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# China's One Child Policy: Examining the Origins and Outcomes Ignored by the Media

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Family Structure and Political Theory

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**China's One Child Policy:  
Examining the Origins and Outcomes Ignored by the Media**

On June 20, 2004, the National Geographic channel released *China's Lost Daughters*, a short, forty minute documentary that followed the adoption process of several American families as they traveled to China. Although the documentary relied most heavily on the pathos of viewers rather than specific research or hard data, the film nevertheless brought increased scrutiny to the social issues plaguing the world's most populous country. The conflict in question was China's controversial one child policy, a massive government attempt to slow population growth by limiting couples to one child. Soon, a brief flurry of media attention spawned headlines such as *Toronto Star's* "A Crying Shame" or PBS's *Between Two Worlds*. But long after these frenzied headlines, sociologists, anthropologists, and other scholars around the world continued to examine what was really happening in China. Although it was easy for the media to hastily arrive at sweeping conclusions and broadcast their dramatic assumptions, thorough research indicates that China's one child policy was the culmination a government desperate to avoid economic distress as a result of an unbounded population. While the one child policy successfully decreased fertility rates and achieved a more manageable population, western media obsessed over the policy's multitude of inadvertent complications such as increased rates of human trafficking, prostitution, and widespread gendercide. Only in historical retrospect can this policy's necessity be challenged, as evidence suggests that the population may have stabilized regardless of the heavy-handed communist action.

#### *A Communist Foundation for Family Planning*

Few media outlets explored the past events that led China to such a radical policy decision. To fully understand the origins of the one child policy, one must travel long before its formal implementation in 1979. The twentieth century was a transformational period for numerous countries. Britain lost India—the "crown diamond" of her colonies— as well as various

other spheres of influence around the globe. The Ottoman Empire ceased to exist, and Russia's last Czar was executed, ushering in the beginning of Bolshevik rule. China was no exception to this global turmoil. China's last Qing emperor Pu Yi was overthrown by Mao Zedong, marking a monumental shift from the ancient tradition of dynastic rule to communism. But even the communist rulers could not deny the sheer scale of the country they now ruled. Discounting Antarctica, China boasts the third largest landmass of all countries in the world and the largest population. Data from the United Nations Census Bureau shows that China's population was approximately 565 million in 1950, just one year after Mao's official ascension to power. Life expectancy was bleak, at just 40.1 years for the average adult (UN). The sheer size and scale of China and her troubles suggested to Mao that intervention had to occur on a more private, intimate level.

Efforts to bolster the population aligned with Mao's belief that a large population was necessary to reflect the political and economic power of China. This philosophy is hard to grasp when the Chinese government now holds the polar opposite position. Indeed, Mao would continue to exaggerate success in order to fulfill his vision of a massive labor force capable of world domination and success (Riley 11). Mao's vision for the country included making significant advancements in agriculture and manufacturing, which he hoped would propel towards a more prestigious role on the global stage. The implementation of government funded healthcare programs lowered the death rate from 35 to 14 per one thousand people by 1953 (Riley 6). These minor programs had relatively small, local aims. Healthcare personnel received formal training and municipal crews worked to clean up neighborhoods. Inexpensive yet relatively successful, these efforts are believed to be responsible for the slight improvement in living conditions during the early post-revolution days (Riley 6). However, scholars are acutely

aware that the statistics indicating dramatic improvement in mortality rates may be unreliable due to the regime's tendency to idealize its success. Nancy E. Riley, a professor of Sociology at Bowdoin University, points out that mortality data was "chronically underestimated" (Riley 7).<sup>1</sup>

### *Sustaining Then Containing*

Before Mao turned to more serious measures of population control, Mao attempted to focus on agriculture as an initial means of sustaining the population. Regardless of imprecise data provided by the regime, historians agree that the initial introduction of Mao's policies did bring a period of general improvement. Unfortunately, this brief period was soon eclipsed by the most infamously disastrous effort known as the Great Leap Forward. Launched in 1958, Mao reorganized Chinese land into a series of communes in which land was no longer owned individually (Garside 14). A typical commune held about 5,000 families, all of whom gave up their ownership of tools, equipment, and housing to be used communally. By the end of 1958, the total reorganization of Chinese society was complete. Initially, production of lumber, coal, and steel all rose. This early triumph prompted Mao to push unreasonable quotas that overworked the Chinese peasantry starting in 1959. Total disaster ensued (Garside 26). Cheap machinery broke quickly and the increased attention to raw manufacturing meant that only 170 million tons of grain were produced (Riley 12). Historians know that this amount was nowhere near enough to feed China's residents, and the World Health Organization concludes that nearly 30 million people died of starvation between 1958 and 1961. Although China was able to rebound by 1964, even Mao himself admitted to the failure of the program, and in a famously cited quote, Mao stated, "The chaos caused was on a grand scale, and I take responsibility" (Moody 127). Peter Moody Jr., a professor of Political Science at the University of Notre Dame,

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<sup>1</sup> Riley's research focuses on family, gender, and population trends in China and is published in her most famous paper "China's Population: New Trends and Challenges". Her estimates suggest that a death rate closer to twenty per one thousand people is a more accurate picture of the Chinese standard of living in 1953.

explains that this mistake cost Mao his title as Head of State. Deng Xiaoping became the leader of China and reversed many of Mao's communist policies.

The famine caused by the Great Leap Forward also caused officials to reverse their initial position on population growth. Realizing that limited resources could only provide for so many people, the government began to instate family planning campaigns throughout China. The strategy of choice was no longer sustaining the population, but containing it. Smaller efforts to control family sizes had already been established since the mid-1950s, but these efforts “highlighted fertility control efforts in the name of maternal and infant health” (Riley 11). The renewed effort to control the population was much more urgent, as the second family planning control involved much more direct means of communication between families and the government. The government sought to make abortion and birth control more accessible. Special attention was focused on rural families, where the government attempted to convince individuals that it would be beneficial to have smaller families. The government advised an older marriage age for both men and women. Encouragement to have children later and less often became widespread. In urban areas, this campaign was remarkably successful; fertility rates in urban areas dropped to 2.1 (Hongbin 15).<sup>2</sup> However, efforts in the rural areas were not as successful. Fertility rates remained fairly constant at well over 6.0. Li Hongbin, a professor at Tsinghua University, attributes the stable trend to the lack of resources available to individual rural families. Furthermore, rural families were much more reliant on children as farmhands, so embracing the idea of small families seemed antithetical to the productivity of family farms. This key difference would only amplify as officials took more and more drastic measures to control the population.

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<sup>2</sup> Fertility rates are measured by the average number of children a woman will bear in a lifetime.

Although Mao had been removed from his position because of the Great Leap Forward's failure, many citizens still admired Mao, and Mao used this popularity to incite the masses during the 1966 Cultural Revolution. Mao began to regain power within the government by purging the party of people he believed too sympathetic to capitalism. Mao's cult of personality inspired hundreds of thousands of young people, many of them students, to take to the streets in support of his return to power. Mao praised rebellion and encouraged the Red Guard to be the effectors of his cleansing campaign. Mao declared, "You young people, full of vigor and vitality, are in the bloom of life, like the sun at eight or nine in the morning. Our hope is placed on you ... The world belongs to you. China's future belongs to you" (Moody 128). However, below the surface of Mao's façade, Mao knew that population control was now a necessity.

Mao renewed these efforts in early 1970. Much like the previous effort, government officials encouraged families to minimize family size to one or two children. Particular attention was paid to rural families. Abortion services and other contraceptives became widely available and added tangible pressure to couples. Mao also instructed that specific quotas should be met in order to manage the expanding population. Mao even gave the new campaign the slogan *wan, xi, shao* or "later, longer, fewer" (Riley 12). By 1970, the fertility rate in China dropped below 6.0, indicating that even rural areas were responding well to the public campaigns. This number still did not satisfy Mao. Historians believe that his passionate desire to decrease the fertility rates inspired the creation of the one child policy and its stringent requirements (Riley 13). However, his death in 1976 meant he would never see the final stages of his family planning policies implemented.

Mao's successor, Deng Xiaoping would continue Mao's vision for the country's population. Although Deng reformed many economic and political policies that turned away

from Mao's ideology, his family planning rules would remain tight. Mao's targeted limits were adopted by Deng and tightened. The fertility rate in China was still declining steadily, hitting a record low around 3.2 in 1977 (UN). Social scientists who have studied this trend, such as Liu Zheng, generally agree that, regardless of the 1979 one child policy, China would have reached the fertility rate of 2.0 by 1980 (Riley 21). What truly cemented this reality, however, was Deng's announcement of the one child policy with a resounding speech of encouragement. Sociologist and professor Susan E. Short describes the various methods Deng sanctioned in her essay, "Looking Locally at One Child Policy." Deng demanded a specific and thorough organization of the program, leading to a troubling rate of effectiveness in its implementation.

Incentives, punishments, public education, and intervention on the private level were all means of enforcement. Such complex organization took until at least 1981 to become fully instituted. However, reports of forced sterilization or abortions were already surfacing<sup>3</sup>. Women faced extreme scrutiny by local officials and lost ownership of their bodies under this policy. If this coercion was not enough to subdue a family into obedience, incentives and punishments were additional ways the government leveled power over the family unit. Short notes that "Incentives were given to couples who pledged to limit their families to one child, and couples who had three or more births were penalized" (Short 374). Initially, second births were discouraged, not penalized. This policy was reversed by 1982, and second births were also penalized. Incentives or punishments often took the form of monetary compensations or fines. However, as the urgency of the policy increased, documentation shows that fines became subjective to the whims of the local officials. Cash subsidies varied from province to province, but a median sum of forty yuan was the baseline amount. This grew over time to almost sixty-eight yuan by 1991 and seventy-three yuan by 1993 in rural areas. In urban areas, this sum

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<sup>3</sup> Hongbin cites an estimate near 30 million when counting the number of these instances.

remained stagnant once it decreased to approximately 38 yuan by 1991 (Short 375). These numbers quantified human life and unsympathetically placed children at the center of the policy's harshest consequences.

### *Rural vs. Urban Enforcement*

Although the draconian methods of intimidation have always incited the most passionate of responses from the global community, not all provinces in China used an identical formula of implementation, a nuance almost always missed by the media. Short's article also emphasizes that the one child policy was somewhat dynamic, as not all areas had a similar experience under the new law. Her paper explores the various ways each province responded to the policy. The data her article provides comes from the China Health and Nutrition Survey taken three separate times in 1989, 1991, and 1993. Eight different provinces participated in this survey: Liaoning, Jiangsu, Shandong, Henan, Hubei, Hunan, Guangxi, and Guizhou. All of these provinces are autonomous and recognized nationally as entities of China<sup>4</sup>. The survey sought to discover whether exceptions were allowed based on gender, disabilities of the child, or special parental conditions such as a special occupation.

By comparing all three surveys, clear patterns began to emerge. First, rural areas were consistently more relaxed in their enforcement of the one child policy. Exceptions were granted on all three levels with relative regularity. In 1989, a rural couple had a 64.9% chance of being allowed a second child if their first child was a girl. Contrastingly, an urban couple in 1989 had only an 18.9% chance. Second, as the years passed, strict adherence became more common, and exceptions were granted less willingly. For instance, the rate of pardons being granted to rural couples with a firstborn daughter dropped from 64.9% in 1989 to 58.8% in 1991. For urban

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<sup>4</sup> Specific clarifications are given in order to establish a distinction between disputed regions such as Tibet, whose demographic information is often included in Chinese statistical values, and uncontested regions such as Guangdong.

couples, the rate dropped to 9.4%. Interestingly, exceptions were almost always given to rural couples whose first child had a disability (97.4% chance of being granted a pardon). In urban areas, however, a child with disabilities did not afford couples a strong enough reason to avoid punishment if a second child was born. Having never broadcast considerations such as these, the media vilified the country as a whole and reduced the complexity of the true nature of the policy.

The continued discrepancy between rural and urban reflects the massive cultural and economic differences between rural and urban families. Rural families, who traditionally have always relied on children as a direct means of livelihood received a more relaxed interpretation of the one child policy. Here, consideration was clearly given to the more important role children played in the economic stability of the community. In urban areas, where enforcement was much stricter, Short explains that the decreased emphasis on children as a necessary means of wellbeing resulted in less leniency. Here the increased access to education and health facilities was thought to compensate for the tighter regulation. Urban areas were also much more likely to receive punishments as opposed to incentives. Rural residents could be offered better housing, land, or even extra food rations (Short 378). No such provisions were generally offered to urban individuals. This difference again emphasizes the vast problem China has always faced when reconciling a huge rural peasantry with a growing urban population.

#### *Infanticide, Girls Missing by the Millions*

However difficult it was to accommodate both urban and rural ways of life, the most troubling part of the narrative surrounding the one child policy arrived with reports of widespread infanticide, the systematic and selective murder of newborns, specifically infant girls. Although precise rates of infanticide are understandably difficult to procure with accuracy, the undeniable imbalance of males and females provides an excellent place to begin. Even before

the one child policy, the male population outnumbered females by nearly 18.5 million (Rajan 2503). By 1982, China lacked 30.7 million females to balance the sex ratio, and by 1990, this number grew to 328.9 million. Rajan's statistics indicate that "the destruction of female infants seems to be most common in the southern part of China and specially [*sic*] in some provinces in which the Chinese themselves regarded it as a terrible and a threatening evil" (Rajan 2503). Statistical evidence supports this claim, as rural areas such as the Hunan and Guangxi provinces recorded some of the most extreme ratios at nearly 111.36 and 110.65 males per 100 females (Rajan 2504). Rajan defines a healthy sex ratio at birth to be around 105 males to 100 females. While some variance is always to be expected, the most troubling part about this ratio is that it does not balance out with time.

In striving to maintain a strong family by preferring a son, rural communities have created an especially terrible catch-22 situation for themselves. If rural families decide to settle for a daughter, they risk struggling in the day to day operation of the farm and, later, security in their elderly age. However, if they selectively abort or abandon baby girls and raise a son, their community is at risk of deterioration due to the migration patterns of the young men who leave their village to find a wife. Rajan's painfully descriptive explanation hits the heart of the matter. Namely, it is the individuals who suffer most for the sake of the state. A great sacrifice must be made either way in order to fulfill the duty to the country.

To explain the obvious preference both rural and urban communities placed on males, author Mary Gallagher urges her audience to understand the deeply rooted Confucian values in Chinese culture. Confucianism places women at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Much like western traditions of patriarchy, women in China were instructed to be loyal to the domestic sphere and all its tasks (Curtin 90). However, Gallagher does mention that there were some

anomalies to this pattern, as there is extensive documentation of some women writing poetry or managing property, but these cases were rare and make up the exception, not the standard.

Women showed respect by having complete obedience to husbands and fathers. Confucius compared the natural, hierarchical relationship of ruler and subject to the natural relationship of husband and wife. Never was a woman expected or anticipated to be free and autonomous. Of course, this similarity to Western models is no real surprise, as the emphasis on manual labor in a predominantly agricultural society would naturally tend to value males. Although Gallagher recognizes the shock value in the very idea of infanticide, she urges readers to adjust to look at the issue through a lens other than Western culture. While the United States certainly recognizes the prevalence of patriarchy and other institutionalized forms of gender bias, readers must realize that the average individual in China does not have a notion of analyzing, much less questioning these concepts.

This logical, though still oppressive trend, is further affirmed by even contemporary data provided previously by Rajan. If an agricultural society did indeed emphasize males, gender disparities should be much greater in rural areas. This trend can easily be witnessed and corroborated again using Rajan's data. Furthermore, urban areas in post-1990 census data demonstrate that male preference is in fact declining, as the sex ratio tends to be much more even, though still not ideal. Gallagher's analysis of the relationship between urbanization and sexual preference reveals that a number of factors allow urban centers to value women. First, the physical deficiencies of a woman are much less consequential when survival is not based on the quality of manual labor. Because of this, demographers such as Gallagher believe that the increasing rate of extreme urbanization in China has and will provide a buffer to any further exaggeration of an already disproportionate sex ratio. Second, urbanization also offered

significant exposure to Westernized opinion, which decried the treatment of girls under the new policy. Urban areas also mean a greater possibility of education, which, being state sanctioned did not in theory promote either sex to be of greater or value. In fact, realizing the inadvertent gender imbalance the one-child policy had caused, additional efforts were made to encourage families to keep first born daughters and even provide money as compensation (Gallagher 100). These observations begin to dismantle support of the one child policy, suggesting that internal mindsets began to shift towards a patchwork of triage.

Further evidence of futility is explored in Sun Yuesheng's article, "The One Child Policy in China Today," looks at sex ratios, fertility rates, and other statistics to determine if the one child policy was effective and if it continues to be necessary or worthwhile. Yuesheng states that any measurement of efficiency is naturally subjective, and therefore approaches the question cautiously and logically. He first evaluates the trend in the total living space each individual possessed. He defines living space not merely as uninhabited, arable land, but as a physical housing structure available for residency. In 1987, he found that a rural individual in China could expect to have approximately 4.3 square meters. In urban areas, living space per individual was approximately 4.5 square meters. In light of the rapid urbanization taking place, officials feared that allowing the fertility rate to remain anywhere above 2.0 would result in disastrous overcrowding. Chinese officials wanted the policy to prevent excess population growth beyond 1.2 billion by the year 2000. A quick analysis of effectiveness would then deem the policy ineffective; the goal was not met and the Chinese population exceeded 1.2 billion by more than 42 million in 2000.

A general consensus exists amongst the scientific community that questions whether the one child policy is directly responsible for improvements that numbers indicate. In the early

1960s, the fertility rate in China was six children per woman. By 2001, this number dropped to 1.7. Never has any country succeeded in producing such startling results (Yuesheng 313).

Average family income, educational accomplishment, and healthcare opportunities have all improved under the one-child policy as well. The policy was also effective in reducing higher order births, or births that produce the third, fourth, etc. child in a family. In 1973, first births made up only 21% of all births in the country. By 2000, first births made up almost 68% of all births (Yuesheng 313). Yuesheng believes that the trend of urbanization and adoption of western-style family planning would have reduced the number of children to two per couple regardless of the one child policy. Essentially, the one child policy was merely an accelerator of a process that had already begun in the early 1970s.

Dr. Mark R. Rosenzweig and Dr. Junsen Zhang explore this very possibility and find that the one child policy may be able to take very little credit for the successes traditionally attributed its existence. They cite a survey taken in 2005 which asked couples how many children they would like to have. A general response of one to two children confirmed suspicions that modern couples needed little pressure to decide on a smaller family. When pushed to explain their rationale, many couples responded with answers that mirror the very reasons the government continues to enforce the one child policy. Rosenzweig and Zhang concluded that the political attitude of caution in numbers has successfully been transferred to the family environment; Chinese families now see the scarcity of space and resources and feel compelled to respond. Rosenzweig and Zhang muse that such a minimal desire for large families “fulfills the government’s dream” (Rosenzweig 1164). Most profound is the professors’ confidence in suggesting that an appropriate sex ratio could have been maintained without the decision to execute the one child policy at the expense of thousands of lives.

Yet, because of the affirmative decision, China must now contend with the plethora of issues the one-child policy has spawned. These issues include a huge gulf that is growing between the number of marriage-eligible men and women. Projections from the 2000 census suggest that as many as 30 million men will be unable to find a partner by the year 2020 (UN). Psychologists have noted that this shortage has increased competition in men, leading to higher homicide and assault rates between males in the last decade. Additionally, they have also noted an increase in drug and alcohol abuse, which are often classic trademarks of communities with an excess of men (Rosenzweig 1167). Other problems documented by the World Health Organization and Polaris Project include increased human trafficking of women, specifically, kidnapping and sex trafficking due to the shortage of available brides.

Although Chinese officials certainly did not plan for the social burden the one child policy caused, it seems impossible to reconcile the positive statistics with the reality of the policy's simultaneous but unintended flaws. The policy was an urgent attempt to fix an increasing population pressure to improve the long term future. The sacrifices made on an individual level for the greater community merely reflect the political and ideological philosophy that has always existed and emphasized the whole rather than the part. When combined with the greater value placed on men in a patriarchal society in general, it can be no surprise that women and girls suffered most during its initial phase. Contrastingly, it is now young men that will feel more and more negative pressure from the one child policy.

The clear violation of human rights as western philosophy perceives it is reason enough to raise concerns and objections. However, to vehemently disparage such a large-scale, yet paradoxically personal, effort seems equally inappropriate. The world witnessed self-denial in a way that could never be observed in a nation whose people themselves proclaim the ideal—the

right—of freedom. No amount of speculation can truly change the fact that the Chinese accomplished a spectacular feat of population control, however terrible. Their sacrifice is solemnly touching, and when the policy is eventually reversed, as the population growth is expected to reach zero<sup>5</sup>, it will be a testament to the magnitude of gore that accompanies any great glory.

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<sup>5</sup> Projected estimate provided by Rosenzweig and Zhang

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