

3. See Lincoln Steffens, *The Struggle for Self-Government* (New York: McClure, Phillips, and Co., 1906).
4. Gunter Schubert and Anna L. Ahlers, *Participation and Empowerment at the Grassroots: Chinese Village Elections in Perspective* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012).



Writing a Chronicle History of China's One-Child Policy: Three Books by Susan Greenhalgh

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An Unexpected Experience

In March 2013, I was attending the fifty-seventh Commission on the Status of Women, which was organized by the UN in New York and attended by over four thousand participants from around the world. Among thousands of panels, we Chinese delegates (including five to eight scholars, feminist activists, and women's federation cadres) also organized a one-and-a-half-hour panel titled "Feminist Approaches to Address Gender-Based Violence in China," mainly discussing the practices and strategies that Chinese feminists adopted to tackle this social problem after the 1995 Beijing conference, and the accomplishments achieved so far. Around thirty participants attended the panel, and all five presentations went well. However, the Q&A session turned into something beyond our imagination.

Nobody asked any questions related to the issue of domestic violence. Instead, all the questions were addressed to the one-child policy—mainly challenging us, as Chinese feminists, "how can you tolerate such a coercive policy violating women's bodies and rights?" A large poster sat on the conference room table with the bold title "Help Chinese Government to Stop Coercive One-Child Policy" with bloody pictures of girl killing and dead bodies as background. Under such

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conditions, any explanation of the policy that we might have offered or endeavors to answer the questions would have been treated as defending the “coercive communist PRC regime,” and its absolute otherness from the Western world. One of our scholars and one questioner almost ended up arguing.

This incident forced me to reflect on how to develop a feminist movement in the global world. Chinese feminists have to face historical and social issues like the one-child policy, the Cultural Revolution, and the 1989 students’ democracy movement, which have affected Chinese society deeply with trauma and violence. Confronting these ineradicable dimensions of memory in China, rather than only focusing on more politically acceptable topics such as domestic violence, seems to some to be escapist. Moreover, how can Chinese feminists develop a unique standpoint with a feminist vision, viewpoint, and identity, and, at the same time, maintain a critical stance toward both China party-state discourse and Western ideology? To accomplish this end, the one-child policy is one of the biggest challenges that we face.

Encountering Greenhalgh’s Books

Fortunately, Greenhalgh’s three books are accessible and provide Chinese feminists (and others) with better knowledge and skills to tackle the issue of the one-child policy. She refutes the coercive story¹ as the only way of understanding China’s population politics in the West by providing a more comprehensive and complicated chronicle history of governing China’s population since the establishment of the PRC.

Greenhalgh’s twenty-five years of scholarship have mainly focused on answering one major question: “how China governs its population and to what effect” (2008, p. 41). This is “one of the most difficult” topics in the population field and a “hypersensitive” issue in the study of contemporary China (2010, p. 1). With ten years of experience in the leading international NGO Population Council as an anthropologist and China specialist (2008, p. 42), Greenhalgh was able to establish a reputation as a “friend of China” and “a constructive critic” within the high-profile inside circle of Chinese population experts and officials. She conducted 140 interviews with China’s population specialists and officials, and accessed extensive documents, articles, and books on the history of Chinese population science and policy, including many labeled as *neibu* (for internal use only) or even *jimi* (extremely secret). Her writing travels smoothly between the formats of anthropological storytelling and quantitative data presentation, excelling at both interpreting quantitative data to support the narratives (especially in *Governing China’s Population*), and using discourse analysis to tell the stories behind the figures (especially in *Just One Child*). She deftly interweaves other researchers’ ethnographies and empirical data to explore the complex landscape of Chinese population and politics.

The consistent theoretical framework of the three books is based on Foucault’s concepts of “biopolitics” and “governmentality.” Biopolitics “operates at two inter-

connected poles, the regulation of the population as a whole and the disciplines of the individual body” (2008, p. 6), with the purpose of “administration and optimization of the process of life” (2005, p. 6). She defines governmentality as “a combination of governing and political rationality—the particular regime of modern government that takes population, its size, health, welfare, security, and prosperity, as its primary end” (2008, p. 7). Although the analytic frameworks of the three books do not draw primarily on feminist scholarship, their aims are implicitly feminist.

The significant contributions of these books are: (1) translating the rather abstract Foucauldian concepts of biopolitics and governmentality and applying them toward an understanding “the world’s most significant case of population politics” (2005, p. 338) within the Chinese context, and developing vital politics at both the aggregate level and individual level; (2) emphasizing sexism as the dominant deployment of bio-power in China, and vividly documenting women’s traumatic experience under the coercive policy; (3) pushing governmentality studies by extending the focus to institutions by including discourse, science, subjectivity, and policy making; and (4) adopting an interdisciplinary approach to overcome the disciplinary boundaries of ethnography, governance research, science and technology studies, policy-making process research, and women’s studies, which makes her work unique.

Governing China’s Population

Governing China’s Population describes the one-child policy as a “culture-blind, top-down” model. Here, Greenhalgh vividly illustrates the development of the one-child policy from 1949 to the early 2000s and demonstrates how this policy impacts the people (especially married women of reproductive age), culture, society, and the nation.

Since the rural–urban division is one of the most distinctive characteristics in Chinese society, Greenhalgh and co-author Edwin A. Winckler describe the different trajectories of policy evolution in rural and urban China. Greenhalgh elucidates how the policy in rural China was adapted from “one child for all families” to “one- to two-child families” in the 1980s due to peasants’ consistent and furious resistance. In the 1990s and earlier 2000s, rural couples’ desire for children declined and they found the so-called modern way (using ultrasound to discover the sex of the fetus and then aborting the females) to “stay within state limits on child numbers while achieving their gender preference” (2005, p. 226). She describes how in urban China the policy has remained the same over the years, with the only child becoming so precious that mothers have the pressure of being the ideal mother.

Greenhalgh describes in great detail how the policy restratifies Chinese society by (1) widening the rural–urban divide, therefore causing traumatic social suffering in the villages—namely campaigns of sterilization, abortion, and IUD

insertion—bringing trauma and violence to women’s bodies and disrupting rural cultural traditions; (2) deepening gender inequality and reinforcing a male-centered patriarchal society. Women’s bodies became the direct target of population control, therefore putting their physical and psychological well-being at risk. Contraception became the duty of women: troublesome IUC rings were inserted into women’s bodies, sterilization was always performed on women, abortion became socially acceptable, and repeated abortions and late-term abortions were common practices. Sonless women in certain rural areas “suffered from severe discrimination” (2005, p. 262); (3) putting infant girls and female fetuses at risk—the sex ratio at birth kept rising to 120 in 1999 (2005, p. 265) and 118 in 2013; baby girls’ infanticide, abandonment, and trafficking was astonishingly prevalent in rural China and sex-selective abortion became a common practice; (4) creating the reproductive discourse of “low quantity, high quality” by excluding unplanned children and by nurturing planned children with unexpected results—surviving urban girls enjoy equal treatment and better education and village girls are treated as better caregivers than sons.

In this book, Greenhalgh also points out directions for further development of her scholarship: on the one hand, she shows how science plays a huge role in the formulation of policy, therefore promoting the modernity and modernization of the nation (discussed in depth in *Just One Child*); on the other hand, she describes how China positions itself globally in terms of the one-child policy and how Chinese people internalize the regulation and cultivate a nation of global citizens (discussed in depth in *Cultivating Global Citizens*).

Just One Child

Just One Child was published in 2008 and received numerous excellent reviews and awards.² Focusing on the early Deng era, this book asks one simple but mysterious question: how was the one-child policy produced? Combining the two approaches of governmentality studies and science and technology studies, Greenhalgh tells three stories—the science story, the politics/policy story, and the cultural story—which are actually interconnected.

There are three competing camps working in the process of policy formulation: the cybernetic missile control scientist group led by Song Jian, the Marxian statistics of the population group led by Liu Zheng, and the Marxian humanist voice of Liang Zhongtang. The latter two groups lost the competition because of the disadvantaged position of social science due to the disruption in the Cultural Revolution, lack of scientific method, including data and computers, and high-level governmental support for the scientists. Meanwhile, the missile scientist group won by occupying the predominant position in policy making in an area in which they have no expertise. Their success was due to: (1) creating a “perfect” linkage between the population problem and social, environmental, and even national crisis; (2) access to international conferences, the theory of the Club of

Rome, data and advanced computer technology at that time—claiming that they spoke the language of international population science; and (3) excellent personal networks and skills in lobbying the highest leadership level. All their efforts were conducted and legitimated in the name of science, at a time when the nation and society believed that science was the salvation of the whole nation. The crisis discourse they created matched the state's desperation to escape from the chaos of the Cultural Revolution, get rid of the “backwardness” and “lateness” of the nation, march into modernization, and have a voice on the global platform. In this sense, the policy was produced not only because of a “totalitarian political regime” as portrayed in Western media, but also because of “scientific aspirations and a thirst for high-tech rationality” in Deng's state.

When Greenhalgh skillfully puts all the pieces of the puzzle together to demonstrate vividly the process of “scientific” policy making, the reader cannot help but notice that in the cultural map of family planning there are so many factors missing: human beings were reduced to figures, cultural tradition was ignored, the earlier and effective “later-longer-fewer” policy was carelessly abandoned, the people's voice was not heard, and the potential social suffering was not considered.

Cultivating Global Citizens

Cultivating Global Citizens extends the investigation of the issue of Chinese population into the new millennium by discussing why the policy remains in place and what the options are for change in the future. More importantly, this book links two cultural landscapes within the Chinese population realm on the international platform. The Western media construct one predominant coercive story of the one-child policy, which echoes the political standpoints of social conservatives in the United States and causes tension in the American-Sino relationship. The increasing interaction between international organizations and China helps the Chinese party-state reflect on the existing policy and actively adapt complex international standards to improve their capacity to govern. On the local level, we can see clearly that the one-child policy is changing over time. The skills of governing are evolving and social scientists gradually have a larger voice in policy making.

My Reflection as a Chinese Reader

I was born in 1974 in a small township in Jiangsu Province, the second daughter of my family, two years younger than my older sister. My mother, a primary school-teacher, lost her eligibility to be a party member because she violated the “later-longer-fewer” policy and was forced to publicly criticize herself during a meeting of the entire school. She always told me that she never regretted the decision of giving birth to me, and I always felt treasured and was deeply grateful.

The one-child policy is the Chinese people's everyday experience, deeply impacting all aspects of life and every corner of society. Reading these books

provoked in me complex emotions of intimacy, anxiety, uncertainty, and anger. Various memories flashed into my brain. One of my aunts was sterilized by force during the policy campaign in the 1980s. At that time, she was three months pregnant without knowing the sex of the fetus. She was so traumatized by the experience that she developed chronic epilepsy. In the late 1980s, my father was a county cadre in charge of culture, education, and health. One morning I witnessed a middle-aged villager get on his knees in our living room and beg my father to ask the local health institution to prevent his wife being sterilized. My father could not help him. I am certain many Chinese people have similar stories to tell, but most of them remain untold.

As a national policy and research topic, the one-child policy is certainly underresearched in China. Limited research was developed within the framework of existing policy to discuss the demographic and social impact without calling into question the legitimacy of this basic unquestionable state policy. Common people, as well as most intellectuals, genuinely believe that the discourse of national crisis (too much population will cause social and environmental crisis) represents the truth, documented in geography textbooks in primary and middle schools. Most people feel that it is their responsibility as a citizen to save the nation instead of burden it. People are familiar with the story of Ma Yinchu,³ who proposed family planning and fertility control in the late 1950s. However, Chairman Mao emphasized that a large population would be good for the nation (*ren duo hao ban shi*) and short-sightedly criticized Ma Yinchu. Later on, statistics demonstrated that the population rapidly increased to 300 million from the end of the 1950s to 1979. Few people realize that Mao had conflicted ideas about population control in the 1950s, and that a missile scientist group was the force behind the adoption of the national policy in the 1970s. Indeed, very few studies have attempted to unearth the origin of the policy, and most people have come to accept it or even develop their biocitizenship through it. When Greenhalgh revealed she intended to study it, it surprised her that Chinese population experts simply did not know its origins.

There are certain passages in the book that especially caught my attention because they challenged my way of thinking. First, the author vividly describes the competing groups of natural scientists and social scientists during the policy-making process. Greenhalgh demonstrates that there still exists a major gap between the natural sciences and social sciences in China. Science is still portrayed as being “neutral,” “objective,” and “scientific,” thereby occupying a privileged position in academia. Social scientists seldom use sociological and anthropological approaches to question how the science was produced and how it related to policy making.

Second, the author compares the social suffering in rural areas caused by the one-child policy campaign with the Great Leap Forward and argues that the damage was even worse (2005, p. 253). The author uses the shocking figures of

women's sterilization during the 1980s campaign as evidence. From 1971 to 2001, 112,505,648 women and 39,034,818 men were sterilized, according to China Health Yearbook; in 1983 alone more than 16 million women and 4 million men were sterilized. I believe that Chinese social scientists need to rethink and reevaluate the seriousness of the social suffering caused by the policy in order to pinpoint better strategies to govern the population. Moreover, I keep wondering why we are inclined to reflect on the past rather than the present? Maybe it is because the dichotomy of the Maoist era and Reform era—chaos and development, revolution and modernization—created by the state discourses made it easier for people to reflect on the past rather than the present? Or is collective amnesia just an easy way to survive the past and present and move forward to the future?

Third, an interesting phenomenon emerges from the depths of these three books. When discussing sex ratio at birth—as high as 120—the author briefly mentions that only Xinjiang and Tibet have normal sex ratios compared to international standards, without offering further discussion. The contrast may be due to different cultural and religious traditions and practices among the Han and minorities and the relatively looser enforcement of the policy in the minority areas. However, how Han Chinese can learn from other nationalities to get rid of sexist cultural standards provides an interesting entry point to be further probed.

What Can We Do Next?

If any Chinese feminists or social scientists encounter similar questioning as we did during the UN conference, there are at least a few points they should address. First, the policy per se brought a lot of damage and social suffering to society, especially to rural women and girls; second, the policy has gone through many changes since 1979 and is now in transition to a more humane “one to two per family” policy; third, China's party-state has gradually learned from the international standard to combine women's reproductive health with family planning and fertility control; fourth, young women, especially urban daughters, became the unexpected beneficiaries of the policy and enjoy greater attention, educational investment, and opportunities to achieve their hopes and dreams through the suffering of their mothers' generation.

What can Chinese feminists learn from these books? How can we carry on the merits of the work with a clear vision of respect for women's reproductive health rights and promoting gender equality? In November 2013, the Chinese government eased the one-child policy by allowing couples to have two children if one of the parents is an only child. This is a big change that represents a critical moment for Chinese feminists to reflect and work on issues pertaining to population.

On the one hand, I think that we need more advocacy and research in the area of gender, body, and health in China—we may need a grassroots movement

like *Our Bodies Ourselves*⁴ in the United States to help women better understand their bodies and health, and identify harmful (cultural, medical, and daily) practices related to their health. On the other hand, oral history would be an effective method to gather women's stories and let their voices be heard, since social science in China has traditionally regarded women's issues—including abortion, breast cancer, breastfeeding, infertility, pregnancy and artificial impregnation, menstruation and menopause, eating disorders, etc.—as trivial and unimportant.

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1. The coercive story is the most prominent one to describe China as a “totalitarian other,” controlling the population and suppressing the reproductive desires of the Chinese people, causing societal resistance. It was first created by the Western media in the mid-1980s, and later became the de facto official story of the Chinese population program, shaping a number of important U.S. policies toward China (2010, pp. 3–6).

2. *Just One Child* was awarded the 2010 Joseph Levenson Prize of the Association for Asian Studies, the 2010 Rachel Carson Prize of the Society for the Social Study of Science, and honorable mentions in the 2010 Senior Book Prize of the American Ethnological Society and the 2009 Gregory Bateson Book Prize of the Society for Cultural Anthropology.

3. Ma Yinchu (1882–1982) was a prominent Chinese economist, who served as the president of Zhejiang University (1950–1951) and Peking University (1951–1960). He developed a new population theory and was the first person in China to advocate governmental control of fertility in the late 1950s. However, his proposal was rejected, his theory was attacked, he was ousted as president of Peking University and dismissed from public life. In September 1979, all charges against him were retracted, and he was made honorary president of Peking University.

4. *Our Bodies, Ourselves* is a book about women's health and sexuality produced by the nonprofit organization Our Bodies Ourselves (originally called the Boston Women's Health Book Collective) under the influence of the second wave feminist movement in the United States. First published in 1971, it contains information related to many aspects of women's health and sexuality, including sexual health, sexual orientation, gender identity, birth control, abortion, pregnancy and childbirth, violence and abuse, and menopause.

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