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Three Women, One Policy

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Abstract

China's one-child policy, which spanned nearly 40 years, was implemented in 1979 by the Chinese government as a way to curb overpopulation. The government imposed strict punishments for noncompliant families, leaving a legacy that forever changed the lives of many of China's 1.38 billion citizens.

But its greatest impact was on women who experienced government-mandated abortions, along with female infants who were never born due to sex-selective pregnancy termination. This project digs deep into the narratives of three distinct women whose lives were forever changed under the one-child policy.

Source List

Nancy Riley- A professor at Bowdoin College who has published several books about population and policies in modern day China.

Thomas Gold- A sociology professor at UC Berkeley with an expertise in how policies change family dynamics in China.

Richard Jackson- President of the Global Aging Institute.

Sun Yi Chong— A psychiatrist at a women clinic in China. She routinely consults with *shidu* families.

Juan Nie- One of the three main characters of this project. She is the project coordinator of the Global Health Institute of Sun Yat-Sen University in Guangzhou.

Zhou Xiangheng- One of the three main characters of this project. She's a 65-year-old woman who lost her only child. It took her ten years to fully recover from that traumatic experience.

Chen Reiyu- One of the three main characters of this project. She's now a lead virtual reality director at Caixin Media.

Three Women, One Policy

Nearly two decades ago, Zhou Xiangheng's son was training to become a train driver at the locomotive depot in Beijing. One day, as he was purchasing cigarettes, he discovered that the shop had sold him fake cigarettes. He quickly confronted the seller.

"He was really naive," Zhou said. When the seller refused to give him a refund, two of his friends walked over and flipped over the cigarette table in frustration. A fight then broke out. Zhou's son was soon surrounded by a group of people. He was stabbed seven or eight times during the brawl. One of the knife strokes reached his heart.

Zhou felt numb when she heard the news. It was not until a few days after the tragedy, as Zhou was looking out of the window, that the reality hit her: her son was not coming back. Her tears started to fall.

China's one-child policy, which spanned nearly 40 years, was implemented in 1979 by the Chinese government as a way to curb overpopulation. The government imposed strict punishments for noncompliant families, leaving a legacy that forever changed the lives of many of China's 1.38 billion citizens. Many compliant families like Zhou's, who obeyed the limit but later lost their only child, suffered untold grief. Families who dared to defy the one-child policy to bear an additional child, experienced fines and social pressure that left different economic and emotional scars. The law led to some rural areas enforcing strict abortion laws that required aborting fetuses as late as the seventh month of pregnancy.

By controlling population through the policy, the government tried to relieve poverty, promote modernization of the economy and prevent depletion of the land's natural resources.

Bowdoin College Sociology Professor Nancy Riley, who has done research on China's family planning and population, said that the one-child policy was a way for China's government to establish the country as one of the world's leading economic powers. "They said, 'We want to be a modern country. And in order to become a modern country, we can't have so many people,'" Riley said.

Throughout the duration of the policy, the U.S. mass media's coverage of its impacts often focused on the negative fallout of the policy on society at large, ranging from a new era of only children, the so-called "little emperors," to a generation of men without a spouse, the so-called "bare branches." Coverage also focused criticisms leveled at Chinese policymakers by many human rights organizations and the unfavorable view of it in the public's eye.

But its greatest impact was on women who experienced government-mandated abortions, along with female infants who were never born due to sex-selective pregnancy termination. The one-child policy is estimated to have prevented 400 million births, according to the Renmin University Sociology Professor Zhai Zhenwu in Beijing.

There is no denying that these things occurred, Riley said, but added they present an incomplete picture of the policy and its impact. “We heard a lot about the negative things that happened, and there were a lot,” she said. “But that’s not all there was.” The U.S citizens only get partial information about the policy filtered through an American lens, she added.

People have the assumption that the policy was callously enforced, she said. However, the Chinese government did not just say you cannot have another child and stop there without explanation. The government also conducted a campaign of social marketing to persuade its citizens that the policy was necessary and beneficial for China to modernize and make it as a leading world power. It appealed to citizens’ nationalism even though some sacrifices had to be made.

Through posters, billboard advertisements and official announcements, citizens were repeatedly exposed to the message that having a single-child was good for China, and that it was necessary. People soon began to regulate themselves. The notion of having a single child became the norm so much so that Riley recalled that a friend of hers in China could “stop all traffic” by bringing her four sons on the street.

“The really remarkable thing about the one child policy was that they (the government) really did convince people in that country that it was necessary,” Riley said.

Juan Nie’s Story:

At the Global Health Institute of Sun Yat-Sen University in Guangzhou, project coordinator Juan Nie remembers being a 21-year-old intern during the days when the one-child policy was enforced. In a series of interviews by telephone and over Skype, she recalled one day observing three beds with three women lying side-by-side in a small room with no curtains between them. A doctor approached the first woman with a tube, pressed a button, and sucked the woman’s fetus from her womb. He paused, walked to the next woman and repeated the same procedure. He briefly wiped his gloves.

A few minutes later, Nie’s professor approached her and showed her a silver plate carrying a puddle of gooey liquid composed of water, flesh, and blood. “This is *pei tai*,” or fetus, her professor said, pointing at the white matter in the center.

Nie, although stunned, remained composed and finished viewing the demonstration. “It was like watching a manufacturing company,” she said.

The one child policy served to magnify a traditional gender preference for male heirs. Chinese families are largely patriarchal and influenced by Confucian philosophy, which emphasizes the

obedience of women and the empowerment of men. Under this system, male children are preferred because of their perceived ability to work the land and extend the family name.

Under principles of the Confucian system, it is also the men who take care of their elderly parents. A girl, however, is destined leave her home, said Thomas Gold, a sociology professor at the University of California at Berkeley. Having a girl means that a family is basically training her to become someone else's bride, he added.

This preference for having baby boys, in addition to the one-child policy, resulted in one of the most skewed gender ratios in the world. According to the Pew Research Center, the world's average gender ratio is about 105 boys born for every 100 girls. In the decades before the one-child policy was first implemented, China's ratio looked roughly the same as the global average.

However as time went on, the Chinese gender balance began to shift until 115 boys were being born for every 100 girls, the Pew Research Center said. This suggests that there have been millions and millions of infant girls lost due to infanticide, abandonment or sex-selective abortion. "And that (number) is the reported one," Professor Riley added. "I actually think some of the official numbers aren't the real numbers. It could be even higher." Although sex-selective abortion is outlawed in China, many people continue to use technologies such as a sonogram or an ultrasound scan to determine the baby's sex in deciding whether to keep or to abort a baby.

In Nie's mind, all babies are created equal, she said. Nie, who completed her bachelor degree at Sun Yat-Sen University, has been a proponent of equal rights ever since she realized the importance of equality to global health.

In 2012, the issue became personal for Nie when she learned that a relative was then pregnant and hoping for a boy. Nie recalled that she questioned her about her plans.

"What if it's not a he?" Nie asked back then.

"Then I'll have no choice but to abort it," she said her relative replied.

In an attempt to dissuade the woman, Nie pointed out the fact that a sex-selective abortion is illegal in China.

"I know where I can find a clinic to test its gender," she recalled her relative replying. "If it's a daughter, I will abort it."

Throughout their conversations, Nie said she began to realize that her view that girls and boys are equal could not trump China's gender preference. "It was just so ingrained in their minds," she said.

Two months later, her relative aborted her child. Nie recounted the experience in interviews as well as in speeches which have been posted online.

Nie said she does not condemn women who make their own choices. However, she questions the volume of messages over social media and recommending that women have an abortion. Nie recalled seeing advertisements on newspapers, in bus stops or on huge billboards that depicted abortion as an easy and stylish solution -- even for under-aged girls.

One day, as Nie flipped through a mainstream newspaper, she saw an advertisement depicting a group of attractive, teenage schoolgirls wearing backpacks, with a line of printed blue letters on the side saying: "Grab your backpack and go have an abortion."

Nie said she does not diminish the importance of population control, but she laments the "seemingly careless" promotion of girls having an abortion. Being raised in a family that doesn't discriminate against her based on her gender, Nie said she suspects that some advertisements lure girls to have an abortion by having taglines such as "50 percent off," or "painless abortion." Advertising promotions present abortion as fast, easy and pain free, Nie said.

Such marketing messages never mentioned abortion is not always safe. Nor did they disclose that once a woman has confirmed a child's gender, the fetus has already developed into a more mature stage, making the abortion a more invasive and potentially dangerous operation. Nevertheless, Nie said the way to resolve gender-based abortion is to educate people that a baby girl is just as important as a baby boy. "We have to work hard to gradually change our traditional values," she said.

In fact, one approach the government is taking to counteract the gender-based abortions is circulating posters of a girl-centered family. In a billboard, viewers can see the image of a girl child being held up high by her happy parents. "It's getting more and more normal," said Riley of Bowdoin College.

Zhou Xiangheng's Story:

Zhou Xiangheng remembers that for a decade she would drive away from the city on New Year's Eve, leaving behind her the fireworks, laughter and congratulatory blessings of the season. Accompanied by her husband, whom she called, "Laozhang," or old Zhang, she would typically decide to spend the night in the family car.

"I don't want to be where the crowds are," Zhou remembered thinking in an interview in her small country house about an hour outside Beijing. "It's too painful."

Year after year, festival after festival, Zhou always drove away from people. During Qingming Festival, when people sweep the tombs of the dead, Zhou accompanied her friends to Beidaihe

beach. During Mid-Autumn Festival, when people eat mooncakes and carry brightly-lit lanterns, Zhou stayed at a village far away from home.

“The hardest time is the Spring Festival,” Zhou recalled. Spring Festival is the time when Chinese families gather generations and generations of people -- sons, daughters and grandparents -- and bid “*Gong Xi Fa Cai*,” or “Happy New Year” to one another, and receive lucky money in a red envelope. People dress in red and offer congratulatory wishes to each other for completing another year. But Zhou does not want to hear “Happy New Year” from just anyone. She wants to hear those wishes from her only son, who was 20 years old when he died, and who will forever remain 20 in her memory.

Zhou and her husband were among Beijing’s estimated 10,000 compliant parents who abided by their country’s law and limited their family to one much-loved child, according to the Beijing Family Planning Association. She had once dreamed of having a boy and a girl, but limited herself to one child. Then that one child was lost, never to be replaced -- leaving her family and others in a tragic childless state known as “*Shidu*.” Under the one-child policy, an illness, accident or murder left many parents with no children to look after them. There are currently millions of *Shidu* families in China nationwide.

After the cigaret quarrel that led to her son’s fatal stabbing, Zhou prepared the burial arrangements, and telephoned only the people who needed to know. One of the murderers was caught, but the incident was not brought to trial. The main suspect is still at large, she said. Her son’s killer may never be brought to justice. Her son’s death may never be avenged.

But every day, Zhou mourned her son and felt overwhelmed by memories. The street that her son used to walk, the friends whom he talked to, the neighbors with whom they interacted, all triggered her tears. Looking at her son’s belongings tore her apart.

“Should I throw them away or hold on to them?” she asked herself. As she went out to buy groceries, a neighbor’s friendly greeting induced fear. “What if they ask about my son? What if they ask how he’s doing?” she worried.

Zhou decided the best solution was to isolate herself from the world, and that decision lasted for ten years.

Like other mothers who lose their only child in young adulthood, Zhou, then 48, was already past childbearing age. She said she could not have had another child even if she had wanted to do so.

Sun Yijiang, a practicing psychiatrist working at the Maple Women’s Psychological Counseling Center in Beijing, has been helping people like Zhou to come to terms with their feelings. Her ultimate goal is to help *Shidu* parents find closure.

Sun said in an interview at her Beijing apartment complex that about 70% of the *Shidu* parents feel that they are inferior to families with children. Zhou said she still feels threatened when people talk or brag about their own children. When her neighbors talked about the college that their children were about to head to, or the jobs that they were going to get, Zhou said she would have an urge to “dig a hole and hide.” In China, “*Duan Zai Jue Sun*,” or dying without descendants, is one of the most devastating blows to a family. As they grow old, Zhou said that she and her husband will have to find alternative ways to take care of themselves other than relying on the younger generation.

“There are many phases of coping with a devastating loss in life,” Sun said. “And the first phase is the denial phase.” Depending on the individual, this denial phase could last from a week to up to ten years. During one of the counseling workshops, one task given to *Shidu* parents was to answer a seemingly simple question: “Where’s your child right now?” Some people answered, “In heaven.” Some parents answered, “I don’t know, I’m still trying to find him or her.” A father whose daughter died in an aviation accident still flies out twice a year in search of his daughter. A mother catches up and looks back at girls who have the same dark, long hair as her daughter. Such practices and rituals are among the signs that parents are still denying the reality of their loss, Sun said.

At a lesson plan called, “Complete your Sadness,” parents cried in each other’s embrace. Contrary to common cultural belief, instead of asking patients to suppress their sadness, it’s more helpful to let out the tears, Sun said, adding, “Tears have the power to heal.” For a husband who has divorced his wife and lost his daughter, crying in another person’s warm embrace is a rare gift, she added.

Around 40% of the *Shidu* parents that they’ve surveyed feel angry at heart, said Sun. In Chinese culture, there’s a superstition that if one’s family heritage is stopped, it must be because that person has committed a crime so grave that a heavenly god has decided to punish that individual. A lot of parents, who feel they have never committed any heinous crimes, remain angry at “heaven” for taking their child away.

For some parents, children who have died due to illness are a slightly more bearable loss. “Usually, those families have some sort of warning,” Sun said. But deaths that happened too suddenly, such as a murder or suicide, are among the hardest losses to bear. Parents often blame themselves, or are stuck in a continuous loop where they question what they could have done to prevent that outcome.

To help ease the pain of *Shidu* parents in coping with their loss, the Chinese government is now sponsoring local clinics with programs such as Sun’s counseling center to offer “a more solid solution” working with various families. Social enterprises such as the Maple Women’s Psychological Counseling Center and Beijing Shangshan Public Foundation are prime examples of such clinics with government-sponsored therapy for *Shidu* families.

Currently, the government also is paying *Shidu* parents a monthly compensation, with a different rate in different regions, as another way to ease the loss. Parents in some regions receive around 340 RMB, or \$50 each month. Some areas receive a higher reimbursement, close to 2,000 RMB, or \$305 a month. As for Beijing, where Zhou's household is located, the government is sponsoring their payments of 500 RMB, or \$77 per month.

But Zhou and her community are filing proposals for enhanced reparations. They think the government should do more. She's asking the government to pay for a one time, mental compensation fee of around 8,000 to 10,000 RMB, or \$1200 to \$1550. This amount roughly equals the penalty fee of having a second child in Beijing.

During one of the biggest protests held by *Shidu* parents to raise awareness back in March, local police arrested Zhou and confiscated her white cap with the word, "*Shidu*" written across it. Zhou said they threatened to put her in jail, but ended up letting her go once she expressed the thought that she would gladly go to jail, for then she would no longer have to worry about her elderly care.

Currently, the Beijing government is renovating the Beijing Fifth Social Welfare Institution, which is a nursing home located in Chaoyang District, into an elderly care facility specifically for *Shidu* parents. But even if the beds were to be expanded to around 500, this figure would still not be enough to accommodate the 10,000 now-childless parents in the city's *Shidu* population that will be needing elderly care soon.

Until such arrangements are ready, Zhou has moved to a town located in the Fanshan District away from the city center. She's used her savings to purchase a place in a rural area.

The simple surroundings, free from noises, allow Zhou a peaceful setting where she can escape from the familiar faces that would remind her of her son. She said she likes going to a market that is just several steps away from her home. She keeps a blog where she routinely posts photos of her travel. She's an active member of a QQ group, a Chinese social media group chat, where she invites other *Shidu* parents to travel and participate in various activities.

"Traveling helps me forget and get away from sad emotions," Zhou said. Zhou added that she understands that her pain is lasting. She keeps the memories of her son not on the wall, but tucked away in a photo album in a cupboard.

Chen Reiyu's Tale

For some families, the wrenching decision to defy the one-child limit inflicts its own particular pain on the old and young alike.

Years before Reiyu Chen was born, her elderly grandfather stepped on a stool, and placed a loop of rope over his head. He kicked the stool away, and his body began to dangle. But a

crowd of neighbors wouldn't let him die. They flung open the door and dragged him down. He started to gasp for air. He was alive.

Chen's grandfather's decision to hang himself was a gesture to save the life of Chen's unborn second sister. Back then in 1983, the implementation of the one-child policy was absolute. Villagers in Wuyangzhen, Chongqing, got paid based on how well they defended a city from overpopulation. It wasn't until Chen's grandfather hung himself that the villagers stopped demanding that his daughter abort her child, and instead settled for a penalty fee.

UC Berkeley Sociology Professor Gold said that, contrary to the government position that abortion was voluntary, "a lot of it was locking up women until they agreed to have abortions." Especially in the countryside, a part of the career evaluation of commercial and bureaucratic officials was based on how well they could keep the population under control, he added.

This was Chen's story. Chen, who was born in Yunnan and raised in Chongqing, was the third daughter born to her family back in 1987, despite the strict one-child policy. According to her parents, she was originally going to be named, Erhai Chen, taking the name of a lake located in Yunnan province. But the morning of her birth, the sky suddenly turned dark and a storm soon followed. Seeing this, her parents decided to change her name to Reiyu, meaning thunder and rain.

Chen's stormy upbringing could be compared to that tempestuous weather. Back then, breaking the one-child policy carried grave consequences.

Government officials who then broke the law would be fired from their jobs, and people who didn't abort their second pregnancy would be assessed a fine. Cities like Shanghai and Beijing, where disposable income was high, had to pay the highest penalty fee compared to other regions. In Chen's case, since her parents were both private entrepreneurs, and therefore exempt from layoffs, the family had to pay two penalty fees—one for Chen's second sister, and one for Chen.

"My birth cost the family 2,000 RMB," Chen said. This is equivalent of around 63,750 RMB today, or \$9,800 today. This fee was added on top of a recurring tuition hike for nine consecutive years of Chen's education, and a higher tax on her parents' earnings.

In 2014, Article 51 of the Chongqing Family Planning Policies stated that lawbreakers could pay two to six times their disposable income. Since the disposable income average was around 18,350 RMB, or \$2800, a person could be charged as high as 110,100 RMB, or \$16,515 for having a second child. This one-time fee, called the "social maintenance fee" -- which was imposed to penalize those who disrupted the national goal of achieving economic, societal and resource growth -- would be added on top of a child's tuition fee hike and a tax on parents' earnings.

Those who refused to pay the social maintenance fee would be treated as “invisible citizens,” deprived of education and medical care in cities such as Chongqing.

Chen’s family moved twice in order to give birth to her and her second sister. For Chen’s birth, her parents relocated to Erhai, a lake town in Yunnan, China. Her family members include themselves among what is known as the “child-giving army,” or the group that moved for the sake of giving birth or became pregnant in an area that had no governance over their children.

More than two decades ago, Chen’s family ran a temporary sewing warehouse that offered cloth-making lessons to locals. The business location prior to Chen’s birth was at Yiliang County, in which Chen’s second sister was born.

Paying extra penalty fees meant that the family had to save as much money as possible. Chen did not attend kindergarten. She also grew up wearing hand-made Baipho clothing, a traditional, ethnic minority style that originated in southwest China. It was not until age three that Chen moved back to Chongqing and tried on Han-style, or regular day-to-day clothing worn by the Chinese.

Although Chen did not starve due to the economic penalty, she did experience nutritional deprivation while growing up. When she was an infant, instead of milk, her second sister would carry Chen outside for a walk and feed her sugar water. Back then powdered milk was simply too expensive. Chen also did not get snacks that her classmates would usually get.

Having to pay higher living fees also meant that her parents had to constantly fixate on their work. Chen was known as a “key child,” or a child of working parents who had to wear a key around her neck to avoid losing it. As a child, Chen had lost her keys a couple of times, one incident including a fight with a boy. Episodes like these triggered Chen’s parents to berate her.

“They would say phrases such as, ‘We shouldn’t have given birth to you,’ or ‘Why don’t we put you up for adoption?’ ” she said. At one point, Chen started to fear that she would be abandoned, or that she was the “extra one.” She said If she had not had a strong enough heart back then, she would have truly believed that she was the one never supposed to be born.

“There weren’t any books that taught a parent how to love her children back then,” Chen added. “They didn’t have time to consider how their words might impact a child’s mindset.”

Chen survived her tough upbringing, but she gained sober insights from the experience. Now a lead virtual reality director at Caixin Media, a financial and business media firm in Beijing, Chen said if the two-child policy had been in place back then, her family would have been under less pressure. They might have been less prone to say hurtful things to her and her sisters. Chen also joked that she wouldn’t have developed a distaste for dessert if it weren’t for her years of drinking sugar water.

Looking Forward

In 2015, the Chinese government introduced the two-child policy, which officially put an end to the nearly four decades of the one-child policy and allowed all couples to now have two children. But the deep emotional scars and profound demographic changes left by the policy may take generations to heal.

For some people, this policy change came too late. Juan Nie's relative already aborted her child. Chen Reiyu's family already spent years paying the penalty fees, and their daughters felt the pressure inflicted by their parents' harsh scolding. And 65 year-old Zhou Xiangheng has lived without her only child for nearly two decades, after having sacrificed her dream of having a boy and a girl -- a desire that was never realized because of the policy.

The government of China is now shifting its focus to combat the lasting and population-wide legacies of the lower birthrate, which led to an aging population and serious gender imbalance in China. According to World Data Atlas, the median age in China rose from around 19 years old in 1970 to 35 years old by 2010.

In the traditional Chinese society of past eras, there was a surplus of younger people to replace the working population due to its formerly high fertility rate. But as the huge population of babies born in the 1960s now enters retirement age, and fewer people had children to replace them, China's workforce has begun to diminish and the people in need of elderly care have increased, said Richard Jackson, president of the Global Aging Institute in a telephone interview.

The population has begun to look like an inverted pyramid, where a large group has passed its 60s and 70s, while a smaller group of children are entering their adolescence. By 2050, an estimated 100 million Chinese are expected to be over the age of 80. Consequently, there won't be enough young and working age adults to replace the retiring workforce and to care for their aging parents and grandparents.

The Chinese government now faces an "old age dependency burden," said Jackson. In a 2010 retirement survey polled from several East Asian countries, he said that most countries said that the responsibility of a traditional, family-centered retirement should now be shifted to individuals or even to the government.

But even without the existence of the one-child policy, demographers had anticipated China's birth rate and infant mortality rate would drop. This is true in many East Asian countries where the standard of living is rising. However the one-child policy brought down the birth rate sooner and faster, said Jackson.

According to Global Aging Institute, over 60% of Chinese people now believe that elderly care responsibilities should be shifted toward the government.

“You have 400 million people aged 60 and over depending on the family,” said Jackson. “But the government told them to have only one kid.”

The lack of a new generation to take care of their elders makes people increasingly certain that the government should support retirement. A few years prior to the official implementation of the two-child policy, the government began to add exceptions to its one-child policy, such as allowing couples to have two children if one of the parents were an only child.

China is “hoping (for) a bit of a surge in population, but it’s not getting it,” said Jackson. Once the population comes down, and once it stays down for a generation or more, it becomes the new social norm, he added.

Based on recent surveys, almost nobody believes that more than two children is ideal, said Professor Gold of UC Berkeley. Along with rising education, income and living standard, people started to focus their resources on investing only in a small number of children. They realized the economic burden of having a second child.

“They are saying, ‘I don’t want it; I can’t afford another child,’ ” said Gold. “ ‘You don’t have to tell me only to have one child. You don’t have to punish me.’ ”

Right now, even if the Chinese decide to have more children, those children won’t be able to support the elderly for another 25 to 30 years. These children will be society’s long-term investment for they will have to be educated before they can start contributing to the economy. Any significant changes may take more than a generation to become fully noticed, according to Jackson..

Bowdoin College Sociology Professor Riley said that current studies and reports suggest that there’s not going to be a huge, booming birthrate any time soon.

An improvement of the male-dominated gender ratio also may eventually emerge from the two-child policy, said Jackson. Along with less anxiety about having a boy and a greater acceptance of female children, the skewed gender ratio may equalize over time. That, in turn, may lead to fewer females having to go through the stress and social pressure to abort or abandon their infants.

With the implementation of the two-child policy, protests and discontents with the government seem to have quieted down. Juan, who was against the one-child policy, said that the two-child policy is a step forward for women’s rights. But it will take at least a decade to detect any noticeable correction of the skewed gender balance, Jackson predicted. And for those like Zhou Xiangheng, the policy’s legacy is lasting one. A death of a child is too hard to erase, she said. “You can only escape from it.”