

## *"Choose Life" A Reflection on the Story of Chi An*

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### *A Mother's Ordeal*

#### *One Woman's Fight Against China's One-Child Policy*

Steven W. Mosher and Chi An

Little, Brown and Company, London, 1993.

What follows is not strictly a book review; it is rather a reflection on China's one-child policy in light of Chi An's touching story.

*"I was fascinated by the tortured figure on the cross that hung over the altar. Why would anyone worship a dead God, I thought to myself....Perhaps there was something to all this after all (p.324).*

*"I remembered the hundreds of women I had forced to have abortions, how they had writhed and screamed and cried. And I remembered my own abortion, and how I had writhed and screamed and cried. If this tortured figure was God, then surely he understood the pain and suffering that I had felt and caused. Was there in his death a larger meaning?" (p.325).*

Chi An found peace, freedom and inner strength from her new found faith and her newly acquired political asylum in the United States. Convinced that her good fortune was the result of God's mercy and love and the goodness of hundreds of people, most of whom she had never met, she resolved to spend the rest of her life doing good to others. She would let the world know of the agony millions of women in China have suffered from being sterilized against their will or forced to have abortions. She knew that she had to atone for the physical and psychological pain she herself had inflicted on hundreds of women whose babies she had taken from them. She knew what she had to do. No matter how painful it might be, she would begin by telling her story.

Chi An's story as told to Steven W. Mosher, is an unforgettable, heartrending narrative of a woman unwittingly and unwillingly caught in the maelstrom of China's struggle to limit

its population growth by enforcing the one-child Policy.

The problem of population is not new in China. Back in the 1860s, a Chinese official called for millions of young men and women to become Buddhist monks and nuns as a humane way of solving China's overpopulation problem. At that time China had some 400 million people. Over the next decades, the population increased at an average rate of only 0.4%. After 1949, public health improved, food was better distributed, infants were less likely to die, and people multiplied. Chairman Mao said: "People are the most precious thing under heaven". Chi An remembered how the people at that time were encouraged to have large families, but she also recalled the suffering caused by Mao's ill-advised Great Leap Forward and the famine that followed in 1960-61, when it is estimated that some 20 million people died of starvation.

By 1972, the State Office of Planned Births, inoperative since the mid-fifties, was reactivated. In April, the head of the sanitarium where Chi An worked explained the State Council's new directive:

*"...The Liaoning provincial department of health has given us a new assignment: birth control. The watch word of the new campaign is 'late, spaced and few,'" he said. " 'Late' refers to late marriage. 'Spaced' means that children are to be born at least four years apart. 'Few' means no more than two children. You will help in this campaign by sterilizing and inserting IUDs in rural women as directed by local birth control officials" (p.116).*

The government saw the control of births as essential for its socialist revolution and socialist construction.

In January 1980, when the population was nearing one billion, the government issued Document I which called for a national campaign to promote planned parenthood and legal, administrative and economic strategies to limit married couples to one child. The statistic constantly quoted is "China must feed 22% of the world's population on 7% of the world's arable land" (*China Daily*, 5 Sept., 1994). Rewards offered to those who signed the one-child pledge, and penalties imposed on those who did not, soon helped cut birthrates in both the cities and countryside. A billboard in Beijing displayed a smiling young couple holding a baby girl. The Chinese caption read: "Bearing only one child is best". Underneath, the caption in English warned: "*You had better have only one child*".

On the whole, people in the cities were more easily persuaded. Given a small apartment, both parents working, the child's need for as many years of education as possible, and keeping up with the neighbors made it difficult to rear several children.

The story is different for the 80% of the Chinese who still live in the countryside. Now that the communes have been dissolved and the land returned to individual families, every couple wants more than one child. Sons, of course, are generally preferred. Sons till the soil, provide for their parents' old age, give them a first-class burial, offer sacrifices for their spiritual needs after death, and keep the family line going. Labeling these last three activities "feudal superstition" has had little or no effect. In China, girls have always been more expendable than boys. When a young woman marries she ordinarily moves into her husband's home, often in a nearby village. She is seen as being of little value to her own family.

Throughout China's long history, a fallout of this mentality has been the infanticide of girl babies. With the one-child and birth control policies this ugly traditional practice has surfaced again. Today, there are many confirmed reports of parents themselves killing a newborn daughter. Not infrequently girl babies are drowned, asphyxiated, abandoned in waste cans or in the mountains. Other parents prefer to let their sick baby daughter die without taking her to a clinic for a cure. The death of the daughter sometimes makes it possible to have a son. The law, of course, prohibits the abandonment and drowning of female babies and other forms of infanticide but the fact remains that the birth control policy has resulted in a disproportionate number of baby boys to baby girls. In Guangxi alone in 1989, there were 126 boys registered to every 100 girls. The national average according to recent statistics is given as 118 boys to every 100 girls. This is already the world's most skewed ratio. The world average is 105 boys to every 100 girls.

Many women have found ways to buck the system and frustrate the government's plan. One way is for a pregnant woman to go into hiding and not report the birth of an "unplanned" child, that is, one not allowed within the limits of the birth plan for their district. These "unregistered" or "black market births" as they are called, may now account for as many as tens of millions of children. The State, aware of the situation, eventually came to realize that farm couples could not be limited to one

child by administrative decree, so in many places they now allow a second child if the firstborn is a girl. It is a known fact, however, that even couples with a son also want a second child.

In spite of clear evidence to the contrary, the government still maintains that, "*Women's rights to decide whether or not to bear children are fully protected...In the new China, women are in control of their own child bearing*" (*Beijing Review*, Vol. 37, '94 p.19). But let us see what actually happened when Chi An unexpectedly got pregnant seven months after the birth of her son. Her fears are evident, "*The thought of confrontation with authorities was emotionally overwhelming*" ( p. 201). It was so overwhelming, in fact, that she decided not to report her pregnancy to the population control official. Sooner or later, however, she knew there would be no hiding the fact. When the population control official discovered Chi An's pregnancy, she barraged her with threats and finally, gave her the ultimatum. "*I have made an appointment for you at the hospital tomorrow morning at 8:00 a.m....I intend to accompany you...There will be no more delays*" (p. 202). So much for Chi An being in control of her own child bearing! In spite of physical complications that could have caused her death, one doctor was willing to proceed with the abortion. It was soon over! The population control official led her to the postoperative room. Chi An recalls, "*I fell on my hands and knees to the floor and sobbed, 'Please forgive me. Heaven, if you can hear me, please forgive me for what I have done'*" (pp. 206-7).

This would not be the end of Chi An's troubles or confrontations with population control authorities. The worst was still to come.

The government also maintains: "*Whether or not a pregnant woman has a sterilization or abortion depends totally on her own wish...China does not advocate induced abortion as a means of birth control...*" (*Beijing Review*, op. cit., p. 9-12). The fact remains that in the early 1980s, in a desperate attempt to limit family size, the government tried to limit even peasant families to one child, through forced IUD insertions, sterilizations and abortions. It is reported that since 1980, there have been some 10 million abortions yearly in China. Also in 1983 alone there were more than 20 million sterilizations. Obviously, all of these could hardly have been the expressed wishes of all the women involved. The government admits that in some places coercion

may happen but it also insists that those caught violating policies while performing public services may be charged in accordance with the law. The government alleges further that *They [women] display great enthusiasm for the State's family planning policy and an overwhelming majority of them are willing to marry late and have children late and have fewer children (ibid.,)*. But in fact, a population control official from Chi An's former work unit in Liaoning writes: *"In the last few months some women pregnant with "illegal" children have been forced to have an abortion during the eighth or ninth month of pregnancy, or even at the time of birth.... Officials have used physical force, dragging or pushing pregnant women to the abortion clinic for the operation..."* (p. 2). This is certainly a strange way for these women to manifest their enthusiasm!

In January 1979, Wei Xin, Chi An's husband, was nominated for a government scholarship to study abroad in the United States. Without informing Wei Xin, the population control officer threatened to have his scholarship withdrawn if Chi An did not sign the one-child pledge. And so, without telling Wei immediately why she had done so, Chi An signed away her "right" ever to have another child. Wei Xin left for the United States on March 6, 1980.

After he left, Chi An, who was a trained nurse and also a dedicated Party worker, asked for a transfer of jobs. With this job transfer, effected only through her mother's efforts, Chi An unwittingly found herself deeply involved in performing sterilizations and abortions. Her bitterness at having been forced into an abortion and having had to sign the one-child policy agreement suddenly made her insensitive to the feelings and sufferings of other women. Pressed into service as a surgical assistant, Chi An soon found herself helping doctors perform as many as a dozen tubal ligations a day for eight to ten days running. Her work eventually even forced her to perform late-term abortions and even to take care of "illegal" births through lethal injections at birth.

Filled with remorse, guilt and self-recrimination, Chi An realized she had to extricate herself from this terrible situation. She eventually found a way. After considerable difficulty she was able to obtain a permit to join her husband for two years in the United States.

A few months after joining Wei Xin, and to her total sur-

prise, Chi An discovered she was pregnant. After long deliberation she decided to write to the head of the population control office in Liaoning to see if the one-child policy applied to couples living outside of China. The answer was swift and clear, "*Whether your child was conceived in America or China makes no difference. Second children are absolutely banned. I hope that you do not lose any time and take care of this problem as soon as possible...*" (p. 303).

Another letter from the population control office arrived in September, one month later, "...*Moreover our whole factory will be disqualified from any production contents, and the bonuses and benefits of all employees will be negatively affected....we will all be punished. The consequences for you are unthinkable...You should seriously reflect on these consequences and come to a speedy decision to fix your problem....We expect you to report your actions to factory officials as soon as you receive this letter....There is no time to waste*" (p. 309).

As the days passed, Chi An realized that she and Wei Xin had reached the point of no return. The China that had always been their home would not welcome them back. They would have to seek and obtain political asylum in the United States.

What are we to make of such a situation? Of this brutal enforcement of this "culture of death"? What does *right to life* mean? And who has a *right to life*? Can any government, agency or person deny that right? And especially to one as defenseless as an unborn child? These are important moral, ethical and political questions as the legislation of more and more countries, even so-called Christian countries, legally authorize adults to terminate pregnancies. This also poses a terrible dilemma for poor countries that find themselves with an ever-growing population that they can neither feed, educate nor house.

In the year 2000, China will have 1.3 billion people, not 1.2 billion, which was the target announced in 1979. The population will stop growing around the middle of the next century at 1.6 or 1.7 billion, a far cry from the goal of 700 million set when the one-child program began. A report released last summer (1994), says that such a population can be fed a simple diet, but strict recycling of water and raw materials, and energy conservation are crucial.

Confronted with this reality no person, agency or church can afford to ignore the rate of population growth. As the Holy Father says in his latest book, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, "The right path is that which the Church calls *responsible parenthood*; that is taught by the Church's family counseling programs. *Responsible parenthood is the necessary condition for authentic human love, and it is also the necessary condition for authentic conjugal love*, because love cannot be irresponsible" (p. 237). Although the Church's teaching on abortion, birth control and the sacredness of life are well known, knowledge of natural family planning methods are not widespread within the Catholic Church in China. Much more needs to be done by way of educating both the clergy and the people. Theologians from Hong Kong, who have been permitted by the government to teach at Sheshan Seminary in Shanghai, are helping mainland pastors guide their Catholics to a fuller understanding of Christian sexuality and family planning. This has opened the door for mainland priests, seminarians and laity to deepen and update their understanding of the church's teaching.

*"As Wei Xin looked on, I stretched out my arms to take her from the nurse, suddenly aware of the significance of the moment. It was for the sake of this tiny human being that I had endured so many months of long distance blackmail and personal torment.... You are safe now, my little 'illegal' daughter.... Whatever happens now, no one can ever take you away from me"* (p. 320).

Unto us a Child is born,  
King of all Creation,  
Came he to a world forlorn,  
The Lord of every nation.



Merry Christmas  
Happy New Year

from the Holy Spirit Study Centre Staff