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Just One Child: Science and Policy in Deng's China

Susan Greenhalgh; Berkeley: University of California Press; 2008; xxii + 403 pages; \$21.95 ppbk; ISBN 9780-520-253391

My interest in this book stemmed from my own experience in a single-child family (SCF), the typical setting of contemporary Chinese urban households. Labelled as the spoiled generation in flourished living conditions, those born under the one-child policy (OCP) are not as fortunate as the agitprop claims. Many singleton youths have been experiencing low love awareness but high neurotic and social depression, trait anxiety and perceived stressors (Liu, Munakata, Onuoha, 2005), not to mention the loneliness perceived by child and parent(s) in the SCF. At the same time, many mothers suffer numerous health issues brought by intrauterine device insertion or contraceptive operation which is a precondition for (continuing) employment and promotion in socialist workplaces. As households infringing the rules would be heavily penalized and even have their possessions confiscated, the OCP has generated peculiar migrants who leave their hometowns to elude the family planning officers.

In *Just One Child*, Susan Greenhalgh, an anthropologist at the University of California, Irvine, looks into the initial stage (1978-1980) of the OCP that consequently “tore families and communities apart” (p. xi) and “accelerated aging and a growing gap between the sexes” (p. xii). Indeed no other policies have the same degree of influence as the OCP has in post-reform China. However, it remains a mystery how this policy was established through intentional concealment. As the author asks, “Why did China’s leaders adopt a population policy that was certain to fail in reaching its demographic goals while producing so much harm in the attempt?” (p. xii).

In the first instance, the author explains her adoption of an epistemic or knowledge-centred approach that combines governmentality studies and science and technology studies (STS) with the anthropology of science making and policymaking. The major chapters are divided into two sections, namely *Making Population Science* and *Making Population Policy*. In the Conclusion, Greenhalgh strengthens her application of microhistory and micropolitics to examine the relationship between science and policy, which is driven by research question rather than disciplinary constraints, and to overcome the shortcomings of a solely institutional approach.

This book opens the black box. Since 1978, led by a group of defence scientists, a sinified cybernetics of population had taken up the high-ground of policy debate. Song Jian, the originator and leader of this group, had accumulated political fortune in Mao’s era as a missile specialist and control theorist. By employing advanced mathematics and computer techniques, the group’s population model showed the shocking metamorphosis of Chinese future population. The model, however, was based on inaccurate and incomplete data. These biased analyses were able to reach the very centre of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), a privilege unattainable by most social scientists. Scientists were deemed to be trustworthy in China, and the group successfully obtained the party leaders’ endorsements on the OCP, which was finally promoted to a basic state policy irrespective of social costs. Song denied that his work had been influenced by the group of population scientists known as the Club of Rome, it is believed that he wanted to be in a politically safe position or to preserve his aura of policy founder. Criticism of the OCP has become more fierce in recent years as China confronts ageing and labour shortages. Yet this group still advises the government’s population policy today, even though its findings have been proven to be incorrect and misleading.

Greenhalgh innovatively establishes a contextual framework for understanding party power, internal politics, the role played by knowledge, and the advancement of policy. Her analysis shows that Song had gradually built networks to the top policy-makers by fully utilizing his *guanxi* and

resources in military sector. Then the dubious nature of findings was purposely disguised by Song to the extent that the CCP finally requested him to lead the construction of OCP, which was officially accepted as the only choice to prevent any detriment to China's modernisation which might be caused by enlarging population. Song wanted to 'sell' his ideas and he was certainly aware of "the inherent value of the science and the high status of the scientist(s)" among the Party leaders (p.245). Song's work articulated in empirical terms the problem of population growth as it was being articulated by China's leaders and craft policy solutions to solve that problem (p.84). As Greenhalgh comments,

The brilliance of Song's interventions was that...he intervened at each crucial point with a new a strategically crafted quest for credibility that evidently was aimed at silencing doubters, gaining adherents, and ensuring the continued life of his ideas (p.314).

As a good story teller, Greenhalgh fills the work with detailed and exclusive materials from in-depth conversations, participant observation and documentary research. By describing the engagement with Chinese population policy in her career in an NGO and later a university, the author utilises fascinating research skills to get the most valuable and crucial information from top-level policy makers and people around them, who are usually inaccessible in China's political hierarchy. Without nearly 20 years' time and effort delving into this topic, it would be impossible to produce such a profound monograph. The readership of this book would be demographers, STS scholars, political scientists and anthropologists. As a lively account of alleged 'scientific policymaking' (*kexue juece*), this book should also interest wider audiences including political economists, historians and students on contemporary China. Together with her earlier book with Edwin A. Winckler (2005), and some other works (e.g. Fong 2004), readers can attain a comprehensive knowledge on the evolution of population policy in China in the last six decades and its existing and emerging social and economic consequences.

Angry critics have tauntingly said that Song must have been pleasantly surprised that not only missile but also his policy is a weapon of mass destruction with even higher efficiency.¹ The CCP has known such criticism but has feignedly ignored the indignation of many Chinese and made efforts to mend the shaking validity of the OCP. Despite this, a limited loosening of the policy has been recently observed. Hopefully freedom will eventually prevail.

References

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Fong, Vanessa L. (2004) *Only Hope: Coming of Age under China's One-Child Policy*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.

1 For example, see discussion in Tianyi Shequ, a famous online discussion site in China.
<http://bbs.tecn.cn/viewthread.php?tid=253643&extra=&page=1>.