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Table of Contents

Introductionpage 3

Context and Background.....page 4

Story and Perspective.....page 8

Body of Work

 Formpage 13

 Material and Techniquespage 15

Conclusionpage 16

Introduction

My memories are inextricably linked to my experience growing up as an only child. Like many Chinese families both of my parents worked. When my grandparents did not have time to look after me, my parents would leave me home alone watching cartoons on TV. In China, male children are generally favored over female children and it is not uncommon for parents to leave their children alone while they work resulting in neglect and the feeling of loneliness. My experiences as an only child are common for millions children born under the One Child Policy.

In recent decades, the structure of the Chinese family has been transformed by the government's One Child Policy. Urbanization and industrialization have further complicated the social shifts that have resulted in rapid and unbalanced transformation. I use the traditional Chinese form of the calabash as a canvas to explore and record stories that illustrate these social shifts. These stories demonstrate the impact of this policy and its transformation of China. These calabash objects suggest that everyday life can be surreal, ridiculous, and absurd. This paper supports my Calabash work series, providing important cultural context, material and technical information, academic statistics, and media reports of the stories told.

Context and Background

China, the country with the highest population in the world, was a poor and hungry place after the Second World War, Chinese Civil War, and Communist Revolution. In order to improve the quality of life and economic inequality, the Chinese government introduced the one-child policy beginning in 1978, a family planning policy intended to control population growth. Generally speaking, most Chinese families were prohibited from having more than one-child (Hesketh).



Image 1 a family photo taken around 100 years ago



Image 2 Tu Lou in Fujian province

The traditional paternal family system includes many family members living together under one household (Image 1). An excellent example is a special local housing style in Fujian Province. The above image is of a housing complex called Tu Lou (Image 2). Each small family unit, consisting of a man with his wife and children, lives in a room. The entire house is a big family system. The middle area of the house is usually a ceremony site for their ancestors and even a children's schooling area. This traditional family system has been undermined by the instituted policy. While the one-child policy

has increased the level of education, health, and average wealth of Chinese people, changes to the familial structure have also brought about many social problems, such as an exponentially smaller generation assuming the burden of care for older generations. This is known as the “4:2:1 Phenomenon,” meaning that increasing numbers of couples will be solely responsible for the care of one child and four parents. The two images below show the changes in family style after the Communist Revolution: image 3, taken in the 1960s, shows my mother in the middle with her parents and three brothers; friends admired their family because they had three boys. Image 4 was taken in the 1980s, which shows me in the middle with my parents. As a single child, I will assume the



Image 3



Image 4

responsibility of caring for my four grandparents and two parents. While a single child might benefit from being the sole focus of love and attention, they are also burdened with the responsibility of care for all elder family members.

Traditionally, Chinese families prefer boys over girls. Since couples could only have a single child, the policy increased the rate of abortions. Most of the aborted fetuses are

female. In the countryside, disabled or elderly grandparents are often left at home with the dependent children while the able-bodied parents go to the cities to work (Hesketh). These social problems caused the government to relax the one-child policy twice, once in 2013 and 2014. The following list describes the rules of the first relaxation of the one-child policy in Beijing:

Regulations from Beijing Municipality on Population and Family Planning

A couple may give birth to a second child if:

- (1) The couple has just one child, who is handicapped or unable to work because of non-hereditary diseases.
- (2) Both parents are only children themselves, and have just one child so far.
- (3) The couple adopted their first child because one of them was diagnosed as infertile.
- (4) The couples remarried but have only one child in total.
- (5) The couples are ethnic minorities who moved to the city from provinces bordering other countries and were given permission from a high-ranking Family Planning office before they moved.
- (6) The husband has brothers, but only one brother is able to give birth, and the others have promised not to adopt.
- (7) The husband is a farmer who married a woman already with a daughter (this only if that husband pledges to care for the woman's parents).
- (8) The couples are rural farmers, in which one spouse is a handicapped soldier with an injury grade B or above or can no longer work.
- (9) The couple are farmers from the deep mountains who only have a daughter, depend on farming and are poor. (Fisher)

Critiques of the Chinese one-child policy have been ongoing since the Chinese government introduced it in 1979. Both western and eastern scholars were interested in this topic during the 1980s, as shown by *China's One-Child Family Policy*, edited by Elisabeth Croll, Delia Davin, and Penny Kane, which provide valuable research and survey materials useful to subsequent studies. Another book, *Fatal Misconception: The Struggle to Control World Population* by Matthew Connelly, records many problems and incidents relating to this governmental policy. There are also studies and surveys that are very popular with Chinese academic and governmental organizations, such as the 1981 survey, *Study in the Education of Single-Child* by Liu Zhen and the later study in 2014, *Psychological Comparison Study Between Single-child and Non-single-child University Students* by Xiaowen Zhang.

In the field of fine art, the transformation of the Chinese family is a vital topic connected to the one-child policy and urbanization. In the exhibition *Terracotta*



Image 5 *Terracotta Daughters*



Image 6 *Two of Us*

Daughters, as shown in image 5, French artist Prune Nourry explored the unbalanced sex ratio in China and its effect on traditional Chinese culture (Montefiore). Particularly for

Chinese artists born in the 1980's the topic is very important, because they were directly impacted by the policy. For example, Fan Shisan Photoshop's her subject to make it appear as if the subject is staring at themselves, as seen in image 6. They look anxious and filled with worry. Fan's work shows the expression of the psychological effects on the one-child generation (Hall).

Along with the academic and artistic exploration of these social problems, many incidents covered by the news media are attributed to these resulting social problems, and reflect the results of social structural changes. As a product of this policy and culture I am compelled to use my work to record this portrait of a changed China.

Story and Perspective

These stories are retold versions of real incidents from the past three decades. My research method employed was to collect past news items; relevant contemporary stories that reflect and record the experiences of one-child families and changes in family structures. In addition, sociological studies and critiques provide statistical and historical support for my research and the perspectives these stories demonstrate. In these stories, I insert myself in the scenes as if the stories happened to me. In doing so I suggest that behind the individual physic wound is collective trauma. I hope to enable the viewer to enter the story with me and become involved and imagine him or herself in my place within each situation.

Stories:

Dec. 12 1983

On my way back home from school, I found two boys with their heads cut off standing by the road. I realized that I know that they are the village cadre's sons. The cadre's two sons were just killed by a man. This man has two daughters already. His wife gets pregnant again, which breaks the one-child policy. Thus the village cadre forced his wife to abort. When the man realized the dead infant was a boy, he was very angry and killed two sons of the village cadre (Zhou, 184).

Perspective: Expect the viewers to be able to think about the relationship between individual rights and the benefits for the entire society. I attempt to make the audience think about the unbalanced sex ratio in China (Table 1, 2). In traditional Chinese culture, boys are preferred over girls. In 1991, in Tianjing in the Hexi District, a survey showed that 55% of divorces resulted from the births of females (Zhou, 180). The government's policy has made peoples' day-to-day lives better, but we are also sensitive because personal benefits are affected (Connelly, 237-326).

Sex ratio (males per 100 females)		
Year	At birth	Population aged 0-4
1953	104.9	107.3
1964	103.8	106.5
1982	107.6	107.0
1990	111.8	109.8
1995	116.6	118.8
2000	117.8	120.8
2003		121.2

Table 1 (Naughton, 171)

Apr. 1, 2011

I had just arrived at Shanghai airport from New York. I heard a lady shout and lay down in her own blood. A young man was standing by her side, looking angry and holding a knife. When I arrived home, I heard the news saying that a university student just came back from school abroad, because his mother did not have enough money to support his study and living expenses. He was furious and used a knife to kill his mother in the airport (Zang and Yang).

Perspective: One of the original goals of the one-child policy was to increase education and health of children. The one-child policy influenced social structures, which have some clear disadvantages compared to a natural social structure. These include impacts on children's

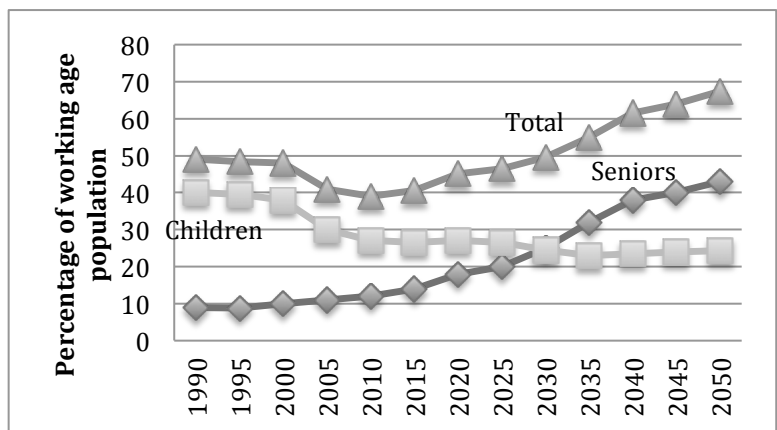


Table 2 (Naughton, 173)

psychological health, family education, and the social pension system. The resulting age structure of society is a serious contemporary social concern (see table 2). Young people feel stressed under the heavy load of taking care of their parents and grandparents.

Sept. 20, 2011

I went to the countryside near my hometown. I wanted to get some water to drink, so I knocked at a door, but there was no response. Then, I smelled a terrible odor and pushed

the door of a house open. An old woman lay dead inside. An infant was lying by the body. The one-year-old granddaughter had stayed by the dead lady for seven days without care or feeding (Wang and Su).

Perspective: Left-behind elders and children are commonplace in China. The need for workers increased rapidly due to industrialization. Young adults left the countryside for the cities leaving elders and children at home without care (Gaubatz, 280-309).

Aug. 1, 2013

I was passing by a window and saw an old man killing his own granddaughter with toxic medicine. According to the news, the reason for killing the little girl is that he did not want her father to take her away. The girl's father used to take drugs and had never taken care of her, according to her grandfather (Mu).

Perspective: The traditional relations among Chinese family members are transformed by rapid urbanization and governmental policy (Gaubatz, 280-309).

Sept. 10, 2014

A man was talking with me next to a residential skyscraper. Suddenly, he noticed there was a lady looking upward with a frightened face. A baby was falling down from a window on the 17th floor. The man ran to the spot and used his arms to try and catch the baby but failed. This is the fourth child-falling incident this month (Modern).

Perspective: After the Communist Revolution, the social standing of Chinese women had improved, which was a big success for feminism. However, it is common for parents

to leave their child at home without care while they are at work. In traditional Chinese culture, married women must stay in their husband's home with his parents. However, women prefer the independent small family style.

Jan. 18, 2015

Recently, the Chinese government introduced the second-child policy. If one of the parents is an only child, they are now permitted to have a second child. My mother's friend, a 44-year-old mother, got pregnant when her first daughter was 13. Her daughter was afraid of losing her mother's love after the second child was born. Therefore, she refused to go to school and even tried to kill herself. Finally, her mother went to hospital to have an abortion (Kai).

Perspective: Many children of the one-child generation lost their brothers and sisters, while parents lost opportunity to build a multi-child family. Most only children possess a



Image 7, a still image from New Book of Mountains and Seas part 2 by Qiu Anxiong

self-centered character, expecting to receive all of their parents love. The government noticed the social problems of the one-child policy, so it was changed. However, changing back may cause more problems.

These stories are absurd but real. Today, traditional superstitions and myths are often dismissed, perceived to be of little practical value in contemporary society. However, moral stories are cultural solutions to problems

that plague the society that produced it. These above stories are contemporary myths, and moral stories. Qiu Anxiong's animation *New Book of Mountains and Seas*, as seen in image 7, uses the form of a traditional Chinese book called *Book of Mountains and Seas* to critically describe contemporary everyday life. My stories also function in this way; retelling the new realities of Chinese culture (Qiu).

Body of Work

Form

The sculptural vessel is based on the natural gourd - calabash. In traditional Chinese ceramic forms (Image 8), the calabash possesses classical proportions. Its seeds symbolize the wishes of having more children, who inherit family blood and honor. However, for the generation born in the 1980s, it brings to mind a cartoon series called the *Calabash Brothers*, one of China's most popular cultural products. The *Calabash Brothers* tells of a story about seven calabash brothers, representing a multi-child family, and the monsters who want to kill them in a kiln, which represents the one-child policy. Instead of being killed the brothers are fused into a single, super calabash brother. Representing an only child, the super calabash brother brings many troubles, representing the social issues caused by an unbalanced social structure, to the monsters. The story mirrors the historical situation of



Image 8

the one-child policy era: the Chinese government wanted to control the number of children in order to reduce the social stress from large population; however, the unbalanced population structure caused by the one-child policy produced other social problems.



Image 9

Seen as a solution to the current social problems caused by the policy, the government elected to relax the policy and revive the style and values of traditional family. However, the gap between traditional and contemporary values, are

proving hard to bridge. In my Calabash series I split the form into sections (image 9), representing the break between modernization and tradition. Seven Keraflex Porcelain and seven enameled copper calabash forms are paired. Keraflex is a new porcelain component that contains plastic-base material, which provides the material flexible attributes before it's fired. The Keraflex vessels are painted to depict the individual stories reported by the media, while the paintings on the enameled copper vessels illustrate deep social problems, such as unbalanced authority, traditional filial piety, urbanization, gender preference, feminism, individualism, and collectivism. The specific incidents depicted are shocking and fantastic. The surfaces of the seventh pair are blank

because the governmental policy is still influencing the society. The blank surface will provides space for audiences' own predictions.

The superficial solutions to these problems are fragile, and like porcelain, can be broken into pieces and forgotten. However, the deep and serious social problems remain, as represented by the stable and enduring surface of the enameled metal.

Material and Techniques

Keraflex Porcelain sheet, copper sheet, and enamel are the primary materials used. Keraflex is fired to cone 10 (specific firing temperature for ceramic); enamel is fired on the copper; and then layers of overglaze paint are added and fired to cone 017 (specific firing temperature for enamel).



Image 10. enameled copper

Computer-aided design is used to layout three-dimensional sections from each Calabash form. A laser cutter is used to make the Keraflex parts, which are then fabricated together into a three-dimensional form (Image 10). The copper sections are cut by hand.

Conclusion

The calabash series is a medium for recording the stories of a generation. The stories take on a surreal quality despite being based on real incidents, presenting an important perspective of contemporary life in China, and Chinese society. The Calabash series is a way to contemplate these social problems, past, present, and future. These stories become new myths or morals, helping us to rethink ways of governing, living, and understanding each other.

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