

## MORE PRAISE FOR ONE CHILD

‘Eye-opening, powerful and utterly gripping, *One Child* had me hooked from page one. Mei Fong possesses a rare eye for the details that truly illuminate a story, the ones that most of us overlook. She writes beautifully and vividly, revealing sides of China I’d never imagined to exist.’

Amy Chua, Yale Law Professor and author of *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* and *The Triple Package*

‘*One Child* is a riveting read, written with the flair and compassion of a novel. But it is also a critically important book about the future of China, necessary reading both for policy experts and anyone interested in the future of one of the most important nations of the 21st century.’

Anne-Marie Slaughter, author of *Unfinished Business*

‘Mei Fong’s brilliant exploration of China’s one-child policy must change the way we talk about China’s rise. *One Child* is lucid, humane, and unflinching; it is vital reading for anyone focused on the future of China’s economy, its environment, or its politics. It not only clarifies facts and retires myths, but also confronts the deepest questions about the meaning of parenthood.’

Evan Osnos, author of *Age of Ambition*

‘*One Child* is a timely and informative look into China’s infamous effort to control its enormous population. But Mei Fong has also given us a wry, bittersweet, and often very personal look at how courtship, marriage, birth, and death interact in the post-Mao Chinese family. A lovely antidote to decades of chillingly cold Party-speak from Beijing.’

Orville Schell, author of *Wealth and Power*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mei Fong is a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist who spent over a decade reporting in Asia, most recently as China correspondent for the *Wall Street Journal*. Her stories on China's migrant workers saw her win Amnesty International's Human Rights Press Award in 2006 and in 2015 she became a fellow at the thinktank New America. She lives in greater Washington, DC with her husband and their two sons.

# ONE CHILD

The Story of  
China's Most Radical  
Experiment

Mei Fong



ONE WORLD

A Oneworld Book

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*To anyone contemplating the cost of parenthood*



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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

Whenever it made grammatical sense, I have tried to make a distinction between “China” and “Chinese,” since one can be ethnically Chinese but not a citizen of the People’s Republic of China.

In representing Chinese names, I’ve usually placed the family name first, though there are exceptions—mine being one. Readers may also note that I’ve used English translations for some Chinese names—for example, “Moon Lotus”—and not for others. I’ve done so to help Western readers distinguish various Chinese characters in books, since unfortunately in Romanized script many Chinese names can sound alike. In some older interviews I conducted, I failed to get accurate translations of the subjects’ names at the time and do not venture to guess.

A last note on statistics. China sources such as Xinhua or the country’s Bureau of Statistics have been used as indicators but should not be taken as gospel. (Even China’s Premier Li Keqiang reportedly said China’s GDP figures are “man-made.”) The wise reader would assume that official numbers may be deflated when such figures have negative implications for China’s prestige—such as fatalities or pollution indicators—and possibly inflated in cases where overstatement may benefit authorities—for example, GDP growth.

# PROLOGUE

In the midst of the Cold War, China's rocket scientists came up with an ambitious plan that had nothing to do with missiles, or space exploration, or weaponry of any kind.

It concerned babies.

On September 25, 1980, China's Communist Party unveiled this plan through an open letter that asked members to voluntarily limit their family size to one child. The request was, in truth, an order.

Thus began the one-child policy, the world's most radical social experiment, which endured for thirty-five years and continues to shape how one in six people in this world are born, live, and die.

Like crash dieting, the one-child policy was begun for reasons that had merit. China's leadership argued the policy was a necessary step in its Herculean efforts to lift a population the size of the United States' from abject poverty. But like crash dieting, the one-child policy employed radical means and aimed for quick results, causing a rash of negative side effects.

The excesses of the one-child policy, such as forced sterilizations and abortions, would eventually meet with global opprobrium. Balanced against this, however, is the world's grudging admiration for China's soaring economic growth, a success partially credited to the one-child policy.

What we fail to understand is that China's rapid economic growth has had little to do with its population-planning curbs. Indeed, the policy is imperiling future growth because it rapidly created a population that is too old, too male, and, quite possibly, too few.

*More* people, not less, was one of the reasons for China's boom. The country's rise as a manufacturing powerhouse could not have happened without abundant cheap labour from workers born during the 1960s–70s baby boom, before the one-child policy was conceived.

To be sure, fewer births made investments in human capital more efficient—less spreading out of educational resources, for example. Many economists, however, agree that China's rapid economic rise had more to do with Beijing's moves to encourage foreign investment and private entrepreneurship than a quota on babies. Privatizing China's lumbering state-owned enterprises, for example, spurred private-sector growth until it accounted for as much as 70 percent of China's gross domestic product (GDP) by 2005. Arthur Kroeber, one of the most prolific and respected economists who specializes in China, said, "Let's say China grew 10%; I would be surprised if more than 0.1% of this is due to the one-child policy."

China's vast cohort of workers is growing old. By 2050, one out of every four people in China will be over sixty-five. And the one-child policy has vastly shrunk the working population that must support and succor this ageing army. In recent years China has made great strides in rolling out nationwide pension and health-care schemes, but the social safety net is far from adequate, and the leadership will have to do much more with much less time.

I started reporting on China's economic miracle in 2003 as a *Wall Street Journal* correspondent. I was on the factory beat, covering the workshop of the world. Every little city in southern China's Pearl River Delta defined itself by what it made: I made regular stops at Jeans City, Bra Town, and Dollar Store center, wrote stories

about the world's largest Christmas tree factory, and about a brassiere laboratory that birthed the Wonderbra.

Few envisioned a worker shortage then. But I was starting to hear stories about factory owners being forced to hike wages. Some resorted to offering previously unheard-of perks like TVs, badminton courts, and free condoms. Most economists at the time saw it as a short-term labour supply issue that would soon sort itself out. For how could you run out of workers in China?

As it turned out, the work force shrinkage happened faster than anticipated. The one-child policy sharply accelerated a drop in fertility. China's massive 800-million-person work force—larger than Europe's population—started to contract in 2012 and will continue doing so for years to come, driving up wages and contributing to global inflationary pressures.

After twenty years of below-replacement rates, China has officially moved to a two-child policy as of late 2015 to ease demographic pressures. It may be too little, too late. When Beijing loosened the policy slightly two years earlier, only about a tenth of eligible couples applied to have a second child, a take-up below even the most pessimistic projections. Many say it's simply too costly and stressful to raise multiple offspring in modern-day China. In that sense, the one-child policy can be judged a success, for many Chinese have thoroughly internalized the mindset that the one-child household is the ideal.

If Beijing is unable to reverse this thinking, then somewhere in the decade between 2020 and 2030, China's population will peak and decline. By 2100, China's population may have declined to 1950 levels, about 500 million, a startling reversal for the world's most populous nation. No other country has ever shed this much of its population without the aid of warfare or pestilence. And at the same time, the policy's enforcement was occasionally vicious, bordering on inhumane in certain cases, and it encouraged a number of baleful

side effects, from a potentially explosive gender imbalance to what is essentially a black market for adoptable infants.

China's one-child policy was crafted by military scientists, who believed any regrettable side effects could be swiftly mitigated and women's fertility rates easily adjusted. China's economists, sociologists, and demographers, who might have injected more wisdom and balance, were largely left out of the decision making, as the Cultural Revolution had starved social scientists of resources and prestige. Only the nation's defence scientists were untouched by the purges, and they proved not the best judges of human behaviour.

The sad truth is, the harsh strictures put in place by the one-child policy were unnecessary for economic prosperity. By the 1970s, a full decade before the policy, China already had in place a highly effective and less coercive family-planning policy, called the "Later, Longer, Fewer" campaign. In the ten years the "Later, Longer, Fewer" campaign was in place, women in China went from having six children on average to three.

Many demographers believed this pattern of falling fertility would have continued without the imposition of the one-child policy, a reasonable assumption considering similar fertility trajectories among neighbouring Asian nations. After all, China's neighbours also managed to slow population growth—and turbocharge their economies in the bargain—without resorting to such traumatic measures. In roughly the same period of time China's one-child policy was in place, birthrates in South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, and Thailand also plummeted, from six births per woman to two or fewer.

It is possible that if China had followed the path of these countries, investing in normal family-planning activities, fertility would be almost as low as current levels.

Certainly its people would be happier. "Even an extra 50 to 100 million people wouldn't have made a huge difference," suggested University of Washington professor William Lavelly, an expert on

China's fertility transition. "It wouldn't have greatly reduced overall welfare, and in fact it may well have increased it, as many families would have been able to have the second child they need. Higher GDP per capita can't substitute for the security and psychic benefits that some families gain from an extra child."

Will China be able to flip the baby switch on as successfully as it turned it off? Recent history suggests not. Asian countries that have tried to boost their population with pro-natal policies have largely failed; Singapore resorted to immigration to refresh its labour force. What China, the world's largest economy by size, decides to do to rectify its future labour shortage will have repercussions beyond its shores.

Despite all this, the various costs and consequences of the one-child policy are so poorly understood that it continues to get plaudits, especially from environmentalists. For years, the Communist Party has asserted that the policy averted between 300 and 400 million births, about the size of the American population. (Such claims are now suspect; some demographers estimate the real number of births averted was probably 100 to 200 million at most. That's a lot, but it's still dwarfed by the Communist Party's pronouncements.) Based on these possibly inflated claims, the venerable *Economist* magazine ranked the one-child policy as one of the most important stratagems to have slowed global warming, more effective than preserving the Brazilian rainforest or improved US emissions standards.

While sheer numbers contribute to carbon emissions, that's hardly the whole story. After all, the United States has less than 5 percent of the world's population but contributes about 15 percent of the world's carbon emissions. China, despite having drastically curbed its population, is still the world's top carbon polluter. The real culprit is the Communist Party's economic-growth-at-any-cost model. This mindset, which led to the imposition of the one-child policy, also prompted Beijing to erect the flimsiest of environmen-

tal protection measures. This has probably had a more detrimental effect on global carbon emissions than the number of children born in China.

Even now, the one-child policy has its global supporters. Brazilian environmentalist Charles Clement wrote that all governments should “adopt a one-child policy in some form . . . rather than abolishing this policy in China and ignoring its world-wide importance.” Prominent Canadian writer Diane Francis advocates “a planetary law, such as China’s one-child policy.” Berkeley academic Malcolm Potts told me he believes the one-child policy, though painful, yielded important economic benefits and is still “one of the most important social policies ever implemented.”

It is worth noting that the system they advocate authorized forced abortions and sterilizations. It raises the question, What are we saving the planet *for*? It is possible to support population control without embracing anything so brutal as a one-child policy.

In writing this book, I have tried to examine the causes that led to this policy, and the wide spectrum of effects it has had on ordinary people’s lives. For though China made international headlines by peremptorily moving to a nationwide two-child policy, the one-child policy’s side effects will endure for several decades; many still pay a price.

In my quest to find the individual dramas behind the one-child policy, I travelled to “bachelor villages,” rural hamlets with no females of marriageable age. I tracked down a former senior family-planning official hiding in an American suburb, who by her own reckoning was responsible for authorizing over 1,500 forced abortions, about a third during late-term pregnancies. I discovered a burgeoning industry that thinks it holds an answer to China’s female shortage: custom-made, life-size sex dolls. I spoke to Americans who adopted babies from China, and Chinese who were having babies using American surrogate mothers. I underwent in vitro fertilization (IVF) treatment

in a Beijing clinic and spent time in a Kunming hospice, experiences that shed light on how the one-child policy has affected the most basic of human experiences, life and death.

Against the stark chiaroscuro of China's one-child policy, I would weigh the costs of parenthood and learn for myself the answer to the question, Why do we have children?

The ground moved. That was how it began.