



CREATORS

The 'One Child' Policy Was Tyrannical in Theory and Brutally Oppressive in Practice: For Decades Western Apologists Downplayed the Horrific Consequences of China's Reproductive Restrictions

Jacob Sullum

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It is not surprising that the Chinese Communist Party, which this week further loosened its legal limits on reproduction, still does not admit the "one child" policy that Deng Xiaoping imposed four decades ago was a grievous error, tyrannical in theory and brutally oppressive in practice. But the extent to which Western apologists have downplayed that ugly reality *is* surprising — and shameful.

In 2009, Financial Post columnist Diane Francis declared that "a planetary law, such as China's one-child policy, is the only way to reverse the disastrous global birthrate." Four years later, BBC documentarian David Attenborough joined Francis in praising China's policy, although he regretted "the degree to which it has been enforced" and acknowledged that it "produced all kinds of personal tragedies."

New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman, who admires what a "one-party autocracy" such as China's can accomplish when it is "led by a reasonably enlightened group of people," thinks the one-child policy is a good example. In his 2008 book "Hot, Flat, and Crowded," Friedman said restrictions on family size "probably saved China from a population calamity" and expressed the hope that the Chinese government would show the same dictatorial fervor in pursuit of "net-zero buildings."

In a 2015 HuffPost essay titled "In Praise of China's One-Child Policy," Israeli environmentalist Alon Tal cited the famines that killed an estimated 45 million Chinese in the late 1950s and early '60s as evidence that strict population control was necessary. He did not mention Mao Zedong's calamitous Great Leap Forward, which caused those food shortages in a misguided attempt to modernize the Chinese economy by government fiat.

The assumption that coercion was necessary to reduce China's birth rate is contradicted by trends in other developing countries that never adopted such a policy. As Cato Institute Senior Fellow Marian Tupy notes, "plenty of other countries experienced dramatic declines in fertility, which is highly correlated with income and education, and does not necessitate draconian intervention by the government."

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The "personal tragedies" that Attenborough lamented were not, as he seems to think, an unfortunate side effect of an otherwise enlightened policy. They were necessary to enforce the government's dictates, which people predictably resisted.

The enforcement measures, which varied widely by time and place, included "family planning contracts," birth permits, gynecological surveillance, fines that could amount to several years of income, property confiscation, home demolitions, beatings, arbitrary detention, kidnapping of unauthorized children, denial of employment and government services, and forced abortions, sterilizations, and IUD insertions. While not all those methods were officially blessed by the central government, Brookings Institution scholar Wang Feng observed, the national policy was "so extreme that it emboldened local officials to act so inhumanely."

In her 2019 documentary, "One Child Nation," Nanfu Wang returns to the farming village in Jiangxi province where she was raised and talks to an uncle and an aunt who mournfully remember the infant daughters they felt compelled to abandon. Wang's grandfather says he had to dissuade local officials from sterilizing her mother after Wang was born.

A former family planning official tells Wang that "sometimes pregnant women tried to run away" from forced abortions, often performed at eight or nine months, and "we had to chase after them." A midwife estimates that she performed 50,000 to 60,000 sterilizations and abortions.

"Many I induced alive and killed," the midwife says. "My hand trembled doing it."

In 2011, notwithstanding the horrific consequences of China's reproductive controls, then-Vice President Joe Biden told students at Sichuan University that "your policy" is "one which I fully understand" and "I'm not second-guessing." The problem, Biden said, was that it had led to a rising ratio of retirees to workers, which was "not sustainable."

The Chinese government now seems to agree with Biden. But the problematic demographic results of China's experiment in coercive "family planning," which include a gender imbalance as well as an aging population, are hardly the worst thing that can be said about it.