

**The Chinese State at Work**  
**The One-Child Policy in Restrospect**

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**Foreign opposition to the Chinese one-child policy build up in 1980s, put forth by American conservatives looking for an anti-abortion cause célèbre. But looking at this most famous of Chinese reforms as coerced obedience is inadequate: Chinese leaders have turned from a view of population control as a means to economic ends, and the Chinese population has followed them.**

**Reviewed:** Susan Greenhalgh, *Cultivating Global Citizens: Population in the Rise of China*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010.

Greenhalgh describes her book as an ethnography of the Chinese state—or more specifically, of the state’s population management program. In this novel anthropological work, she seeks to understand this enormous and complicated political policy in the context of the state’s goals, norms and beliefs about the proper role and means of governance. By doing so, Susan illuminates not only the program itself, but also important mechanisms of Chinese statecraft.

**The Governmentalization of the Chinese population**

The book synthesizes and builds upon two recent works to which the same author has contributed: *Governing China’s Population: From Leninist to Neoliberal Biopolitics* (2005) and

*Just One Child: Science and Policy in Deng's China* (2008). The former work gives an overview of the governmentalization of the Chinese population under Communist Party leadership, from 1949 to 2004. The second volume zeroes in on the one-child policy as a case study for that process.

Putting these two books together in *Cultivating Global Citizens*, Greenhalgh traces population policy through successive conceptual phases within the broader milieu of China's modernization agenda. She observes the program's transition over time from population governance, in which the population is abstracted into a statistical trend that needs to be leveled off by any and all available means, to human governance, under which population is concretized as families, husbands, wives, children, elders, migrants, and others—specific identities with desires and needs which the state both shapes and fulfils in order to deliver desired aggregate outcomes.

The book divides into three chapters. Chapter 1 traces the institutionalization of population issues within Chinese politics: how population issues are framed, how population goals are conceived and owned by actors in the political system, how the population program fits within an overall reform agenda, and the logic, both cultural and technical, for that fit. In Chapter 2, Greenhalgh explores the interface of the state's population program with society. How does the program shape people's understanding of modernization? How does it shape people's ideas about citizenship, about their role, obligations and opportunities in society? As the project began to produce results in terms of economic and welfare improvements, how did the political agency of the population change, if at all? What were the unintended social consequences of escalating population management to the highest priority in the broader reform agenda? The author succinctly answers all these questions. In Chapter 3, Greenhalgh steps back and evaluates the broader implications of the population program's implementation and outcomes for the Communist Party's governing legitimacy and for the suite of social issues it generated.

## The Three Stages of the Population Program

The strength of this volume lies in its well-told stories. Greenhalgh's ethnographic eye for the details of the program's formation and implementation helps the reader get a tangible grasp on the program's politics in a way that other works on the subject have failed to deliver. A memorable example is Greenhalgh's tracing of international perceptions of the one-child policy. Coerced obedience has always been a very small component of society-wide compliance, but it was nonetheless transformed into the master narrative abroad—a narrative, Greenhalgh reveals, put forth in the mid-1980s by right-wing conservatives in the United States looking for a *cause célèbre* to mobilize domestic anti-abortion voters. Forgotten by these frame-setters was that just a couple years earlier, in 1983, the United Nations Population Fund had awarded China's population czar with the inaugural United Nations Population Award for the country's birth control efforts. Greenhalgh reminds us, and she explores the hitherto untold story of Chinese policy-makers' surprise reaction to the international community's sudden praise-turned-vilification.

Greenhalgh also gives a cogent and easily digestible account of the complex history of China's population program. The author traces it through three stages, drawing out the conceptual shift that marked each and punctuating her main argument with helpful asides. Beginning with the 1980s, she examines the Party's coming to terms with its population projections. The “crisis-crackdown” narrative, as she labels it, reveals the Party's social engineering mindset that enabled policy-makers to abstract population as the output of a particular social model. In the 1990s, as evidence accumulates that the quantitative problem has been wrestled into an acceptable range, China's broader reform agenda increasingly calls for building a quality population to man the front lines of export-led economic growth. Greenhalgh shows how the population program shifted gears accordingly, toward an emphasis on human capital development.

In the third stage of the population program, begun in the early 2000s under the Hu-Wen administration, both quantity and quality targets are deemed to be on track, and the program turns its focus to smoothing out the social and demographic ripples or consequences of the program—identifying and responding to issues raised by: a large migrant worker population,

environmental degradation and displacement, an aging population, a fertility crisis, and welfare consequences and criminal activities related to the loss or theft of a family's only child. New political language—population security, reproductive security—emerges. Put together, these three phases trace a U-turn in Chinese statecraft from conceptualizing population control as a means to economic ends, to economic development as a means of human welfare and development.

The book also draws out from the population program's achievements some helpful reflections on the legitimacy of the Party today. Against those who argue that the Party-state's legitimacy is on the wane, Greenhalgh presents her evidence: Party-led state power that reaches not only into the home, not only into the bedroom, but into the womb. The success of the program, measured by the leveling off of population growth and improvements in GDP per capita and public welfare, is for many a validation of the Party's leadership. Only the Party, supporters argue, with its unmatched organizational reach and resources, could pull off so vast and urgent a political program successfully.

### **Leninist Neoliberalism and The Management of Subjectivity**

The most valuable contribution of this work is to draw the reader's attention to subjectivity-management as a key component of Chinese statecraft. Greenhalgh points out that by focussing our attention upon the Party's coercive measures, our master narrative of the one-child policy obscured for us much more significant tools of Chinese statecraft. More insightful by far is to understand how compliance with a policy so deeply invasive to one's personal choice-making was achieved, for the most part, without violence and physical coercion of any kind.

Greenhalgh labels this management of subjectivity *Leninist neoliberalism*. The state progressively withdraws from micromanaging the population, and instead focuses its efforts on shaping the macro framework in which people judge for themselves how they ought to behave. The one-child policy is perhaps the most stunning example of the power such macro frame-setting entails. Greenhalgh charts the means by which the population are encouraged to rethink

what constitutes a good mother, a quality singleton, a healthy family—and how the most important measure to ensure compliance with the policy is autonomous choice.

It would have been nice to see more discussion about how the Party's capacity to manage subjectivity is affected by the emergence into adulthood of a generation of single children who are far more individualistic and independent-minded than their parents. Growing social inequality might also be expected to erode this mode of statecraft. Wealth equates to freedom—the ability both to flaunt fines for noncompliance and to secure privileged relationships that encourage the Party to look the other way. Given how much focus Greenhalgh gives in her book upon the recognition of subjectivity management as a key statecraft component, the reader is left wanting further insight into how present demographic shifts are altering its effectiveness. This is a thin book, weighing in at just over 100 pages (plus end-matter), so it's not surprising that it skims lightly over some topics.

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