China is not just aging but also shrinking due the after effects of the One-Child Policy. It is clear that by its own metrics, the One-Child Policy achieved its goal to decrease the overall birthrate of China. By 2018, women were giving birth to an average of 1.7 children.<sup>23</sup> However, this has created new problems for the government. Now China is facing an ever increasing aged population, meaning within the country there are increasingly more people entering retirement age or middle age than people being born. This creates a problem since as the older population retires from the workforce there will not be enough youths to refill their ranks. For some statistics to make it more real, China’s workforce has been falling consistently at 0.5% for the last seven years.<sup>24</sup> Once again the PRC expected this problem as seen in their open letter. However, they dismissed it. Basically saying that it was an issue that would be solved through the advancements made in the future, meaning the PRC just kicked that can down the road and hoped to deal with it another day.<sup>25</sup> This obviously came back to bite them, as seen above. It was a strain on economic progress being made apparent that caused the relaxing and later revoking of the One-Child Policy. It would also explain the government’s new push for women to have more children and marry younger. In the end, what killed the One-Child Policy is the same thing that encouraged its implication: the economy.

The bottom line is that the One-Child Policy was the co-opting of a true problem, population, into a manufactured crisis that sought to scapegoat the poorest in

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23 Alice, Zhang, “Understanding China’s Former One-Child Policy,” Investopedia, November 23, 2020

24 Alice, Zhang, “Understanding China’s Former One-Child Policy,” Investopedia, November 23, 2020

25 *The Search for Modern China: A Document Edition*, ed. Janet Chen, Pei-Kai Cheng, & Micheal Lestz with Jonathan D. Spence, 518.

the country as burdens to modernization and the economic progress of China through a short sighted solution that brought multitudes of harm to families. Most especially those rural communities and generations of women as a whole. And now, after the policy fulfilled its goal, the PRC is dealing once again with the effects of short sightedness of government policy. Just like how Deng Xiaoping had to deal with Mao's, now it is the modern PRC's job to deal with the effects of Deng's. One must wonder what they will do to ease the pains of ever decreasing birth rates, lasting cultural trauma of the population, and their increasingly shrinking workforce. Hopefully, for their sake, their revocation of the law in 2015 will allow for changes to come however slowly. But after studying the estimations, I cannot say how possible that's going to be in the near future.

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## About the Author

**Allyson Surette** is currently a senior majoring in History and Secondary Education, with a minor in Social Studies. Her research project was completed during the winter of 2020 as a final project in **Dr. Bingyu Zheng's** (History) course on the history of China under communism. It was made possible through extensive use of the Maxwell Library and its staff, which helped compile the sources necessary to make this essay possible. She plans to pursue a Ph.D. in Medieval History after a few years of work as a high school history teacher in Massachusetts.

