

## MORE PRAISE FOR *ONE CHILD*

‘A moving and at times harrowing account of the significance of decisions taken by a small coterie of men with too much faith in science and ideology, and too little in humanity.’

*Observer*

‘A timely reminder of how the recent relaxation of the policy is unlikely to avert a self-inflicted demographic disaster.’

*Sunday Times*

‘Gripping, balanced and well-documented.’

*Spectator*

‘Outside China, there are still vocal admirers of the one-child policy. Perhaps after reading this book and doing the sums they won’t be such strident supporters.’

*Herald*

‘Combines tough, broad economic analysis with individual stories.’

*Economist*

‘A searing, important, and eminently readable exploration of China’s one-child policy.’

*New York Review of Books*

‘The policy itself remains a monument to official callousness, and Fong’s book pays moving testimony to the suffering and forbearance of its victims.’

*New York Times Book Review*

‘A timely, important work that takes stock of the one-child policy’s damage... *One Child* is, like the policy’s abolition, long overdue, and Ms. Fong was the perfect person to write it.’

*Wall Street Journal*

‘Fong’s moral outrage is as understandable as her empathy is affecting...*One Child* draws thoughtful attention to the ethical and moral risks of regulating human reproductive rights.’

*Asian Review of Books*

‘In human history, China’s one-child policy is unique. If you want to understand how it affected the lives of ordinary people and Chinese society as a whole, you need to read this. With its vivid character portrayals and incredible stories, *One Child* is an eye-opening book.’

Xinran Xue, author of

*The Good Women of China* and *Buy Me the Sky:  
The Remarkable Truth of China’s One-Child Generations*

‘Fong’s moving and highly personal account of the one-child policy will teach you more about the dysfunction and cruelty of modern-day China than any other.’

Barbara Demick, author of *Nothing to Envy*

‘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*

‘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

Life, Love and  
Parenthood in  
Modern China

Mei Fong



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.

ONE CHILD



## AFTER THE QUAKE

Two sorts of errors are absolutely commonplace. The first of these is the idiotic belief that seismic events are somehow “timed” to express the will of God. People will seriously attempt to guess what sin or which profanity led to the verdict of the tectonic plates.

—*Christopher Hitchens*

### I

The road to Huimei’s school was red.

I blinked, wondering if my mind had conjured this mirage after three hectic days on the road. But there it was: not a comforting earthen red, but a scarlet gash made up of thousands of shredded fireworks, lit to honour the recent dead.

Huimei’s mother tottered up the path. Four days before, Tang Shuxiu was working at a Beijing construction site when the building began to sway. Eight hundred miles away, a powerful earthquake was ripping through her hometown, tearing up major cities along the western Sichuan basin and unleashing as much force as the Fat

Man bomb in Nagasaki. Tremors were felt as far away as Bangkok and Bangladesh.

As news of the quake unfolded, Tang dialled home frantically, trying to reach her teenage daughter. There was no answer.

The next day, Tang and her husband, Liu, set off for home. I tagged along, a random reporter they'd met. My presence barely registered except as an extra set of hands to help with their luggage. All those weary miles home, the couple doggedly lugged bags crammed with instant noodles, charcoal cakes, gardening gloves, sanitary napkins, and floral quilts. There were shiny thermos flasks the colour of Mao's *Little Red Book*, reams of tissue-thin toilet paper, disposable chopsticks, and a giant pack of cigarettes. Tang even packed a gallon of cooking oil over her husband's objections. Of course, the bottle leaked over everything—our clothes, bags, hands. Toward the end, we were covered with a film of grease, our faces glowing incongruously, like film stars at a photo shoot.

Now Tang was unceremoniously dumping this precious cargo to race up that red path. Tin mugs and exercise books lay in the rubble of the school grounds, and a basketball hoop swayed at an impossible angle. A notice, written on torn-off exercise paper, said:

The government has done a lot to save the children of this school.

The government hopes parents coordinate with them to claim the bodies.

Tang and Liu made their way to the edge of the field, to a man with a plastic folder.

I remember her screams when they told her. The sound was a wound tearing open, a sound humans shy away from as instinctively as dogs from the scent of rotting meat. That sound meant, *Game over*.

## II

In the beginning, the Sichuan earthquake, China's deadliest in years, was viewed as a simple tragedy. The earth moved, buildings crumbled, and about seventy thousand people died.

In time, I would see it as a devastating illustration of the tragedies of the one-child policy, writ large.

Many people had no idea Shifang, the area near the epicenter, was a test case for the one-child policy. Before the 1980 nationwide launch of the one-child policy, population planners had experimented in Sichuan, in particular Shifang County, using coercive methods to drastically lower birthrates. Scholars believed Sichuan was chosen first because it is the heartland of rural China, home to a tenth of China's people. It was also Deng Xiaoping's birthplace. Whatever the reasons, the methods worked astoundingly well. By 1979 Shifang County's population growth had drastically plunged, and 95 percent of couples there had pledged to have only one child. Sichuan gave China's birth planners "a sense of tremendous possibility" that Beijing could "achieve demographic miracles," wrote population scholar Susan Greenhalgh.

When the quake struck almost thirty years later, some eight thousand families lost their only child in the disaster, according to state-run news agency Xinhua. In Shifang, where over two-thirds of families are single-child families, the quake was said to have wiped out a generation in some villages, local media reported.

This lent a bizarre dimension to the tragedy. Mere weeks after the quake, parents were rushing to reverse sterilizations they had been forced to accept long ago under family-planning rules. They were desperate to conceive a replacement.

Soon after, they were pressured into signing documents pledging to make no trouble. Chinese media were expressly forbidden to write

stories about grieving parents and the shoddy school construction that had caused many of these children's deaths. Locals who tried to probe were jailed. Lives were lost, families ruined, and protests steam-rolled as Beijing prepared to host the Olympics, just months away.

Although Communist China is theoretically secular, many still believe in omens and portents. People interpret natural disasters as a sign of withdrawal of the mandate of heaven from China's rulers. After all, Mao had died six weeks after the 1976 Tangshan earthquake, ushering in a new era, which eventually led to socioeconomic reforms—such as the one-child policy—that shape today's China.

Some wondered if the 2008 earthquake was a judgment on the one-child policy and other practices that tampered with nature. There was speculation, for example, that the building of massive dams in highly seismic areas might have triggered the quake.

These were precisely the sorts of inferences Beijing did not want. The Communist Party had worked long and hard to ensure that the year 2008 would be associated with another set of omens, ones designed to suggest a glorious future for the Republic.

The 2008 Beijing Olympics was to be a multibillion-dollar event that would mark China's phoenix-like ascent from the ashes of the Opium Wars and the Cultural Revolution. It was no accident the leadership picked the year 2008 to host the Games, nor that they set the opening ceremony date for the eighth day of the eighth month, when the capital city would be at its hottest and most polluted, not at all conducive to peak athletic performance. The number 8 is auspicious, for in Chinese the word sounds the same as the word for fortune. When turned on its side, 8 represents eternity, certainly something any regime would aspire to. Eight is so popular that places with Chinese communities charge a premium for it, from phone numbers to licence plates and house numbers. That year, a licence plate with the number 18 fetched over \$2 million in a Hong Kong auction.

I myself was born on August 8, and Chinese friends never fail to comment on the symbolism of my birthday when they find out. “Wah, you must be so lucky.”

All across China, clocks were set on a countdown to the day of the opening ceremony: August 8, 2008, at, of course, 8:08 p.m. May’s earthquake, and its attendant baggage, was not going to be allowed to upset this auspicious apple cart.

It was ironic because until the earthquake, the one-child policy had been receding from the news and national discussion.

As the descendant of southern Chinese who’d migrated to Malaysia, I was always grateful I hadn’t been born in China. I am the youngest of five daughters, all conceived in hopes of a son that never was. Malaysia was by then too modern for practices such as abandoning unwanted girls, and in any case my parents were educated urbanites, not farmers. Still, my accountant father never ceased regretting his lack of a son, nor reminding his daughters they were liabilities, not assets.

They say *huaqiao*—overseas Chinese families—are more traditional than mainland Chinese, who were forced to abandon or hide the old ways during the Cultural Revolution. It was certainly true of my father’s family. “Be glad we’re not in the old country,” my relatives would say. “*You’d* never have been born.” That was my introduction to China’s son-loving culture and the one-child policy. As a bookish child, I would come to see the one-child policy as one of the most fascinating and bizarre things about the land of my ancestors, equal parts Aldous Huxley and King Herod.

I certainly didn’t anticipate that I would be living and working in China one day. By the time the *Wall Street Journal* posted me to greater China in 2003, the policy was well over two decades old and was by no means as monolithic as outsiders envisioned. Over time, exceptions were made. You could likely have more than one child if

you were a farmer, or if you were Tibetan; if you were a fisherman or a coal miner. Or if you were handicapped, or were willing to pay the fines, which ranged from nugatory to wildly exorbitant and depended on whom you knew and where you lived. Given all these exceptions, the one-child policy should more accurately be called the “1.5-child policy,” but nobody used such a clunky-sounding term. In China, the term of reference most used is the more anodyne *jihua shengyu*, which means “planned birth programme,” instead of a more straightforward translation—*yitai zhengce*—of “one-child policy.”

Negotiations and rule bending are a way of life—some say art form—in China. To *xiang banfa*—find a solution—is second nature in a place where people are many, resources scarce, and regulations strict but erratically applied. That’s why when you live in China you must quickly accustom yourself to full-contact bargaining, line jumping, and creative driving, all part of the *xiang banfa* ethos. Many Chinese *xiang banfa*-ed and came up with all sorts of creative ways to get around the policy—fertility treatments for twins or triplets, birth tourism, fake marriages, bribes. I had Chinese friends who had several children, though usually no more than two. I met a woman in a second-tier city who’d had *six*, all born during the years of the policy. (According to grisly family lore, she’d killed her first by plunging it in boiling water.)

By the time the one-child policy entered its third decade, experts estimated that only about a third of the population faced strict one-child limitations, and it had become increasingly easy for people to afford the fines for a second or third child. By 2013, China’s one-child policy was “slipping into irrelevance,” wrote my colleague Leslie Chang, a well-respected China watcher.

It would take an earthquake, a miscarriage, and a journey of a thousand births for me to fully realize that curbing China’s masses had serious implications beyond its borders.

## III

Far from courting irrelevance, the one-child policy had irrevocably shaped the face of modern China and set in motion a host of social and economic problems that will endure for decades.

In fifteen years' time, if you throw a stone anywhere outside of Beijing or Shanghai, statistically speaking, you will probably hit someone over sixty. Chances are high that person will be male, to boot. China's one-child policy so tilted gender and age imbalances that in a little under a decade there will be more Chinese bachelors than Saudi Arabians, more Chinese retirees than Europeans.

Everything in China is about scale and speed. China doesn't just face the prospect of being home to the world's largest number of old people; proportionally, too, its population is ageing faster than anywhere else, meaning there will be far fewer working adults to support a retiree population. The speed of this transition will strain China's rudimentary pension and health-care systems. By 2050, pension funding shortfalls could be as much as \$7.5 trillion, or equivalent to 83 percent of China's gross domestic product in 2011, according to one estimate by Deutsche Bank.

This is a pretty bleak outlook, and yet the policy's future repercussions may be difficult to reverse. Over the past decade, most people in urban China have accepted the reality of smaller families and, indeed, prefer it. After all, China had leapfrogged from socialism to full-blown capitalism, so costs of services like schooling and health care are relatively high. Throw in things like melamine-tainted milk powder, lead in toys, and lung-searing pollution, and child rearing in urban China becomes quite a daunting proposition.

Besides, authorities had done a good job with messaging: the one-child policy, they insisted, had played an integral part in China's economic resurgence. It seemed churlish not to rejoice in better

living standards for a country that had, not too long ago, seen great famine and tremendous political turmoil. This is, after all, my ancestral homeland.

Anyone over the age of sixty in China will have a hardship tale to tell, but one that still sticks in my mind is an anecdote by Chinese journalist Xinran Xue. She once visited a family so poor, they rotated one set of clothing among four children. The rest would lie naked under a blanket, happily dreaming of their turn to “wear the clothes.”

China was like a terrier puppy that had been brutally mistreated by history’s vicissitudes. It was hard not to cheer a little to see it lick its wounds and limp along gamely. Starting in the late 1990s, there was much to cheer. Children of peasants became the first in their families to enter college. Infant mortality rates fell. Starbucks outlets bubbled up like so many foamy lattes. A veritable fleet of Bentleys, Beemers, Hondas, and Hyundais took to the roads, and local Xinhua bookstores were crammed with travel guides for China’s first generation of group tourists.

When my Mandarin teacher excitedly recounted her first trip to Europe, I asked her to name her favourite European country. “Germany,” she said promptly. I was surprised. Why not France, Italy? She paused a beat, then said, “It’s so orderly.”

In 2005, I spoke to a contractor who built dormitories for factory workers. He complained of having to put in more electrical outlets, as workers now had so many gadgets to charge. In 2007, I witnessed the opening of Beijing’s first Hooters, or “American Owl” in Chinese. As I eyed waitresses with jacked-up décolletage dishing out overpriced chicken wings, it seemed, strangely, like another milestone had been reached.

People used to joke that a year in China was like a dog year: so much changed that it would be as if seven years somewhere else had passed. In the four years I lived in Beijing, the city’s subway lines expanded fivefold. IKEA opened its largest-ever store outside

of Stockholm in Beijing, with extra-wide aisles to accommodate the multitude of first-generation homeowners. The car population quadrupled. Despite the growing pollution and the corruption, it was hard not to feel the quickening excitement, echo the prevailing sentiment: *Jiayou, Zhongguo, Jiayou!* “Go, China, Go!”

It took me a while to realize that, contrary to popular thinking, the one-child policy had very little to do with China’s double-digit economic growth of the past thirty years, and will actually be a drag for the next thirty. That the Chinese government’s claim that the one-child policy had averted 400 million births was an exaggeration based on faulty maths and wishful thinking. Or that the one-child policy was, in the final sum of things, a painfully *unnecessary* measure, since birth-rates had already fallen sharply under earlier, more humane measures.

More intriguing are the future effects of the one-child policy on the economy: Could it prove detrimental, stalling future progress? The answer here is: most likely, though how much remains to be seen. Predicting long-term economic growth is a chancy business, and few economists, if any, anticipated that the country’s economic rise would be so swift, so spectacular, or so prolonged. Equally, these experts’ basis for predicting a future economic slump is the premise that what goes up must, at some point, come down, a prognosis that would perhaps be more useful if we knew when, and by how much.

Clearly, though, a large greying population in China will likely mean a less productive China. It will also mean the China that global companies currently see—world’s largest cell phone market, world’s largest car market, soon-to-be world’s largest luxury sales, home of KFC’s biggest customer base even—will change. With the manufacturing boom in its last days, the country is now trying to move to a consumption-driven model of growth, with increased domestic spending and growth in the service sector. A large population of retirees will likely prove as helpful in this transition as the Great Wall was in repelling northern invaders.

There is also a growing body of evidence suggesting that China's population would have fallen significantly—exactly how much is in dispute—even *without* the one-child policy. A family-planning policy that predated the one-child policy, called *wanxishao*, or “Later, Longer, Fewer,” had already halved family sizes successfully using less coercive tactics.

In 2009, demographers Wang Feng, Cai Yong, and Gu Baochang challenged the Communist Party's assertion that the one-child policy averted the births of more people than the entire US population. Until then, the 300 to 400 million number had been pretty much taken as gospel truth. It was, and continues to be, a key part of the central government's claim of the global good wrought by the one-child policy. Without the one-child policy, Chinese officials argue, the world would have reached the 7 billion population mark in 2006, instead of five years after. Wang et al. contend that the real number of births averted was probably no more than *half* of what the Communist Party claims.

How did this huge gap occur? They argue that the original calculations used a simplistic extrapolation method that projected what China's future birthrate would be in 1998, based on birth trends between 1950 and 1970. The number arrived at was 338 million, which was subsequently rounded up to 400 million. But this method was flawed. First of all, it was based on the assumption that people's reproductive habits would roughly trend the same from the 1950s to the 1990s, a period when changes such as urbanization, feminism, and advances in infant mortality dramatically altered social behaviour. This is patently as absurd as modern-day tour companies drawing up itineraries on the assumption people still travel by steamship. Second, the Communist Party's method counted birth reductions from the 1970s. The one-child policy didn't start until 1980. In Chinese parlance, this kind of misrepresentation is called *zhiluweima*—pointing at a deer and calling it a horse.

Even as the policy loosened up, many were still adversely affected. Yang Zhizhu, a law lecturer in Beijing, lost his job because he had a second child. In 2010, the peppery Yang advertised himself as a slave for anyone who could help him pay the \$36,000 fine. “Whoever decides to buy me, I will become their slave and serve them until I die. I reject donations as I don’t want to become a parasite for the sake of my child,” wrote Yang in his tongue-in-cheek ad. Yang was eventually reinstated at his university, but at a lower position. His wages were garnished, and university administrators took away his spacious university-assigned housing and made him live in a smaller flat. “The policy is just an ingenious way to tax people without giving any kind of service in return. What could be more natural than having children? Might as well tax for breathing and eating,” Yang told me.

I met a girl, Li Xue, or “Snow,” who spends her days fruitlessly lobbying for the all-important *hukou*, or household registration, that authorities will not allow her because she is an out-of-plan second child. Her parents were labourers who couldn’t afford the birth fine. Without a *hukou*, she hasn’t been able to attend school, get proper medical treatment, or so much as apply for a library card. Without a *hukou*, Snow is a nonentity, without the ability to legally hold a job or get married. Any future children she might have might also be locked in this limbo. An estimated 13 million people share her predicament as an undocumented *hei haizi*, literally, “black child.”

During the summer of 2008, as the country geared up for the Olympics, the fifteen-year-old Snow bravely showed up at Tiananmen Square every morning, holding a sign that said, “I want to Go to School.”

She was never there for more than five minutes before being seized by authorities. Tiananmen, the Gate of Heavenly Peace, is one of the most tightly policed places in the world. In 2008’s Olympic year, security was tighter than usual. Still, she managed to dog-

gedly show up there all summer long. Sometimes, public security officials would try to grab her just outside her house. There'd be frantic chases as Snow and her motorbike-mounted mother weaved through Beijing's narrow warrens, all in a mad attempt to get to Tiananmen for those brief few minutes.

Her actions filled me with both admiration and exasperation. So much risk, so little yield. It all seemed so valiant, so *futile*; whatever did she hope to accomplish?

"I just wanted someone to notice me," said Snow.

Years later, I met a man who'd had an affair with his teenage co-worker in the factory where they worked. She became pregnant, so he brought her to his village to have the baby. They couldn't legally marry because she was underage, and their baby was born without a birth permit. Later, family-planning officials used this as a pretext to seize the child, who was sold into adoption. This man has now spent the last five years in search of the child, whom he believes is living in an Illinois suburb.

Such were the costs of the one-child policy.

#### IV

I was on a flight returning from Kunming, the nearest major Chinese city bordering Myanmar. A sour taste of failure was in my mouth, for I'd failed to get a visa into the country. Myanmar was in a news blackout after a cyclone, and they weren't letting in foreign aid workers, let alone journalists of any stripe or colour. I flew back to Beijing unaware that the earth was ripping apart thousands of miles under me.

The Sichuan quake measured a cool 8.0 on the Richter scale. This was China's most serious quake since Tangshan, which happened thirty-two years before, measured 7.6, and is accounted one of the world's deadliest disasters. For years, the Communist Party covered up the severity of the Tangshan quake, which happened at the

tail end of the Cultural Revolution. State-run news agency Xinhua eventually put the number of fatalities at 250,000.

Nearly every family in Tangshan had a casualty. Every year, on the quake's anniversary, "paper money burnt for the dead is like black butterflies flying low on the Tangshan streets and alleys," wrote resident Zhang Qingzhou. "People are used to this kind of quiet and speechless way of mourning rather than speaking out their sorrows."

Since Tangshan, building standards had improved somewhat, but it was a fair bet Sichuan would have huge casualties. With over 80 million inhabitants, Sichuan is one of China's most populous provinces, with a mountainous terrain that would complicate rescue efforts.

At the Beijing airport, I turned on my BlackBerry and watched in disbelief as dozens of messages scrolled by. My colleagues were already in the air headed to Chengdu, Sichuan's capital.

I stomped to the office, cursing. Why, oh why did I have to return so quickly? If only I'd lingered in Kunming. There's roughly only 400 miles between Kunming and Chengdu. I could have *driven* to Chengdu and be reporting now, I fretted.

Meanwhile I banged out a couple of bread-and-butter stories, including one recounting how Chinese citizens were using a new-fangled, Twitter-like service called Weibo to report the disaster. It was one of the first instances of citizen journalism in China. Looking back, the piece seems as quaint as a story about ancient drumming techniques.

I cudged my brains thinking of other ways to cover the story.

There are a lot of Sichuan migrant workers in Beijing, and just about everywhere else in China. Most Westerners know the province as home of China's cuddly mascot, the panda bear, but the region is poor and populous.

More than half of its natives labour as guest workers, powering factory assembly lines and cleaning crews, the kinds of menial tasks

most urban Chinese no longer want to do. Factory owners and construction crew bosses quickly learn to include spicy Sichuan dishes on cafeteria menus in order to retain these hardy workers, who are likened to the tiny peppercorns they so love: diminutive, fiery, and with boundless ability to *chi ku*—eat bitterness.

Since the earthquake, many were frantically trying to return. What would it be like, I wondered, to have to fight your way across the quake's wreckage to your remote home? And what would you find there?

I headed to the railway station.

I spotted Tang first. Her face was a series of *O*s, a smooth oval face, dark circles under the eyes, her mouth a half circle of misery, lips chapped and bitten. She was in her best gear: jeans embroidered with glittery butterflies, a coral satin coat. Railway journeys were a rare thing for her, and she was observing the formalities by dressing up, even though she was dizzy with worry.

She hadn't heard from her fifteen-year-old daughter, Huimei.

Tang's husband, Liu Jishu, was a wiry five-footer. He looked a little like a Dutch doll: small, with glossy black hair and round apple cheeks. It was an immobile face but for his red-rimmed eyes, which glared with fierce intensity.

Tang and Liu worked on a construction crew in Beijing, roaming from work site to work site. They were now frantically trying to return home with a group from their village.

The quake had ripped through railways and highways, so it wasn't clear how far they'd be able to travel, but there was no alternative. They couldn't afford to fly. Liu sketched out a rough trip scenario that might include twenty-hour bus journeys, days of hiking and sleeping in the open, to get to their remote mountain village.

I wavered. How could I keep up with manual labourers on a physically taxing journey? I rang my editor.

“Can’t we just hire a car and give them a ride home?” I asked tentatively, already knowing the answer. The journey was the story.

We boarded the train two days after the quake. The third-class compartments were packed. Most slept wedged standing up, or perched on tiny seat barriers. During the Spring Festival period, when the whole country is on the move, sales of adult diapers inevitably shoot up. I could see why, for there was no way of getting to the toilet in this crush. Take a train journey in China, and you will know absolutely, indubitably, that the Middle Kingdom is the most populous nation on Earth.

Liu grinned at me fleetingly as I mashed his toes. “*Ren tai duo*,” he muttered. “China has too many people.” I heard that all the time.

Despite the No Smoking sign, Liu puffed away furiously. Tang said little and ate less, sitting stoically as tears crept down her cheeks.

By the third day, she was so dehydrated no more tears flowed. Liu forced sips of tea down her throat, dampening her blouse in big Rorschach blotches. It looked pretty, like a design that was meant to be.

Their story was like that of many other migrant workers. They couldn’t make a living farming rice on a tiny patch of land, especially not with their daughter’s school fees to pay, so they left and became *liudong renkou*—literally, “flowing population.” It’s a poetic name for China’s migrant workers, who drift from the countryside to the city, going from menial job to menial job. Without the city *hukou* household registration, they cannot access urban social services like schooling and health care. That’s why Liu and Tang couldn’t bring Huimei with them to Beijing.

The *hukou* is a form of economic apartheid that creates a permanent underclass and prevents the population of China’s teeming cities from overflowing to unmanageable numbers. It is also a cleaver that cruelly separates families like the Lius for months on end. Liu and Tang hadn’t seen their teenage daughter for more than