Domination, Resistance, And Accommodation In China's One-Child Campaign

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Domination, resistance and accommodation in China’s one-child campaign

Tyrene White

In 1949, as the Chinese Communist Party was poised to establish its new regime, China’s population numbered nearly half a billion, a staggering number that many believed would prove an unbearable drag on attempts to develop. It was two decades, however, before China began to make population control a state priority. In the early-1970s, birth limits were set at two or three children. By 1979, however, China’s post-Mao leaders had become so concerned about the likely impact of population growth on their new development plans that they took the extreme step of launching a one-child-per-couple policy—the most extensive, aggressive and effective attempt ever made to subject child-bearing to direct state control and regulation.

Looking back, China’s leaders and demographers argue that the two-decade delay after 1949 was a fateful mistake. By the time the state began to encourage fertility control, a huge new generation of young people had already been born and were approaching their child-bearing years. As a result, even with declining fertility levels (i.e., the average number of children born to a woman during her reproductive years), demographic momentum and improved health meant continued growth of total population size. In 1979, China’s population hit the one billion mark, and by the century’s end it had risen to nearly 1.27 billion despite aggressive enforcement of birth limits. The goal for 2010 is to contain population size at 1.36 billion, on the way to a predicted peak of about 1.6 billion somewhere around the middle of the twenty-first century. This expansion will continue to occur even though China’s demographic transition from a high-fertility, high-mortality society to a low-fertility, low-mortality society is largely complete.¹

No demographic transition can be explained by a single variable, and China’s transition is no exception. The sudden and rapid decline in fertility, which occurred after 1970 in both urban and rural areas, suggests the strong influence of population control policies enacted at that time. Other factors were also at work, however. By the 1970s, improvements in levels of socio-economic development, education and communication networks meant that more people were aware of the option of birth control. Moreover, infant mortality had declined, while the cost of child rearing had gone up. In urban areas, living space was cramped and scarce, and the “iron rice bowl” of state
employment meant secure, if modest, retirement pensions and health benefits. For the first time, young urban couples were released from the prospect that a secure old age depended on producing male children. A growing proportion of women worked full-time, only to pull a second shift of housework, cooking and child care at home. Although data on this period remain very scarce, there can be little doubt that these changes, particularly in urban areas, began to affect individual calculations about how many children were desirable. As demographers have seen elsewhere, once the idea of smaller family size begins to take hold, it can spread very rapidly within a particular cultural and social context.

With 80 percent of the population living in the countryside, however, it took more than socioeconomic development and attitudinal changes to bring fertility rates down so rapidly. After 1970, six forms of state intervention were used:

1. free access to contraceptives, abortion and sterilization
2. promulgation and enforcement of late marriage guidelines, raising the average age at marriage from 22 in 1970 to 25 by 1979 (Banister 1987)
3. use of material incentives and penalties to encourage compliance with birth limits
4. a mass campaign to promote smaller families and enforce birth limits
5. the creation of a large family planning bureaucracy to implement birth control guidelines; and
6. the inclusion of population targets in the national economic planning process.

Making population targets a part of the central planning process in 1971 marked the culmination of a long internal political battle over how to view China’s large and growing population. In 1949, Mao Zedong viewed population as an asset. Like Marx, he believed that the exploitative class systems of feudalism and imperialism, not overpopulation, were the causes of poverty, disease and unemployment. By the mid-1950s, however, the shock of China’s first census results, combined with lagging levels of agricultural output, led other Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leaders (including Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping) to urge the abandonment of China’s pro-natalist policy and the promotion of voluntary birth control. Just as a public birth control campaign got under way, however, the programme was swept aside by the Great Leap Forward (1958–60), a radical campaign that promised prosperity but produced instead a devastating famine and an estimated fifteen to thirty million excess deaths.

Paradoxically, it was during this period of mobilization prior to the Great Leap that the core idea behind China’s approach to population control took shape. Though Mao remained suspicious of the arguments for birth control and had a direct hand in pre-empting the fledgling campaign, it was he who suggested in 1957 that China should attempt to plan reproduction in the
same way it aspired to plan material production (White 1994). At the time, birth planning (*jihua shengyu*), i.e. the attempt to regulate population growth so as to keep it in balance with levels of economic production and growth, was only a goal to be reached at some more advanced stage of socialist development. As China’s population continued to grow, however, key leaders such as Premier Zhou Enlai came to believe that birth planning could not be postponed. In the early-1960s, after the disastrous Great Leap Forward, Liu Shaoqi and Zhou Enlai attempted to revive the birth control campaign, and in 1965 Zhou proposed the first national population control target—reducing the annual rate of population growth to 1 percent by the end of the century. This second campaign, like the first, was aborted by the Cultural Revolution, but Zhou revived it with new urgency in the early-1970s, creating an extensive family planning bureaucracy to oversee implementation, providing free access to contraceptives, abortions and sterilizations, and introducing specific population targets into the annual and five-year economic plans. Socialist planning thus came to embrace human reproduction in much the same way that it embraced agricultural and industrial production. Local officials who were responsible for meeting grain and steel production quotas now began to receive quotas for babies.

In the early- and mid-1970s, the campaign focus was “later, longer, fewer,” i.e. promoting later marriage, longer spacing between births (three to five years), and fewer births (a two-child ideal and a three-child limit). By mid-decade, the childbearing norm began to tighten; the new slogan was “one is not too few, two is enough, three is too many.” Even that policy was judged too lenient by the new Deng Xiaoping regime which came to power in 1978. In 1979, China’s top demographers and scientists announced that if China were to achieve its economic goals by the year 2000, population had to be contained within 1.2 billion. To achieve that goal, the official birth limit was lowered to one child per couple (with some exceptions for special circumstances), and all child-bearing age couples, urban and rural, had to receive official birth permits from the state in order to give birth legally. Provinces drafted regulations offering economic incentives to encourage policy compliance and imposing stiff sanctions on policy violators right down to the village and community level.

In China’s cities and towns, growing acceptance of the small-family norm, reinforced by the late-marriage policy and tight administrative control in workplaces and neighborhoods, had brought the urban total fertility rate down from 3.3 in 1970 to about 1.5 by 1978, a remarkably low level for a developing country. With a large cohort of women about to enter their peak child-bearing years, however, the state deemed even this low level inadequate. To further suppress fertility and prevent more second births, state monitoring intensified in workplaces and neighborhoods. Monthly gynaecological examinations for child-bearing age women, plus a system of marriage and birth permits provided by the work unit, ensured that anyone attempting to have a second child was caught in a tight surveillance net. Those who
escaped the net faced severe penalties, including fines, loss of employment and perhaps even their coveted urban household registration.

If changing child-bearing preferences and state control worked together to induce compliance with the one-child policy in urban China, rural China posed a far more difficult challenge. Like rural populations in other places and times, life in the countryside encouraged higher levels of fertility. Agricultural work requires household labor, and unlike their urban counterparts, even very young rural children can be put to work in the service of family income. Moreover, while urban retirees could depend on a state pension for retirement support, rural families had no such welfare structure. Children were the only guarantee of old-age support, and the most destitute villagers were inevitably those who were alone and childless. Only a son could assure a couple that they would be spared such a fate. Daughters usually married out of the village, transportation links were often poor, and upon marriage a daughter’s first obligation transferred to her husband’s family. Even the most devoted daughter could not be counted on to provide either income or assistance. In urban areas, in contrast, nearby residency and convenient transportation allowed married daughters to be valuable assets to aging parents.

In addition to these practical considerations, the traditional emphasis on bearing sons to carry on the ancestral line remained deeply entrenched in the countryside. As a result, although rural fertility levels were cut in half between 1971 and 1979 (declining from approximately six to three), much of rural China remained hostile to a two- or one-child limit, including the rural cadres who would have to enforce the policy. When the rural reforms implemented after 1978 began to relax the state’s administrative grip on the peasantry just as the one-child policy was launched, therefore, it set the stage for a prolonged and intense struggle over the control of child bearing.

A substantial scholarship on China’s birth planning programme has examined the process of policy evolution and implementation at the national and local levels, and the means by which the state has succeeded in meeting its fertility goals and overriding resistance (Greenhalgh, 1990, 1994; Greenhalgh and Winckler, 2005; Greenhalgh, Zhu and Li, 1994; Li, 1995; White, 1990, 1991, 1994). Societal resistance, though pervasive and widespread, especially in the countryside, has received less systematic attention. Still less attention has been given to the question of whether, and to what degree, societal resistance has shaped or influenced the evolution of policy. Given the scale of grassroots resistance to China’s population policy, this lacuna in the literature is odd. After all, rarely has there been a case in which the evidence of resistance is so manifest and easy to measure. Though violations of the birth plan are by no means the only form of resistance, the tens of millions of such births that have occurred over the past two decades are a living testament to just how widespread and sustained the resistance has been. By the mid-1990s, the state had nevertheless succeeded in pushing the total fertility rate down to the remarkably low level of 1.8. The case of birth
planning in China thus confronts us with the apparent paradox of what appears to be a strong state and a strong society.

How can that be? Early models of state–society relations generally assumed that the distribution of power between state and society was zero sum; as the state gained in power, society lost, and vice versa. More recent formulations question this model, however, and emphasize instead the vague and overlapping boundaries between ‘state’ and ‘society’, and the internal conflicts that can weaken state authority. In this case, tight fertility control applied to all childbearing age couples, whether they were state officials in Beijing or poor peasants in a remote village. Party members, family planning officials and rural cadres were asked to set an example by taking the lead in embracing the one-child limit. Those past their child-bearing years were pressed to see that their children and relatives complied. The significance of this fact—that no one was left untouched by the policy—cannot be overstated. It meant that the state was at least as vulnerable to resistance from within its own ranks as it was to societal resistance. The struggle over child-bearing, then, has been more than a struggle by the state to dominate society’s child-bearing. It has also been a prolonged struggle to contain and eliminate resistance at every level of state administration, particularly at the local level.

The limitations of a zero-sum, state-society model of power relations are also revealed by the dynamic nature of resistance strategies. As socioeconomic and political conditions have undergone continual change during the reform era, so too have the strategies of resistance, which can take three basic forms: confrontation, evasion, and accommodation. Acts of confrontation and evasion are commonly used tools in social movements of all types and sizes, and resistance to birth limits is no exception. Less common, however, is the strategy of accommodation. This strategy is most likely to be seen when a strong state is capable of extracting compliance, but not capable of eliminating acts of resistance that nevertheless undercut and subvert state purposes. In this case, couples who were caught between state demands to limit childbearing to only one or two children, and cultural and social pressures to have a son, attempted to resolve the conflict by resorting to female infanticide, or more commonly, female infant abandonment and sex-selective abortion. Others chose to defy the child-bearing limit by engaging in willful but technically legal defiance, while accommodating the state’s demands that they pay a steep “social compensation fee” for doing so. Though strategies of accommodation avoid the dangers of direct confrontation, they remain important political actions that reveal vividly the extent to which the right to engineer fertility remains contested political terrain.

**Patterns of resistance**

Before exploring each pattern of resistance, it is important to recognize that the one-child limit has been strictly and consistently enforced only in China’s
cities and towns, and only among ethnically Han Chinese. In the countryside, where the policy was met with hostility and widespread resistance, intense pressures to comply in the early years of the campaign gave way in 1984 to a “one-son or two-child policy.” In other words, those whose first child was a daughter were allowed to try again—for a son—after a four- or five-year wait between pregnancies. In the mid- and late-1980s, some provinces and regions relaxed the policy even more, allowing peasants to have two children, if properly spaced. Officially, these two-child provisions were usually limited to peasants living in poor, remote or mountainous areas, but the relaxation sometimes spilled over into more prosperous areas. A tough new wave of enforcement in the 1990s tried to rein in those who had exceeded their official birth quotas and reimpose a strict one-son or two-child policy, but stiff enforcement provoked stiff resistance and mounting conflict. Calls for policy reform grew more widespread in the late-1990s and early-2000s, but fears of a fertility rebound led policy-makers to reject any change to the official national policy. Still, the social context of the 2000s was a world away from that of the 1980s, as China came to face severely skewed sex ratios due to female abortion, a migrant population of more than one hundred million, frequent and widespread confrontations between villagers or workers and local officials, and a new generation coming of age that was itself the product of the one-child policy. What they did support was a modified approach to enforcement that relied more on education and positive incentives than heavy-handed, target-driven enforcement tactics. Despite widespread trials of this new, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)-supported model, however, old habits died slowly. Targets did not disappear, and local officials were still judged on whether they had met birth-planning targets for the year. Rather than solve the conflict over child-bearing, then, the official retreat from harsh enforcement methods engendered new forms of conflict and resistance.

**Strategies of confrontation**

The determination of the state after 1979 to prevent any “unplanned” birth, but especially third or higher order births (*duotai*), by pressing hard for abortion, sterilization or IUD insertion, confronted millions of households with the reality of state intrusion into the heart of family life. Families who saw child-bearing as their best long-term guarantee of strength, dignity and stature in the village (and their best defence against weakness, bullying and abuse by powerful families or clans), understood that birth limits profoundly threatened their future security. Little wonder, then, that attempts to round up pregnant women could provoke direct and often violent confrontation.

Violence and the threat of violence against birth planning officials escalated in the early-1980s, as pressures to limit childbirth increased dramatically. Irate husbands attacked birth planning officials who pressured their wives
or relatives to have abortions. Others were assaulted out of anger over botched abortions, sterilizations or IUD insertions, and the failure of local officials to provide sufficient follow-up health care. The attacks were often directed against female cadres or doctors, who were frequently on the front-lines of implementation. In some cases, they were attacked and killed by bereaved family members. In one case, reported in *Hubei Daily* in April 1982, a doctor who reported a woman with a third pregnancy to the commune authorities was attacked by the woman’s husband after he was fired from his job. Eight family members joined him in the beating, one of whom was the brigade party secretary.5

In the second half of the 1980s and the 1990s, as reform loosened the choke-hold of rural cadres on peasant livelihood, rural conflict soared. In Suining county of Jiangsu province, for example, there were a reported 381 “incidents of revenge” between January 1987 and May 1988, one-third of them directly related to birth planning.6 All of these incidents involved physical attacks on cadres by angry peasants, but there were also numerous attacks on property. Since cadres sometimes seized or destroyed peasant property in order to deter or punish birth planning offences, peasants retaliated in kind, destroying crops on cadres’ land, killing their chickens or pigs, and damaging their homes and furnishings. These attacks became so frequent that one Henan county passed a law explicitly banning such acts of retaliation.7

Provinces began to follow suit, including provisions in their revised birth planning regulations for punishing those who “insult, beat up, or slander birth planning personnel and their families” (Shaanxi) or “humiliate, threaten, beat up, or retaliate against” birth planning cadres (Guizhou).8 Such measures were hardly effective, however. As the number of strikes, protests and demonstrations by peasants soared in the 1990s and 2000s, ruthless enforcement of the birth control policy ranked high on the list of villagers’ complaints. When local officials were pressed by their superiors to tighten implementation and crack down on “unplanned” births, villagers sometimes struck back by attacking village or township authorities en masse.9 In 2007, for example, villagers in Bobai County, Guangxi Autonomous Region, attacked authorities who had been conducting a two-month long crackdown on illegal births. The crackdown was part of a local campaign to improve the area’s birth planning performance, and cadres were motivated to meet campaign targets by whatever means necessary. Women who were pregnant without permission were rounded up for abortions; if they resisted, their relatives or children were taken away and held as ransom until they complied. To meet sterilization quotas, women who used other means of birth control were ordered in for tubal ligations, or their husbands for vasectomies. Fines ranging from 500 to 70,000 yuan were levied against policy violators, even if the unplanned birth had occurred as early as 1980, and even if fines for the same offense had been levied and paid in the past. Widespread use of these tactics, combined with grievances over other local cadre abuses, led villagers to respond with a massive protest that turned violent and deadly.10
In other cases, villagers used tactics that were less violent but equally effective. In a village in Yunnan province, for example, rural women caught up in a 1994 campaign that forced them into undergoing sterilizations bullied and harassed the village party secretary for his role in assisting township authorities in carrying out the campaign. The women followed him around the village, and made demands that he personally provide compensation for the permanent loss of health and vitality resulting from sterilization, and help them with daily chores they were now unable to do for themselves. The inexperienced leader, who was compared unfavorably to the leader of a neighboring village who had managed to deflect the township authorities and the campaign, and whose own wife’s health was compromised when he pressed her to set an example by being the first to be sterilized, was eventually driven to attempt suicide.11

By the late-1990s, this type of direct confrontation was overlaid by a second type of confrontational resistance. As villagers became more aware of state laws protecting their rights, and more emboldened to act in defence of those rights, they began to appeal to the law and the courts to protect them from abusive enforcement practices, or to punish those who had perpetrated them (see chapters by Ho, Zweig and Friedman). This type of resistance, which Kevin O’Brien has termed “rightful” or rights-based resistance, became an option for villagers in the late-1990s as a direct by-product of state efforts to ease cadre–peasant tensions over tax collection and to improve rural governance.12 Unable to force peasants to pay the fees and taxes that padded local coffers, cadres frequently resorted to the same coercive and punitive methods that they used to enforce birth limits to squeeze out taxes, seizing or destroying property and using intimidation and violence to gain compliance. As tensions mounted in the 1990s, the state repeatedly issued regulations that outlawed such methods of tax collection and held cadres accountable for violations. This provoked a similar ban by the State Family Planning Commission (subsequently renamed the National Commission for Population and Family Planning).

Meanwhile, the implementation of village-level elections in many areas in the 1990s led to growing consciousness among villagers of laws regarding village self-management, and some began to seize on the law and their legal rights as morally grounded means of redress against abusive officials.13 This led some to seek legal redress against family planning enforcers, even in cases where the complainants were in violation of the policy. In one widely reported case, for example, a couple in suburban Harbin with three boys submitted under pressure to a late-term abortion, only to have the baby survive the procedure. Hospital and family planning officials kept the baby from the parents and reportedly ordered that the baby be left to die. Irate nurses and staff members refused to cooperate, however, and journalists reported the story. The parents were eventually reunited with the baby and a group of hospital staff filed an official police report. The hospital director was investigated on charges of intent to murder and removed from her post, but
vowed to sue two journalists for “untruthful reporting.” Although media attention was critical in exposing this case, what is noteworthy is the extent to which the rural couple applied the rights-based logic of the journalists. (See the chapter by Lee for other examples of rights-based suits.) Offered hush money by local officials to cover the excess-birth fine and to move away from the village, the baby’s father refused, saying “we didn’t trust them. We trust the journalists who told us the hospital violated our rights. If necessary, we’ll go to court to be witnesses . . . we want justice.”14 This rights-based defence will not protect those who wilfully violate the policy and refuse to comply with birth limits, but it may give pause to officials who enforce those limits or punish violators after the fact.

The most widely reported case of rights-based confrontation occurred in Shandong province in 2005. Responding to requests from residents of Linyi City, Chen Guangcheng, a blind, self-trained lawyer whose home village was in the Linyi suburbs, investigated the use of coercive methods to implement local policies and meet birth planning targets. According to reports, more than 7,000 abortions and sterilizations were performed in the spring of 2005 after provincial authorities complained about poor local performance in controlling births. Many of these procedures occurred only after relatives had been detained or beaten in an attempt to coerce compliance, and in other cases, property was destroyed or confiscated. These were the same methods that had been outlawed under the national population and family planning law, and been repudiated (under threat of administrative sanction or criminal prosecution) by the family planning bureaucracy. After discussing the events with many local families, Chen attempted to file a class action lawsuit, but was blocked by local authorities. When Chen later visited Beijing to draw attention to the case and confer with supporting lawyers, he was seized off the street by Shandong authorities, returned to his home and held under house arrest, pending formal charges. Chen was eventually tried, convicted and imprisoned, and the lawsuit was quashed. He remained in prison as of mid-2009.15

Strategies of evasion

The most common strategy employed in resisting the one-child policy was that of avoiding the detection of an “extra-plan” pregnancy until the child has been born. Within this category, there were two further subtypes—the independent evader, and the dependent one. Independent evaders attempted to circumvent the birth limits without relying on the silent acquiescence or active assistance of local officials. Dependent evaders, in contrast, relied on cadre collusion in order to succeed.

The simplest approach to avoiding detection was the attempt to time a pregnancy for the autumn. As women bundled themselves in several layers of clothing, or padded jackets, to protect against the winter cold, they were able to hide the pregnancy for several months. Assuming no one in the
village betrayed their secret, they might succeed in avoiding detection until very late in the term or even until childbirth. Keeping the secret was difficult, however, and women leaders responsible for birth control counted on village gossip to help with their work. Pregnant women usually told at least one person about the pregnancy, often their mother-in-law. Once she knew, however, she could not resist telling a friend. As the word spread, the women’s leader discovered the pregnancy. How much pressure was brought to bear upon the pregnant woman, however, depended on how quickly the women’s leader reported the problem to higher-level authorities. A small delay could mean the difference between getting caught or getting away, i.e. leaving the village until the baby was born.

In other cases, women evaded detection by leaving the village altogether until after the child was born. In the 1970s and early-1980s, this strategy generally depended on having a relative or acquaintance outside one’s village or town (ideally in a large county town or a city) with whom one could board for the duration of the pregnancy. By the mid-1980s, however, relaxations on travel and population movement led to the emergence of a burgeoning army of temporary migrants that came to be known as the “floating population.” Estimated at 100 million by the late-1990s, and over 150 million by 2009, this migrant population defied even the best efforts of birth control officials to keep track of their child-bearing. Those who were determined to have another child, therefore, often joined the ranks of the migrants and became part of the “guerilla birth corps.” The sound logic behind this strategy was spelled out by a Yunnan villager:

Since I am from another locality and my residence is not registered here, nobody here will interfere with how many children I am going to have . . . [When I go home] I will simply say that I have picked up and adopted an abandoned child here. Even if the residence of the child is not allowed to be registered, it will not matter because the child will then already be two or three years old. Somehow he will be recognized as my son.16

Notice that for this plan to work, the story does not have to be believed. It is sufficient that village cadres will eventually accept the presence of this additional child, a course accommodated by the fact that they will not be held directly responsible for births outside their own village or township. This villager was also counting on the failure of state efforts to crack down on migrant offenders, efforts that grew more aggressive over the course of the 1990s, particularly in major cities. Central and local regulations were promulgated requiring birth permits as a condition of employment, and obliging employers to monitor migrants to be sure they were in compliance with family planning rules. Although some migrants were restrained by the necessity of being certified by the local family planning bureaucracy that they were in compliance with the one-child policy, many continued to fall
through the net. This loophole was magnified by a regulatory system that placed migrants under the family planning jurisdiction of their registered hometowns, not their temporary residence. This meant that migrants were often required to return home to certify that they were still in compliance with the one-child policy, that they were not pregnant, and that they were using effective contraception or had been sterilized. Even when migrants were prepared to comply with the request, they could neither afford the trip if their home was some distance away, nor could they risk losing their job because of absence, even when their absence was officially required.

Given the enormous size of the migrant population, the failure to effectively regulate them constituted a big loophole in the one-child policy. In 2009, therefore, bureaucratic oversight of migrants was turned over to officials in their temporary place of residence, and their home districts were forbidden to require migrants to return home for “inspection” or pay hometown fines. In addition to gaining responsibility for migrant child-bearing, local family planning officials were now able to provide migrants with the same access to free contraceptive methods and services that were available to residents. Nevertheless, enforcing birth limits among migrants was more difficult than among women who remained in their registered village.

A third strategy was to bribe medical personnel to remove intrauterine devices, normally implanted after the first birth. Some doctors began to provide such services on a regular basis, while others faked the quarterly or monthly gynaecological examination results, allowing “illegally” pregnant women to go undetected. Still others could be paid to tie only one fallopian tube during sterilization, or to provide false certification of having undergone sterilization (normally required after a second birth). In 1994, a former vice-president of a county hospital in Hunan was executed for taking nearly 200,000 yuan in bribes between 1986 and 1991 in exchange for falsifying 448 sterilization certificates. Medical personnel were also implicated in phoney certification schemes. A couple was permitted to have a second child if the first was born with physical or mental disabilities that would prevent the child from being a full-time laborer as an adult. This gave doctors another opportunity for fraud, since they could certify a healthy child as a disabled one. Similarly, official birth permits were controlled and issued by birth planning cadres. Peasants who could not find other ways around the birth limit sometimes discovered that local officials were willing to sell the permits. In 1988, officials in some localities were charging 1,600 yuan for a permit.

Another evasive strategy was to marry or cohabit unofficially, without receiving an official marriage permit or registering with the civil affairs bureau. This was a strategy frequently employed by rural families anxious to arrange marriages before their children had reached the legal ages of 20 for women and 22 for men. Since family planning officials concentrated their efforts on married women, those who were secretly married and sheltered by their families were often able to become pregnant and give birth without
detection. Nationwide, 6.1 million people had married under the legal age by 1988. That figure translated into about 15 percent of all marriages, and those marriages contributed about 10 percent of all births annually. By 1994, under-age marriages numbered 1.6 million annually, representing 16 percent of all marriages. This large number of illegal marriages could not occur without the collusion of local officials. Villagers paid hefty bribes to acquire false certifications of age from village cadres or marriage certificates from township officials.

One of the most pervasive strategies used by cadres to cope with enforcement pressures from above and resistance from below was the cover-up—engaging in statistical fraud to hide excess births. Women known to have given birth, but who did so outside the village, were left off local birth rolls. Even those who gave birth in the village were sometimes omitted, and the omission was covered up by refusing to issue a household registration for the infant. Sending township officials into a village did not necessarily increase the likelihood of full disclosure. One former township cadre complained that village leaders did everything they could to obstruct the work of such teams. Village leaders warned peasants about the impending visit by the team, giving offending couples a chance to flee or hide. Village leaders sometimes hid themselves so as to avoid confrontation. Other cadres welcomed the team and accompanied it into the village, but their “assistance” was actually resistance, their actions designed to minimize the team’s access to accurate data and move it quickly out of the village. These tactics were so effective that one former township official concluded that it was impossible for outsiders to know the true state of affairs in a village.

Township officials did not always want to know the truth, however, since exceeding the local birth quota would have a negative impact on the leaders’ work evaluations, salaries and bonuses. Family planning officials learned quickly that the local party secretary did not want to receive reports that would reflect badly on the township or threaten its privileged standing as an “advanced unit.” And zealous cadres who sought out fraud learned that they would not be rewarded for “rectifying” a fraudulent statistical report. As one former township cadre put it, an honest report would only destroy one’s own career, since higher-level political leaders would be embarrassed and angered by the revelation. He admitted that he had knowingly submitted false reports rather than face the censure that would come with accurate accounting.

Another form of cadre–peasant collusion was to levy fines for unplanned births rather than expend extra effort to prevent them. If grassroots women’s leaders were unsuccessful in persuading a couple to abort an unauthorized pregnancy, village leaders sometimes did little or nothing to reinforce their efforts. This strategy allowed cadres to fulfill the letter of the law without provoking major confrontations with villagers. They could make it clear that heavy penalties would be levied after the child was born, but if that threat was not a sufficient deterrent, no further efforts were made. Leaders in some localities went further, implementing fines that were lower than those...
authorized by county or township regulations. In recent years, this strategy has spread from villages into urban areas as high income couples have simply paid very stiff fines in order to have a second child.

In cases where the first child is a daughter, officials often sympathize with the parents. Cadres were particularly lenient with “single-daughter households” (dunühu), or couples with two or more daughters but no sons. Sympathetic to their plight, village cadres often made no effort at enforcement, even refusing to impose fines if they gave birth to another girl. If couples violated the policy and had a son, however, payment of fines was transformed into a near-ritual performance. Cadres sent to collect the fines were received happily, and couples paid the fine as a part of the celebration over the birth. As one brigade women’s leader said: “They [rural couples] want to have a son. What can we do?”

The same pattern prevailed with respect to sterilization. Pressed to meet sterilization quotas for couples with two or more children, cadres made every effort to avoid couples who had no sons. Even during major mobilizations like that of 1983, cadres worked to shield couples with no sons from the campaign. Because of the extreme pressures to meet sterilization quotas, they were not always successful in this effort, but during less intense periods they had no difficulty bypassing them. In Xinyu City of Jiangxi province, for example, more than 82 percent of duotai births in 1985 were to couples with two or more daughters, including some with six or seven daughters. These births occurred despite a major sterilization mobilization during 1983 and 1984, because cadres had been unwilling to impose permanent birth control measures on couples without a son. Rather than resent the exceptions, other couples, even those with sons who had been mobilized for sterilization, tended to be sympathetic with this discriminating use of power. So severe was the problem of official collusion that provinces and localities drafted administrative regulations laying out punishments for various kinds of policy violations. In 1998, for example, Hainan province drafted provisions for punishing eight specific forms of collusion to violate the birth planning rules, including all of those discussed above, and other provinces followed suit. These local efforts were subsequently reinforced by similar provisions in the national Population and Family Planning Law, which took effect in September 2002.

Strategies of accommodation

Situated between the confrontational (public) and evasive (hidden or disguised) forms of resistance was a third pattern of response. Those desperate to have a son sometimes resorted to female infanticide, female infant abandonment, or, as the technology became available, sex-selective abortion, all prohibited by the state despite the wish to control and reduce births. In one sense, this pattern of accommodating state controls on child-bearing may seem to be the ultimate evidence of state domination, an indicator of defeat and
subordination rather than resistance. As James Scott argues, however, material domination—in this case, control over the number of children one has—is only one form of state domination. Transformative states also seek ideological and status domination, or control over the realm of legitimate ideas and the distribution of status and prestige within society.27 Despite the CCP’s massive and prolonged effort to justify its claim to control child-bearing by emphasizing the public and social costs of child-rearing and insisting that population growth is an impediment to modernization, it has been unable to overcome the influence of patriarchal culture. This competing world view, which rests on family values that prioritize sons over daughters, and rests on a compelling economic logic of son responsibility to care for parents in their old age, places family loyalty and filial obligation above state ethical or legal imperatives, continues to hold sway across rural China. The duty to produce a son and male heir supersedes duty to the nation, a conviction reinforced by the realignment of status and power since 1979. In the new rural world of money, markets, corruption and clans, the weak can be bullied and preyed upon by the strong. Having a son can help a family avoid the miserable fate of being among the weak.

Ironically, and tragically, the state’s own policy has helped further to inscribe and reproduce this traditional world view (Greenhalgh and Li, 1995; Anagnost, 1995). After the extreme and ill-advised sterilization campaign in 1983, and in the wake of growing evidence of female infanticide, the state belatedly responded by simply reversing itself on the crucial issue of the value of female offspring. In the early-1980s, the thrust of the education campaign had been on repudiating the feudal idea that males (traditionally called a “big happiness”) were superior to females (a “little happiness”), and insisting on the equal value of a boy or girl. In 1984, however, it effectively conceded the issue by modifying rural policy to allow single-daughter couples to try again—for a boy. Though the state did not officially endorse the cultural preference for males, it did concede the economic and social realities that made sons more valuable. With the abandonment of collective agriculture and limited community health and welfare benefits, and with men privileged in the process of distributing collective goods (e.g. land, contracts, equipment), the importance of a son for prosperity and security was reinforced. Rather than challenge that reality and risk further rural unrest, the state chose to concede the issue. Single-daughter households were given special dispensation to have a second child—to try again for a son.

Although the 1984 policy change merely legitimized what was already the de facto rural policy in many areas, its effect was to split the state’s ideological hegemony into two conflicting spheres—one sphere that applied to all urban residents, state cadres and administrative personnel, and another that applied to the peasantry. Rural women were thus left in the tragic situation of being caught in the crosshairs of two mutually exclusive modes of discourse. With no means of escaping this dual subjugation, many chose, or were
forced by family members to choose, a strategy of accommodation that guaranteed the birth of a son. Those who could not achieve this result were vulnerable to a lifetime of pity, social ridicule and self-blame.\(^{28}\)

In the early-1980s, when collective life, limited cash income, and restrictions on travel severely constrained the options of rural families, some took the desperate course of female infanticide to preserve the chance to have a son. As the 1980s progressed, however, two alternative strategies of accommodation became very common. The first was infant abandonment, which increased in the late-1980s and 1990s in response to a tightening of the birth control policies (Johnson \textit{et al.} 1998). Civil affairs officials, who have primary responsibility for the system of social welfare institutes (orphanages) that care for abandoned and orphaned children, offered no reliable estimates of the size of the problem by the 1990s, though some reports suggested that as many as 160,000 were abandoned annually, the vast majority of them female. As Kay Johnson has argued, however, this figure likely underestimated the size of the problem, since many abandoned girls never entered state institutions such as those managed by the civil affairs bureaucracy (Johnson 1996; Johnson \textit{et al.} 1998). Instead, birth parents often try to identify likely prospects for adopting the child, e.g. couples with a son but without a daughter.

Even more ominous is the escalating incidence of sex-selective abortion and its impact on China’s sex ratio. In 1979, China produced its first ultrasound B machine, designed for a variety of diagnostic purposes, including pregnancy monitoring. By 1982, mass production of ultrasound equipment had begun, and imports added to the number in use. Thirteen thousand ultrasound machines were in use in hospitals and clinics by 1987, or roughly six machines for each county. By the early-1990s, all county hospitals and clinics, and most township clinics and family planning stations had ultrasound equipment capable of fetal sex determination.\(^{29}\) Henan Province, for example, spent 4 million yuan during the 1991–95 plan period to equip its 2,300-plus township technical service centres with ultrasound scanners.\(^{30}\) Private clinics also flourished, as technicians took advantage of an emergent market.

Despite repeated attempts by the state to outlaw the use of ultrasound technology to determine the sex of a fetus, easy access to the technology, combined with the lure of lucrative bribes and consultation fees, made ultrasound use vastly popular. This was especially true in many county towns and rural townships, where prosperity and proximity facilitated ultrasound diagnosis, but where modest degrees of upward mobility had done little to undermine the cultural prejudice and practical logic that favored male offspring. Young couples raised in a village but now employed in township factories and living in the township seat may have been far more willing than their peers a decade earlier to have only two children. If the first were a girl, however, it remained vital to many that the second be a boy (Chu 2001). They may have been modern in their preference for a small family in order to hold on to their new-found prosperity, but when it came to
desiring a son, tradition and contemporary social realities conspired. Because township and village cadres tacitly agreed with them, they could count on them to look the other way when they made their pay-off to the medical technician. The cadres, after all, would much prefer to see couples resort to induced abortion of females to guarantee having a son, rather than have a second daughter and be tempted to try again, as many two-daughter households did. If the couple kept trying for a son, the local birth plan was threatened. If the couple used available technology to guarantee the birth of a son, the cadres’ problem was solved.31

The impact of sex-selective abortion on China’s sex ratio has become a national scandal. In 1982, the Chinese sex ratio at birth, 107.2 males for every 100 females, was already slightly in excess of the world norm of 105–6 males for every 100 females. Though this figure raised questions about female infanticide and “missing girls,” those questions were dismissed by Chinese spokesmen, who argued that the sex ratio was well within normal bounds and in keeping with China’s own population history. Over the next two decades, however, the sex ratio at birth rose dramatically, to 111.2 in 1985, 113.8 in 1989, 116 in 1992 and 117.4 in 1995. It continued to climb over the next five years, and hit a high of 119 at the time of the 2000 census. Some of this increase was evident in first births, but much more of it was reflected in second and higher-order births. In 1990, the figures for second and third or higher-order births were 121 and 127, respectively. By 2000, they had skyrocketed to 151.9 and 159.4 (Riley 2004).32

Some of this gap can be accounted for by the underreporting of female births. Underreporting is suggested both by surveys of rural areas that reveal “hidden” births not reported in official statistical reports, and by the lessening of the sex ratio imbalance for school-age children. In the 1992 sample survey, the sex ratio for the age 0–4 cohort was a very skewed 113.9. For the age 5–9 cohort, however, the ratio dropped to 107.81. This decline is what would be expected if previously unreported females were registered for school and then placed on local population rolls. Such children might never have appeared in vital statistics on births and deaths, sparing local officials the embarrassment of exceeding their local birth targets. Once older, however, they may be registered as migrants or adoptees, and the degree of male bias in the sex ratio declines accordingly.

In the early-1990s, Chinese demographers argued that such underreporting accounted for anywhere from 43 to 75 percent of the skew in the sex ratio at birth (Zeng et al. 1993). Subsequently, however, as the skew grew more extreme, Chinese authorities admitted the scope of the problem, and by the mid-2000s it was estimated that China was missing approximately 10 million girls. Concerned over the implications of this number for social stability, the authorities have worked to stem the tide by developing campaigns that emphasize support and care for girls, and they have instituted a system that is designed to provide more rewards and incentives to parents of daughters,
as compared to parents of sons. One factor that helps to account for this push is the growing evidence that the sex ratio imbalance is not contained to rural areas, as was initially thought. The results of a 1995 sample survey revealed that urban areas were also experiencing skewed sex ratios. Beijing, for example, registered an overall sex ratio at birth of 122.6, and 148.8 for second and higher-parity births. This high sex ratio at birth placed Beijing on a par with such provinces as Jiangsu (125.1), Fujian (126.2), Jiangxi (129.1), Henan (128.0), Hubei (134.6), Guangdong (125.2) and Shaanxi (125.4). Tianjin also came in high, with an overall sex ratio at birth of 110.6 and a rate of 142.9 for second and higher-parity births. And while Shanghai’s overall rate was within a normal range, the rate for second and higher-parity births was an exceptionally high 175.0 (Gao et al. 1997). Similar figures were reported in the 2000 census. For example, Guangdong province registered a sex ratio at birth of 136, despite being one of the most prosperous and developed regions of the country (Riley 2004).

Although the one-child policy is no doubt a contributing factor in producing these alarming figures, they are consistent with trends elsewhere in Asia where son preference remains strong. South Korea, Taiwan and India all registered increases in the male to female sex ratio as ultrasound technology became widely available (Park and Cho 1995; Das Gupta and Bhat 1997; Eberstadt 1998). The sex ratio in India, like China, climbed continuously during the 1990s, demonstrating clearly that the problem is not limited to China, nor is it merely the result of the one-child policy. Rather, it is a cultural and structural problem, one that cannot be explained away (as the CCP has sought to do) as the product of rural backwardness. The results of a major survey undertaken in late-2005, however, show clearly that the sex ratio imbalance in China continued to worsen between 2000 and 2005, and that the distortion is heavily concentrated in second and higher order births. This consistent pattern is indicative of the impact of strict birth limits, as those who have more than one child feel compelled to make sure the second child is a male. The result, the survey showed, was that boys under the age of 20 outnumber girls by 32 million, and that in 2005 alone, there were more than 1.1 million extra males among newborns.33

The Chinese case, which pits state control over child-bearing against deeply imbedded cultural prejudices and child-bearing preferences, remains unique. China’s relentless emphasis since the 1970s on sheer numbers of births—on targets, quotas and per capita accounting—combined with its neglect of women’s issues and its gendered politics of reproduction, has opened up the space within which an accommodative style of resistance can grow. Just as new birth control technologies and surgical advances facilitated the state’s move to engineer child-bearing, so too has technology become the medium through which couples struggle to engineer the sex composition of their offspring. They may accommodate the state’s birth limitation policy, but they seek to do it on their own terms, rejecting in the process the state’s claim of ideological hegemony.
Resistance and the prospects for policy change

The struggle for dominion over child-bearing in China has led to paradox, tragedy and irony. The paradox we are confronted with in China’s experience of the one-child policy is the simultaneous existence of massive evidence demonstrating the state’s capacity to engineer child-bearing, and massive evidence of resistance, including successful resistance. The tragedy of the policy is that it has forced a large portion of the population to choose between two types of hegemonic discourse—a socialist, nationalist and developmental one that emphasizes duty to the collective society, and a patriarchal one that emphasizes duty to family and ancestors.

The sad irony of this case is that if the one- or two-child birth limit is eventually lifted, it may be due more to countless acts of accommodation than to traditional acts of resistance. The ultrasound technology that allows couples to discover the sex of the fetus, combined with the prosperity that has led to its widespread distribution, has made it possible for those caught between the state’s discourse linking modernization and prosperity to birth planning and a secondary, state-complicit, cultural discourse linking status and dignity to male offspring to attempt to accommodate both. The consequences, however, have been alarming enough to produce a type of “voice” that is increasingly urgent in content, but corporate in structure and non-confrontational in tone. The core constituencies behind this “voice” are demographers, family planning officials and Women’s Federation officials who are alarmed about the implications of current trends with sex ratios and rapid population aging. The skewed sex ratios mean an impending shortage of wives for as many as 30 to 50 million men, which the Women’s Federation rightly describes as an “army of bachelors.” Since the marriage market places poor men at the greatest disadvantage in competing for a wife, this shortfall of brides could have explosive social consequences, particularly in poorer rural communities. And rapid fertility decline, coupled with increasing life expectancy, means that over the next several decades China’s population will age almost as rapidly as the populations of Western Europe, North America and Japan. In these countries, which enjoy wealth and national systems of welfare, anxieties about rapid population aging are already drawing leadership attention. China will face similar levels of elderly dependence without either of those advantages, and with a demographic structure in which a shrinking proportion of the population will have to support a very large population of both old and young.

Those who worry about these negative side-effects of the one-child policy have advocated a modified and less coercive approach to population control, some since the early-1980s. As insiders within the system of population institutes, think tanks and academic departments, however, they have had to be very cautious in how, and to what degree, they challenge the reigning orthodoxy (Greenhalgh 2001). By 1998, however, they had succeeded in getting the national leadership to launch an experiment in several counties
implementing what was described as a genuinely voluntary family planning programme, one that stressed positive incentives to limit childbirth rather than mandatory control. The expansion of this project, supported by the United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA), is a hopeful sign that over the next decade, China might finally and very gradually shed its crude and mechanical approach to population control. Although residents in the project areas were limited to two children, a constraint that makes it impossible to describe the approach as truly voluntary, birth permits and quotas were eliminated, and couples were given more freedom of choice on when to give birth and what type of contraceptive to use.35

Progress remains slow, however, as reports of new local campaigns make clear. In 2001, for example, family planning officials in Guangdong’s Huaiji county were given a target of 20,000 abortions or sterilizations by year’s end, a campaign goal triggered by the 2000 census, which revealed their failure to meet local population control targets. After local complaints and media reports surfaced, local officials were ordered to stop the campaign and undergo reeducation on how properly to implement the family planning policy. The Huaiji campaign was followed, however, by campaign mobilizations in Linyi City, Shandong, and Bobai county, Guangxi, in 2005 and 2007, both of which gained notoriety for the use of coercion. The impulse to rely on such strong-arm tactics remains deeply imbedded, and will shape the behavior of local officials as long as their superiors reward them for the achievement of birth control targets and don’t ask questions about how the targets were achieved.36

Modest though the changes have been thus far, advocates of policy reform have been aided in recent years by conditions that were not present when the one-child policy was adopted in 1979. First, those born after 1978 and now entering their child-bearing years have grown up against the backdrop of rapid development, increased prosperity and the one-child policy. Their hopes and dreams often center on leaving the village, or alternatively, on leaving agricultural work. The images brought to them from the vastly expanded communications networks and opportunities for travel reinforce the idea of the urban, one-child family as the symbol of modernity. As a result, many of today’s young rural couples may simply take for granted the message that had to be drilled into the generation before them—that their lives will be more prosperous and secure if they choose to have fewer children (Chu 2001). If this proves to be true, if the new world they have grown up in has instilled a genuine desire for a one- or two-child family, then moving towards a more voluntary approach to birth planning without risking a significant fertility rebound should be feasible.

A second and more important factor that has encouraged advocates of reform is a shift in the global discourse on population growth and women’s rights. When China began to implement its one-child policy in 1979, it was widely lauded by those in the international family planning community who subscribed to the dominant theory that population growth was a primary, if
not the primary, impediment to economic growth. For them, China’s acceptance of this position, and its determination to place tight curbs on population growth, was so important that the very disturbing methods by which China sought to achieve its aims were often overlooked. By the mid-1990s, another school of thought began to dominate the discourse on population and development. This alternative approach, which was crystallized in Cairo at the 1994 United Nations International Conference on Population and Development, emphasizes the importance of alleviating poverty, improving the status of women and protecting women’s rights (including reproductive rights and labor rights) as the more just and effective approach to population issues.

Those in China in a position to argue persuasively for a change in China’s methods and goals were aided by this shift in the global discourse and agenda. In the early 1970s, China’s leaders quietly but radically embraced the dominant Western demographic theory of the time—that reducing population growth was a prerequisite for socioeconomic development, and that the overpopulated nations of the developing world could not afford to wait for a development-induced demographic transition like that which occurred in Europe. In the post-Mao era, this theory has legitimated the regime’s insistence that population control is the linchpin of the modernization strategy, even as it has come under increased international criticism.

The new language of Cairo—protecting women’s rights and taking a more holistic approach to achieving demographic goals—emerged at a time when the State Family Planning Commission (SFPC) was growing more concerned about the consequences of using coercion and harsh sanctions to achieve China’s population targets (Greenhalgh 2001). The failure to achieve national targets during the Eighth Five-Year Plan (1986–90), a failure that was documented by the 1990 census, led to a new crackdown in the early 1990s that got quick results but left in its wake new concerns about excessive coercion, rising sex ratios at birth and rapid population ageing. The Cairo agenda gave Chinese officials a framework through which to articulate these concerns, and provided institutional contacts and resources they could use to experiment with a softer approach to enforcement. The UN’s Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 reinforced the Cairo message, provoked a new wave of feminist thinking and action, and further encouraged SFPC officials to consider a more client-centred approach that gave greater consideration to women’s needs and their reproductive health (Greenhalgh 2001).

Still, the road to reform has been slow and rife with controversy. After some internal debate, China officially reaffirmed its one-child policy in 2000, and in 2001 passed a long-debated Population and Family Planning Law that upheld the existing policy and gave compliance the force of law. A new central document was issued in 2005 that also underscored the importance of staying the course. Although the law and the 2005 document included provisions that echoed the Cairo and Beijing conference agendas,
calling for an “informed choice of safe, effective, and appropriate contraceptive methods,” and one prohibiting officials from infringing on “personal rights, property rights, or other legitimate rights and interests,” they also reaffirmed China’s basic approach to population control. Nevertheless, the debate over whether and when to bring an end to the one-child policy has become an integral part of the discourse on China’s population policy, and not a moment too soon. The first generation of children born under the one-child policy has now come of age, and they have entered their peak childbearing years. How they respond to their own childbearing preferences, and what those preferences are, will be crucial to the future of China’s population policy. No matter what that future proves to be, the legacy of the one-child policy will live on. It has added to the urban–rural divide by creating an urban sector of one-child households and a rural sector of mostly two- or multi-child households. It has traded reduced rates of population growth for increased rates of population aging that threaten to slow China’s fast march to advanced modernization. And it has led to a dearth of females that will ripple across China’s demographic landscape for decades to come. It is the state that has taught the population that the social engineering of childbearing is a legitimate and virtuous course. Now that individual couples have a modern, efficient and hi-tech method by which to engineer the sex composition of their own households, the dangers that have always been inherent in such a course are becoming clear. Ideological exhortation alone will not solve this contradiction. To overcome it, the state will also have to alter the structural conditions and policies that encourage the continued cultural and social subordination of women.

Notes

1 Even in the absence of China’s one-child policy, surveys suggest that most couples would prefer no more than two or three children, while many would continue to choose to have only one, particularly in urban areas. This suggests that, while China’s demographic transition may not yet be fully complete in the countryside, its overall fertility level would remain relatively low even if couples were left to exercise their individual choice.

2 The total fertility rate refers to the average number of children that would be born to a woman during her lifetime if she conformed to the actual fertility rates of women at all ages during a specific year. In other words, this figure is reached by adding up all of the age-specific fertility rates for a given year (e.g., the number of births per 1,000 women at age 15, 16, 17 . . . 48, 49, and so on until child-bearing ceases).

3 Two exceptions are Wasserstrom (1984), and Greenhalgh and Li (1995).


8 See, for example, the report of a riot in Caojiang township, Guangdong province, after officials tried to impose severe fines on offending couples. Daniel Kwan, “Caojiang Official Denies Riot Over Family Planning Policy,” South China Morning Post, 8 September 1997, p. 8.


11 This campaign was closely observed by Eric Mueggler, and is related in his detailed village study, The Age of Wild Ghosts (Berkeley, 2001), ch. 9. In this case, relations in the village grew so tense that township authorities eventually retreated from their campaign demands and disavowed the forceful methods they had initially urged the village party secretary to use.


22 Interview File 900307.

23 Interview File 900722.

24 Interview Files 821012 and 900307.


28 The agony of being caught in this double bind is rendered very poignantly in Mo Yan’s short story, *Explosions*. Mo Yan, *Explosions and Other Stories* (Hong Kong: Renditions Paperbacks, 1991).


31 For confirmation of this line of thinking among child-bearing age women and rural officials, see the important study by Chu Junhong, “Prenatal Sex Determination and Sex-Selective Abortion in Rural Central China,” *Population and Development Review* (2001), pp. 259–82.


33 The 1 percent survey included more than 4.7 million people under the age of 20, and included sampling from every county in China. See Wei Xing Zhu, Li Lu, Therese Hesketh, “China’s Excess Males, Sex Selective Abortion, and One Child Policy: Analysis of Data from 2005 National Intercensus Survey,” *British Medical Journal* (April 2009); 338:b1211.


35 This project became the centre of controversy in the USA in 2001–2 as conservatives successfully pressed the Bush administration to cut off funding for UNFPA on grounds that the organization helped China maintain “a program of coercive abortion.” This decision was made despite a State Department investigation that concluded, as did the European Union, that the UNFPA programme was a positive step towards reform in China’s programme. For one of many media reports on this controversy, see Philip P. Pan, “China’s One-Child Policy Now a Double Standard: Limits and Penalties Applied Unevenly,” *The Washington Post*, August 20, 2002.

36 Additional evidence of just how difficult the campaign habit is to break comes from Kay Johnson, who found in 2001 that several Anhui counties, responding
to the problem of rising sex ratios at birth, were cracking down on voluntary abortions, which were assumed to be for the purposes of sex selection. Anyone caught aborting a second pregnancy automatically forfeited the right eventually to have an in-quota second child. Personal correspondence from Kay Johnson.

Suggested reading

For a general overview of China’s demographic challenges


On resistance to the one-child policy


Jeffrey Wasserstrom, ‘Resistance to the One-Child Family,’ Modern China, 10 (July 1984), pp. 345–74.

On policy evolution and implementation


On gender and birth control in China

Ann Anagnost, ‘A Surfeit of Bodies: Population and the Rationality of the State in Post-Mao China,’ in Faye D. Ginsberg and Rayna Rapp (eds), Conceiving the

On infant abandonment
Kay Ann Johnson, Wanting a Daughter, Needing a Son: Abandonment, Adoption, and Orphanage Care in China (Yeong and Yeong, 2004).

On the sex ratio of the Chinese population

On skewed sex ratios elsewhere in Asia

On feminism and the prospects for policy reform
On the general dynamics of population growth and the relationship between population and development

