

Mei Fong Discusses New Book on China's One Child Policy

By Rebecca Krisel



Mei Fong

“Writing about the one-child policy is like trying to explain a tax code. I didn’t want to just give a dry analysis of the policy. I wanted to share the stories of the people most affected by the policy,” said Mei Fong MIA ’01.

The first Malaysian Pulitzer Prize winner, Fong visited SIPA on February 10, 2016, to discuss her first book, *One Child: The Story of China’s Most Radical Experiment*, released in November 2015. Fong’s vivid and thoroughly researched book tells the story of the consequences of China’s decision to restrict its population size.

Having experienced a miscarriage while she was reporting these stories, Fong became particularly interested in the human cost of the one-child policy: “[The book] is really a meditation on the cost of parenthood. I felt very personally connected to stories of parents who’ve lost children. And I decided to put myself into the book, because it lent itself to the story.”

Fong began her career in journalism as a reporter in Singapore at *The New Paper*, writing stories about local crime, forest fires in Indonesia, and gang warfare in Macau. With a scholarship from Singapore’s Lee Foundation, she came to SIPA with the intention of increasing her knowledge of policy. After graduating in 2001, Fong joined *The Wall Street Journal*, where she reported on New York’s

recovery after the 9-11 attacks and later won a shared Pulitzer for her stories on China’s transformation in the run-up to the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

The research for her book began while reporting on China’s worst disaster in a generation: “After the Sichuan earthquake, almost an entire generation was wiped out,” she said. “Since most of these families had been sterilized as a requirement under the one-child policy, they couldn’t have more children.”

The Chinese name for those parents whose only child has died is *shidu*, and this population is increasingly marginalized in Chinese society. “There are about a million *shidu* parents in China, with 76,000 joining their ranks yearly, and they’re really to be pitied, because they not only lose financial security with the death of a child, but they also have difficulty getting accepted into nursing homes or buying a burial plot, and they fall far down the societal totem pole,” said Fong.

The one-child policy also resulted in a lower female birth rate. “The Chinese population is too male, too old, and too few. By 2030, there will be a 30 million surplus in males,” noted Fong.

Though Chinese women in urban areas have generally benefited from the policy—their families have more resources to spend on education, health, and nutrition—the overall shortage of women will not translate into a gain for the female population at large: “I fear that there will be a backlash in the future against women’s rights in China. The fact that there is a shortage of women should suggest that they have the upper hand, but China is still a very patriarchal society. We do not see many women in business ranks and certainly none at the most political elite levels,” said Fong.

The Chinese population is also experiencing an increasingly aging demographic: “Currently, there is a nine percent retiree population, with a dependency ratio of about five working adults to support one retiree. That’s a healthy ratio. In about 20 years that’s going to jump to about 25 percent, with a dependency ratio of 1.6 working adults to support one retiree.” This ever-increasing retiree population will have implications for the Chinese economy as well as consequences on the size of pension funds for the future workforce.

Since the one-child policy was initially passed as a means to control population growth in China, one could claim that the policy was successful. Nonetheless, 30 years after the policy was introduced, it has brought into question the historical and cultural fabric of the Chinese family. “The policy is a victim of its own success,” noted Fong. “The little prince is becoming the little slave.”