

A brutal abortion calls into question China's "one child" policy

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Graphic online photos and video showing a forced abortion of a 22-year-old woman, with her bloodied late-term foetus next to her, has provoked public uproar in China and internationally, directed against the country's birth control regime and its "one child" policy.

Feng Jianmei was forced to have an abortion earlier this month. Family planning authorities in Shaanxi province's Ankang city made the decision after she failed to pay a 40,000-yuan (\$US6,000) fine.

Feng and her husband are among the tens of millions of internal migrants who become part of China's cheap labour force. Feng was an urban resident in her hometown in Inner Mongolia. However, she failed to officially transfer her household registration to the new rural residence when she married her husband and moved to Zhenjiazhen township in Ankang city in 2006.

Because they come from a rural background, the couple, who already have a six-year-old girl, are entitled to have a second child if the first is a girl. For urban residents, only one child is allowed.

Feng was told she had to undergo the abortion just days before it was carried out. The only way to avoid the compulsory procedure was to pay the huge fine. Her husband, Deng Jiayuan, who was working in Inner Mongolia as a miner, told the *South China Morning Post* that the sum was equivalent to four years of his pay and the couple simply did not have the money.

Local family planning officials placed Feng under house arrest on May 30, but she managed to escape to a relative's home, only to be abducted three days later by more than 20 officials. She was bundled into a van and taken to a hospital where she was held for two days. One

official sent a text message to Feng's sister, warning that the fine payment "should not be a cent less" than 40,000 yuan. After frantically borrowing the money, Deng Jiayuan failed to make payment in time to prevent the tragedy.

Feng was forced to put a fingerprint on a "consent" document, then her head was covered. She was restrained and given an injection to kill the baby and induce an abortion. Women in China have died from this procedure, often in inadequately equipped clinics. A *Los Angeles Times* article detailed the case of a 38-year-old pregnant woman, Ma Jihong, in Shandong province's Lijin county, who died during a forced abortion last October.

Such operations have become routine since former Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping introduced the "one child policy" in the late 1970s, generating widespread opposition. Access to the Internet has meant that the abuses resulting from the policy can no longer be covered up.

Feng's sister-in-law posted the photos and story online. By June 14, there had been more than one million comments on the Weibo microblogging site, some comparing the abortion to Japanese and Nazi atrocities during World War II. Others contrasted Feng's plight with the official media fanfare about China's first female astronaut, Liu Yang, and the importance of women in Chinese society.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime was shocked by the outburst of public fury. It was forced to back pedal, as it has previously following the emergence of sensitive social issues such as coal mine disasters or the production of milk powder that poisoned thousands of children.

Chinese authorities now state that Feng’s forced abortion violated a 2001 regulation banning forced abortions of late-term pregnancies. On June 14, three officials were suspended, including the heads of the Zhenping county family planning bureau and the Zhenjiazhen township government.

The Ankang municipal government apologised to Feng. The Shaanxi provincial government issued a circular emphasising the “legal rights” of pregnant women, and declaring that “abortions of late-term pregnancies” were prohibited. A national family planning commission official in Beijing announced that an investigation had been conducted from the very “top level” into Feng’s case.

Responsibility for Feng’s treatment, however, lies not simply with local officials. Ultimately it rests with the CCP leadership, which oversees a national system that allocates birth control quotas to family planning commissions at the county and provincial levels. Feng may have been dealt with ruthlessly because the Zhenjiazhen township government had received a “yellow card” warning during the past two years for failing to meet its quota.

Beijing has allowed media discussion of Feng’s case to continue, rather than shut it down. The regime is seeking to defuse public anger, but the issue feeds into an ongoing debate within ruling circles over whether to end the current birth control policy.

The “one child” policy was introduced during the late 1970s by Deng as he launched his program of capitalist restoration. He insisted that China had failed to overcome its economic backwardness after the 1949 revolution because its economic output and natural resources were divided by “too many” people. In reality, the stagnation was the product of the bankruptcy of Stalinism, which is based on the reactionary perspective of national autarchy—the program of “socialism in a single country.”

Now, some Chinese economists are warning that the birth control policy is threatening China’s “population dividend”—the endless supply of cheap labour that has powered its economic expansion over the past three decades. China’s vast reserve army of labour not only provides super-profits for transnational corporations, but

helps keep down wages and conditions internationally—in the advanced economies as well as developing countries.

Earlier this year, China’s National Bureau of Statistics reported that the population of working age—between 15 and 64—had fallen as a proportion of the total population by 0.1 percentage points to 74.4 percent, compared to 2010. “Although it is still possible to see some minor fluctuations in the next few years, it is worth paying much more attention to the impact [of a decreasing] labour supply,” the bureau noted.

Corporate analysts in China and internationally are often critical of the “one child” policy for causing “labour shortages.”

The policy has never applied to China’s rich, who have no qualms about having as many children as they want. A glaring example was reported last December, when a wealthy businessman and his wife in Guangzhou had eight children by using expensive IVF treatment, including to implant embryos in surrogate mothers. They then employed 10 nurses to look after the infants.

For the vast majority of people, the one child policy has had serious social repercussions. The social preference for boys over girls has led to the abandonment of baby girls, and also gender-based abortions. As a result, the gender balance within Chinese society is distorted, with an expected 24 million men to unable to find a partner by 2020. In a country with no universal pension support, parents depend on their only child for financial support, placing great burdens on the generation born in the 1980s and 1990s.

As with every other aspect of life in China, the Stalinist bureaucracy sought to control the country’s population through bureaucratic fiat, regardless of the impact on working people. Now it is contemplating easing or lifting the one child policy to meet the corporate demand for cheap labour. The result will be just as devastating—the operation of the market will inevitably produce greater poverty, unemployment and social distress.



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