

Losing an only child: the one-child policy and elderly care in China

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Abstract: *China has had the one-child policy for more than 30 years. It reduced China's population growth within a short period of time and promoted economic development. However, it has also led to difficulties, and this paper focuses on those which pertain to ageing and losing one's only child. Approximately one million families have lost their only child in China. They suffer mentally and physically, and sometimes face social stigma and economic loss. What worries them most, however, is elderly care, which has become a severe crisis for the families who have lost their only children. This article draws upon several qualitative studies and 12 cases reported by the Chinese media in 2012 and 2013, and existing laws and policies for supporting those who have lost only children. It also analyses the current elderly care situation facing these families. The Chinese government has recognized the predicament and provides some help, which is increasing but is still not always adequate. To both sustain China's economic development and limit population growth, it is essential for the government to reform the one-child policy and provide a comprehensive support system for the families who have lost their only children, including financial relief and elderly care, and work to reduce stigma against these families.*
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Keywords: one-child policy, child loss, elderly care, medical care, social security and benefits, pensions, China

China's one-child policy, to control its huge population, has been in place for more than 30 years.* It has reduced China's birth rate from 33.4 per 1,000 in 1970 to 12.1 per 1,000 in 2012. Accordingly, the natural growth rate of population in China has fallen, to 4.95 per 1,000 in 2012.¹ Needless to say, China's adoption of the one-child policy has contributed a lot not only to the control of population in the world but also the rapid economic development in China.

However, the rigid implementation of the one-child policy since 1980 has also brought many problems and challenges for the Chinese people, such as the high sex ratio at birth, labour shortages and an ageing population. Of all these issues, the ageing of the population is the most urgent. According to official statistics, China has the largest aged population over age 60 in the world – 194 million at the end of 2012. The number will continue to rise annually by 10 million and will reach an

estimated 487 million by 2053, accounting for 35% of China's total population.²

Among the elderly population, one group facing a possible care crisis are those who have lost their only children due to accident, disaster or disease, and who are unable to have another child because of age or low income. In China, these people are called *shidu* parents, i.e. parents who have lost their only children.[†] The official estimate of the annual number of deaths of only children aged 15–30 is 76,000. The total number of families who have lost their only children in China if children aged over 30 are included is approximately 1 million.³ If child deaths below age 15 are also taken into consideration, however, the total estimated number of *shidu* families is 2,412,600, including 826,900 families with urban household registration and 1,585,700 with rural household registration, according to estimates based on China's 6th National Population Census (2010).⁴

The loss of a child is always terrible, and the loss of an only child is perhaps worse.⁵ Yet this

*The one-child policy was launched with the "Open letter to all the members of the Communist Party and the Communist Youth League regarding the family planning issue in China", issued by the Chinese Government, 25 September 1980.

[†]*Shidu* is the transliteration of the Chinese words 失独 (losing an only child).

vulnerable group did not receive adequate attention from society or the government until recently. In official documents, *shidu* families and families with disabled children are described as “needy families especially affected by family planning policies”. To make their situation visible and claim their rights, some *shidu* families banded together and called for social and state support.

On 5 June 2012, over 80 representatives of *shidu* families in China submitted a petition to the National Health and Family Planning Commission, asking for economic compensation, cheaper housing in residential communities exclusively for *shidu* families, and designation of a special department to manage *shidu* issues.⁶ Their petition, signed by more than 1,000 *shidu* parents, said:

*“When we entered middle or old age, we unfortunately lost our only children...We are getting old day after day; who will care for us and bury us? We did not just lose our children. We lost the people who would continue our legacy, take care of us, sustain us and provide the most fundamental support for us in our old age.”*⁷

Although numerous scholars have studied elderly care in China, few have focused on elderly care for *shidu* families. This study seeks to enhance scholarly understanding of how China’s one-child policy affects the care of elderly *shidu* parents,* how Chinese government policy addresses this issue in the context of challenges in providing proper elderly care more broadly, and how elderly care of *shidu* families could be improved. It uses 12 cases covered by the Chinese media as examples and reviews the literature on the relevant laws and policies targeting this group of families. The article concludes with policy suggestions on improving the elderly care of *shidu* families.

The one-child policy in transition

The one-child policy in China has gone through three phases as regards the rigidity of its implementation. Between 1980 and 1982, the Chinese government encouraged people to have one child and rewarded those who did so, but did not punish anyone for not doing so, and there was no forced abortion. From 1982, the one-child

policy became a fundamental state policy, with very rigid implementation. People who had more than one child were fined, and if they had governmental affiliations, including working in public services, universities or state-owned enterprises, they would be fired.[†] Policy starting from the early 2000s is still strict, but the range of people who are allowed to have more than one child has grown. Couples who are both only children themselves are allowed to have a second child. More recently, couples in which one partner is an only child became eligible to have a second child too.** However, in both cases, the couples need to go through a very complicated procedure to apply to the local government for a permit. Otherwise, they will be fined and punished. Although the one-child policy has been reformed gradually, it is still not adequate to cope with the ageing crisis. Many scholars and experts are concerned that the issue of ageing will become critical if there is no fundamental reform of the one-child policy.^{8,9}

The definition of “elderly” in relation to work and benefits

In China, in the official demographic statistics, those aged 60 and over are counted in the elderly population. Due to the surplus labour supply, however, the age of retirement in China is earlier and also gender-biased. Men retire at 60, but those engaged in work demanding physical strength or facing dangers retire at 55. Women usually retire ten years earlier than men, i.e. at 45–50.¹⁰ The only exceptions for women are those who hold high-level positions in the state-owned enterprises, the public sector or are professors in universities or research institutions. “Old age” is defined as much earlier in the labour market. Men aged 50 and women aged 40 may be deemed old by employers and have great difficulty finding jobs, which is called by the Chinese government the “40–50-year old phenomenon”.¹¹ Besides age discrimination in the labour market, the trauma of losing their only children in middle age has

*The terms “*shidu* families” and “*shidu* parents” are used interchangeably here. Since all the relevant policies in China target families, the term “*shidu* families” will be used most of the time, except when parents are particularly referred to.

[†]In some parts of China, a couple with rural household registration are allowed to have another child if the first child is a girl; in some ethnic minority regions, a couple can have more than two children.

**Mentioned in: Resolutions on Deepening the Reforms on Several Major Issues, released by the Chinese government, 15 November 2013.

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