

## Reproductive Realities in Modern China

Lasting from 1979 to 2015, China's One Child Policy is often remembered as one of the most ambitious social engineering projects to date and is considered emblematic of global efforts to regulate population growth during the twentieth century. Drawing on a rich combination of archival research and oral history, Sarah Mellors Rodriguez analyzes how ordinary people, particularly women, navigated China's shifting fertility policies before and during the One Child Policy era. She examines the implementation and reception of these policies and reveals that they were often contradictory and unevenly enforced, as men and women challenged, reworked, and co-opted state policies to suit their own needs. By situating the One Child Policy within the longer history of birth control and abortion in China, *Reproductive Realities in Modern China* exposes important historical continuities, such as the enduring reliance on abortion as contraception and the precariousness of state control over reproduction.

Sarah Mellors Rodriguez is Assistant Professor of History at Missouri State University.

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# Reproductive Realities in Modern China

*Birth Control and Abortion, 1911–2021*

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Sarah Mellors Rodriguez  
Missouri State University



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## Note on the Text

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**A Note on Terminology:** Without denying the limits of biologically-based binary definitions of gender, for the sake of word variation, this book uses the terms “woman” and “female” interchangeably, as well as the terms “man” and “male.” While in no way seeking to perpetuate the erasure of transgender or non-binary experiences, this semantic decision also reflects the fact that, in the eyes of historical power holders, the discourses and policies under discussion were primarily aimed at women and men assumed to be heterosexual and cisgender.

**A Note on Chinese Characters:** Citations of texts from the Republican period (1911–1949) are rendered in traditional characters, as was the norm during that period. The names of sources from the People’s Republic of China (1949–present), however, are written in simplified characters, which became standard under the new regime. Because most of this book focuses on the period after 1949, the terms in the glossary are also written in simplified characters.

Table 1 *Timeline of Important Events*

1840–1842	First Opium War; establishment of foreign treaty ports in China
1856–1860	Second Opium War
1898	Failed Qing reforms
1911	Qing Dynasty overthrown and Republican Period begins
1916–1927	Warlord era
1910s–1920s	May Fourth / New Culture Movement
1921	Chinese Communist Party established
1927	Much of China unified under Nationalists; Communists retreat to the hinterland
1931	Japanese occupy Manchuria
1937	Japanese army invades northeastern China, starting World War II
1937–1945	World War II
1945–1949	Civil war between Communists and Nationalists
1949	Nationalists defeated; People’s Republic of China established
1949–1953	Birth control, abortion, and sterilization tightly regulated; couples encouraged to have many children

Table 1 (*cont.*)

1954–1958	First “Birth Planning” Campaign; restrictions on birth control, abortion, and sterilization relaxed slightly
1956–1957	Hundred Flowers Movement; intellectuals criticize China’s unfettered population growth
1957–1958	Anti-Rightist Campaign; critics of natalism silenced
1959–1961	Great Leap Forward and famine
1962–1965	Second “Birth Planning” Campaign; urban and rural couples encouraged to practice family planning
1966–1976	Cultural revolution
1968–1980	Sent-Down Youth Movement (this movement actually began in 1955, but the number of participants increased dramatically in 1968)
1968–1983	Barefoot doctors sent to the countryside
1971–1978	Birth planning work intensifies
1976	Mao Zedong dies
1978	Reform era begins
1979	One Child Policy enacted
1984	One Child Policy relaxed in some cases
2015	One Child Policy replaced with Two Child Policy
2021	Two Child Policy replaced with Three Child Policy

*Source:* The periodization of birth planning campaigns is taken from Masako Kohama, “Jihua shengyu de kaiduan – 1950–1960 niandai de Shanghai” (The Beginnings of Birth Planning in Shanghai in the 1950s and 1960s), *Zhongyang yanjiuyuan jindaishi yanjiusuo jikan* (Academia Sinica Institute of Modern History) 68 (2010): 99.