

MCDB 150 Global Problems of Population Growth
Professor Robert Wyman

This is the transcript of a presentation given in class as part of Lecture 16. It has not been made available in audio and video at the speaker's request.

Qing: I was also born in 1983, and I will just tell you a little bit about my story. Now this is a very personal account so you shouldn't generalize it, it doesn't really represent maybe the majority of other experiences. It's just to give you a context of what the only child policy was like, what was it like to grow up with this policy.

Here's a little timeline, in the end of the 1970s, the one-child policy was enforced in China. It was enforced in most of the cities at first and then gradually spread to the countryside. Among my cousins, the last of my cousins who actually had a biological sibling was born in 1982. Now he was the youngest of three siblings and he was born in the suburbs where the policy wasn't so tight. His family paid 200 Yuan to have him be allowed but that wasn't even possible in the cities.

I was born in 1983 and in 1990 my mom got pregnant again, but it wasn't possible to have another child, so my sibling got aborted. As I heard, in early 2000, China loosened up the policy a little bit because of the problems that the one-child policy created. Now that one child has to take care of six elderly people, so what they allowed is if both of the couple's were only children now they can have two kids.

This is where I'm from. It's Liaoning Province and the capital of that is Shenyang, that's my city. These are just snapshots from my city, a little bit of my family, that's my grandfather, that's my grandmother, and that's my father. That's two of his half-sisters from my grandfather's previous marriage. My grandmother, as you can see, was a pretty beautiful woman when she was young, so my grandfather loved her dearly and to the extent that he listened to everything she said. Now she comes from a little bit rural area compared to the city. She didn't get much education, I think she went through sixth grade and didn't go beyond that. Her thoughts and her mindset is very traditional and that played a big role in the way that I grew up.

That's my mom and that's my dad, and they met each other when they were both in college even though they didn't go to the same college. They got married. Then a year after they got married I was born, so that's me, and you can see the date here if you read Chinese it's 1983, October 1st and this was taken in--where my grandfather worked. He was an Imam and he ran this mosque in the city. My city actually had a pretty big Islam population. That's my father's family again, so my grandpa, grandma, my father who was the oldest of the three, my uncle and my aunt. Now as the oldest child and the oldest son he had the obligation to produce an heir to the family, and the

heir in the traditional sense had to be a boy and that's where trouble comes in when I was born because I wasn't a boy.

Not there yet--I'll talk a little bit about my birth. I was premature. I was born around 33 weeks and I don't know where my grandmother heard this, but when my mother sensed that she was about to give birth my grandma got really, really happy because she heard that premature babies are all boys. They didn't really have much ultrasound back then so they didn't know the gender before the birth, so when my mom was about to give birth seven weeks early my grandma got very excited, so she woke up the obstetrician who was our backyard neighbor, and said, 'go hurry to the hospital my grandson is about to be born. You have to take him out.' That was the New Year's Eve of the year of the dog which was 1983, and it's the New Year is the next year so nobody really wanted to spend much time in the hospital.

The obstetrician just got in, cut my mom open, they didn't even wait for the labor to start really, just did a c-section, took me out and hurried home. On the way--going back to her house she stopped by my grandparent's house and yelled through the window and said, 'congratulations you have a beautiful granddaughter.' My grandmother just got--totally changed her attitude from--she was very excited, she was preparing little--sewing the little clothes for the baby and when she heard, as soon as she heard that it was a granddaughter she put it down and she said, 'forget about this I need to prepare for the New Year.'

My mom was recovering from the c-section and my father, feeling very guilty of not producing a son, didn't really mention anything about this daughter to the family when he went home. He just concentrated around the New Year's decorations, the celebrations, and I was left alone in the nursery for eight days. Nobody came to look at me, only when it's time for my mom to go home, on her discharge day they remembered, 'oh there was still a baby,' so they came to see me. I was kind of skinny, kind of dark, my hair was like grass, and I didn't look that healthy.

My grandmother looked at me and said to my father, 'you know maybe we shouldn't take her, let's just go home and try to have another child.' My father's half-sister, my second aunt kind of saved my life then. She insisted on taking me home. That's how my life started and during the time when my mom was pregnant my grandfather who was the head of the mosque and had some power in the city, had--what's been promised is separate apartment, and he said he would give the apartment to us to live in once I was born so my parents and I could move off from their house to the new apartment. Since I was a daughter this promise just disappeared, never mentioned again.

Instead my mother got an apartment allocated by where she worked. She taught at a university as a chemistry teacher, so we moved there. One note about China is the housing back then was all allocated by where you worked. You never owned a house or an apartment, everything was

owned by the country, owned by the workplace, and you got the right to live there, you don't have to pay rent but the house is not really yours. It's just a way how the government controls people's lives I guess.

Then we moved away but my mom, when I was two, she got a chance to study for a Master's Degree in Beijing so she moved to Beijing by herself and I was left home with my dad. Now my dad has to go to work during the day so he sent me to my grandparent's house and I spent a few years there growing up.

Now when I was three, around that time, my cousin was born and that's the son of this uncle in the middle. He was a boy, so finally the family has an heir, and everybody is very excited. My grandparents named him 'Heaven.' That's me and Heaven right here, so we both spent a lot of time at my grandparent's house. But through our--the treatment that we received was very different, because he was there because he belonged there. He was the heir of the family, he was the male grandchild and my grandparents they gladly took care of all of his expenses, including his tuition later on. I was there because my father asked them to watch me, so he had to pay almost half of his salary to my grandparents as the babysitting fee.

Just to give you an example of how we were treated differently, we would go to the ice cream store around the corner and each of us would get an ice cream, but I would eat pretty slowly, but Heaven would eat it fast. About halfway through when I still had two-thirds of my ice cream whereas he only had maybe one-third of his we were told to exchange, so I would end up having less ice cream. He just got very spoiled. That made me--that led me to think that if I had been a boy than I would really enjoy the only child treatment. I would have been spoiled as well, but unluckily that wasn't the case. That's a picture of me and Heaven a little bit older with my grandparents.

Now about--a little bit about the place that we lived. Shenyang is a very industrial city and there was a lot of pollution, a lot of high rise buildings, and as a result I felt like people lives were isolated. We basically just disappeared into these boxes of concrete and never saw each other again. This is the area where I lived. It's near the suburb, almost at the edge of the city with a newly built group of apartment compounds. That's my mom around the time when we just moved and they were still building those buildings, a year or so later when the buildings are built, and that's me over here.

This is a picture I found online but luckily they still had my old apartment building there. Around one of those windows is where my house used to be. This is the seventh floor a seven-story building. Each apartment is really very--it's--how do I say this? It's--the city, at the time where there's a lot of industry, a lot of people, and also when a lot of factories were actually shutting down because of the market economy and there were dangers just lurking around in the city and

people didn't feel very safe outside of their home. They basically protected their house with all that they could.

This is a kind of anti-theft door that would have five or six locks all throughout the place and that was a standard in every apartment building. All the windows would have these cages, so even in my apartment where it was on the seventh floor, we still had those cages. Most of the time we were just locked behind those caged doors and windows and inside those concrete boxes, so we never went out to play. We had classmates at school but we didn't really interact with them outside of the classroom. The whole city there's just lots of pollution, the air was pretty bad, and gloomy in a way.

As an only child, because we don't have siblings, we are locked alone at home and there isn't really any friends outside, so I can say the childhood was pretty lonely. That's my elementary school class. Also another thing that comes into play is when you're an only child all of your family's hope is on you, so they want you to go to the best school, get to the best college, graduate, and get the best job possible. My school is kind of like a magnet school that was at the other end of the city where the students came from all over the place, so that made it even harder for us to really interact outside of the school, so we didn't really see each other again. That's a school trip picture and all of my classmates were only children, except one, this boy here. His father divorced so he had a half brother and which made us really jealous.

Growing up in this kind of environment as an only child, only daughter made me longing for a sibling a lot and when it came time--when my parents told me that my mom's pregnant again in 1990 I was very excited. I had a lot of fantasies about this unborn sibling. I hoped that it would be a little brother because then my branch of the family--then the family name will be kind of honored again, my grandparents wouldn't treat us so badly, and also I would have somebody to play with.

It was really impossible for my mom to carry this pregnancy through. She had a public image that she needed to protect, she was--that's my mom right here in the center. She was like the best teacher of the University, got a lot of teaching awards, she was the model worker and she wasn't really allowed to do anything outside of the regulations. Also it was impossible to do anything outside the regulations because there was so many watching eyes around. All these people were basically instructed to keep an eye on each other, make sure you don't violate the country's policies, and to carry a big belly through classrooms and it was really impossible to hide.

That's my mom again giving some kind of speech at--this is actually some kind of woman's symposium. You might recognize the background as a 3-8, that's March 8th, it's the woman's day, International Woman's Day. She had this image that she to protect and she--what the pregnancy meant to her is--because of all these eyes that are watching she would be punished

by losing her job, by losing her teaching position, possibly her involvement with academia altogether, she would also with the job would lose the place where we lived because the apartments are all allocated by the workplace. She would lose her salary, she would lose her ways of buying food, and the same would happen to my dad as well. That's my dad who worked as an engineer in the cities—well, the industrial bureaus in the city.

Also she probably couldn't really carry the pregnancy through medically either. At that time to give birth, I think it's still the case now, you need what's called a birth permit. So this is what you get when you get married and you go to the planned parenthood--family planning committee of your district and you get permission to give birth. It would say something like, 'according to the law you're allowed to give birth to one child, within three months of your pregnancy, bring this to your local government to get services and when the child is born you can exchange this permit for the registration of the child.' Since I was already born my mom wouldn't have--be able to have gotten the birth permit for the sibling, so without the birth permit she wouldn't be able to be admitted to any hospital to give birth.

With a lot of factors coming into play she had to "take care of the pregnancy" as soon as possible before anybody could have found out. She told me that there wasn't really any other choices to make; it's just the way things should be. She got an abortion very early, it was probably within two months, and never really mentioned it again.

I have one of those things, it's called the Only Child Certificate, what it literally says is, 'to certify the proud parents of an only child,' but basically every child in China had this. That's just another picture of those other things that the government gives to you to keep track of your reproduction, so every woman who's in the reproductive age would get one of those. It has a list that keeps track of when you give birth, so I think this is a pretty recent one, so it has two--the spaces for two children here. It keeps track of what kind of birth control method you are using, when you got the IUD inserted, if any, and monthly checks of the birth control method. If you fail it that would be another probably meeting with the family planning committee.

My mom had one of those too where she had to fill out every month what kind of birth control method she was using, and to insure that no accidental pregnancies were possible. Not being able to have more than one child left a lot of regret in my parent's mind I think. One way we can see this is after we moved to America we see a lot of family with multiple children. My parents would look at them and be like if back then--then--now that they are both old and they can't really have any more children they are putting the hope on me, they hope that I will have as many kids as I can to fulfill their dreams for them. That's basically my story, thanks.

Professor Robert Wyman: Anybody--do you want to take questions?

Qing: Sure, any questions?

Professor Robert Wyman: What did your--this is--we've talked about this a lot, could you say a little bit about what you and your parents think on a sort of an individual level, as you said, what they think of it and what you think of the policy on a sort of national/international kind of level, as a political level thing.

Qing: Well so--we think--there are the claimed benefits of the only child policy, it reduced China's total fertility rate from six to two and what not, but we think it's--it comes with a lot of sacrifices, so one of them is the personal choice. My parents--my mom would really like to have at least two children, maybe three, but it wasn't possible so she thinks it should be more voluntary. It's good to educate the population about the citizens about the population crisis and try to encourage them the benefit of having fewer children, but just limiting it to one was too harsh. Yes.

Student: Do you find that it's sometimes [inaudible]?

Qing: It's not a matter of popular or not, right, everybody has to follow it.

Student: Do you mind following it?

Qing: From my--well I don't like following it and my parents certainly did not like following it, my classmates, elementary school classmates when I was growing up I think we all shared this kind of loneliness of being the only children, so I'm not sure on the greater level how to the statistics play out. I think you will read one of Professor Wyman's papers that kind of look like that.

Student: Do you think that that experience has changed the way you look at the world and the way you feel today?

Qing: Yeah. One way I think is my personality is a little more masculine than most girls because I kind of grew up as this only daughter who was supposed to be an only son. I took a lot of the responsibility of the house as I was growing up. If there was something I needed to be done but my parents weren't there I was the only one who could do it, so if I had a brother who can take care of those kinds of things I might have been a little more feminine. Yes.

Student: Do you think that the one-child policy has helped make women more equal or less equal?

Professor Robert Wyman: Can you repeat the question?

Qing: The question is do I think the one-child policy made men and women more equal or less equal? I guess you can say that it's more equal in the way that the women had to take up the responsibilities of the man in the family. If you are the only daughter and your parents got sick you are the one who has to take care of them, you are the one who has to give them money every month, whereas, traditionally that's something done by the men.

It made it less equal in the way that a lot of--because the gender role in China is built through the 5,000 years of history, it's hard to change. Even though you are both only children, people are still happier if you are the son, so I think one way we can look at it is the sex ratio of China is very skewed, and there's far more boys being born than girls. There are many theories about how that happens but I think that kind of reflects how the people think boys and girls are not really equal. This kind of thought is still deeply rooted. Yes.

Student: I noticed in the picture of your classmates that a lot of your classmates seemed to be boys, and did you--did you guys ever sort of talk about how you were treated at home, or did you notice the difference between maybe--were they happier?

Qing: The question is "did I and my classmates talk about our experience growing up, whether boys and girls were treated differently at home"? I don't remember talking much, except maybe because we didn't already interact on the personal level, we didn't really see each other--I've only been to one of my classmates homes once and that was because it was raining when we got released from the school and I got soaked, so she invited me to come over and dry off. Other than that we never really visited each other's homes, we never see each other outside of the context of the classroom, which you might think is weird. I guess that was kind of the standard when I was growing up the city. Yes.

Student: Did second children have access to the same public services or were they non-existent as far as the government was concerned?

Qing: Does the second children have access to public services or were they pretty much just non-existent? Well if you can bring a second child into the world in the first place then you will have a second child but this second child is pretty much non-existent to the public eye. Because without the birth permit you can't register the child with the government.

Student: [Inaudible]

Qing: That would have been very hard.

Professor Robert Wyman: Can you say a little about the city--countryside difference? If not I'll talk about it.

Qing: The city countryside difference--from my personal experience I think the policy was a little looser in the countryside. Partly because there's not much you can control for people living in the countryside, and if you were a farmer you had land, you can produce your own rice and eat it but if you lived in the city you didn't have land, you had to buy rice and where do you get the money to buy rice? You had to work and who controlled the work? It's the government. In that way the city people just had more things that's not in their control like housing, money, public education, whereas the countryside they didn't have to lose much if they had a second child, they already were not--they were not getting housing from the government, they were not planning--probably not planning to send their kids to much schooling anyway, so that's my impression.