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Wollstonecraft, Kant, and China's One-Child Policy:  
The Right to Education vs. The Right to Life

The characterization of China's one-child policy in Western media is flawed because of its application of Western cultural bias to assess the value of the policy. Furthermore, the beneficial effects the policy has had for many women and girls in China are largely ignored. Exposing the myths about the policy in Western thought and showing its compatibility with the most prominent of historic feminist thinkers, Mary Wollstonecraft, is the central focus of my paper. Charting the influence of Immanuel Kant's philosophies of morality and of government on Mary Wollstonecraft's *Rights of Woman* (1792), and the way their works and strains of republicanism relate to China's one-child policy, is my aim.

In some ways, many of the positive effects of the policy for women and girls (intentional or not) are compatible with Wollstonecraft's view of the ideal status of women in society. Through a close reading of Kant's *Critique of Judgment* ([1790]2006) and *Theory and Practice* ([1793]2006), however, it is obvious that his views about the role of human beings and government in society and his notion of the "freedom of the pen" are not consistent with the policy's implementation in China. Each scholar's particular version of republicanism (Wollstonecraft's patriotism and Kant's individualism) influences how we apply their ideas to the one-child policy. Though Wollstonecraft's emphasis on the education and empowerment of women is consistent with many of the unintended yet female-friendly effects of China's one-child policy, her Kantian conception of human rights, including the right to life, is undeniable. Therefore, Mary Wollstonecraft's lifelong dedication to women's human rights has a dual application to the one-child policy, giving explicit support for the

“right to education” justifications for the policy, but thereby restricting the voice that the quieter “right to life” moments in her work would bring to the policy.

These “right to life” moments can be ascribed partly to the influence of Kant.

According to Kant, the ultimate end of nature is the human person, acting freely in a civil society for the good of all. This insistence that a society be one in which its members are free, equal, and independent is significant because it is only then that its people can be subject to coercive laws “that restrict the freedom of each to the condition of its being compatible with the freedom of all” (Kant [1790] 2006, 45). Kant’s argument also overpowers justifications for the one-child policy when he says “His existence has its highest end in itself” (Kant [1790] 2006, 42). If Kant makes it easier for us to theorize about the rights of unborn or missing women, then Mary Wollstonecraft brings to light the ethical implications of the one-child policy for the rights of living girls and women. The increased education and resources available to women as a result of the one-child policy, however, are less of an end than is the assurance of the continued existence of all females conceived. If, according to Kant, the end of nature is human life in and of itself, then any ancillary educational benefits afforded to women as a result of the one-child policy are demoted. Not doing so would ignore the tens of millions of “missing women” denied life due to the gendered implementation of the policy, which caused female infanticide, female-selective abortions, and post-partum malnutrition and premature death of females (Sen 2003).

The influence Wollstonecraft’s *Rights of Woman* has had on feminist culture is immense. Other scholars, building off her conception of feminism, have read influential philosophers through a feminist lens. Lawrence A. Blum interpreted Kant’s moral philosophy in a feminist light (Blum 1982). Scholars such as Madeleine Arnot and Anthony J. La Vopa have analyzed themes of democratic education, reproduction, and the issues that they raise for feminists (Arnot 1997; La Vopa 2005). Many have read Kant and Wollstonecraft with an

eye to gender and politics, but none have used their writings together to philosophically analyze the tensions between human rights and feminist values in the one-child policy, a policy that has been judged in drastically different ways depending on the cultural lens through which it is viewed. Susan Greenhalgh, the leading scholar of China's one-child policy, has an extensive body of culturally sensitive work that acknowledges both the harmful and positive effects the policy has had for women. The unexplored dimension of the policy I hope to research, however, involves the weighing of the morality of these effects. I argue that cultural differences deeply influence our notions of human and women's rights. Analyzing the policy in a way that strives to counter the effects of cultural bias, I will assess the morality of the policy in light of Wollstonecraft's and Kant's thinking on human rights, women's rights, and the family.

Concerns for the health and welfare of the Chinese people in general, and the economic and political status of the state as a whole, serve as clear and justifiable motives towards a reduction in population. China's solution, the one-child policy, brings to the forefront a juxtaposition of cultures. It is through this comparison that questions are raised about each society's values, as well as those values' subsequent effects for women. In my paper, I will delve deeper into the Western perceptions, myths, and hypocrisies associated with the policy. Examining the policy in light of traditional Chinese thought elucidates the rationalism of the policy that an analysis lacking empathy and understanding of Chinese culture cannot expose. Thinking and philosophizing in ways that are both culturally and morally responsible are essential to creating sound policies that are consistent with notions of human rights. It is undeniable that the policy has brought about a number of good effects, especially for girls in China. This outcome, however, does not seem to justify the disproportionate way the policy negatively affects women and girls through its implementation of (sometimes) forced contraception, sterilizations, and abortions.

It is evident that the concern for China's population came about as a result of upper-level leaders' concern about China's role in a world that was becoming more and more globalized. Although many of the rationalizations for the policy have been "black boxed" in terms of visibility to the public, whether from Chinese or foreign inquiries, Susan Greenhalgh has been able to penetrate many barriers surrounding the policy's founding as a result of her role as policy analyst for the Population Council, an American non-governmental organization based in New York City (Greenhalgh 2008, xi). Her discoveries about the rationale behind the one-child policy show its conception in both Western and Chinese thought. Though rooted in a desire to focus on Western natural science, the Communist government stipulated that, "all future policies must be in accord with Marxist-Leninist-Mao Zedong Thought" (Greenhalgh 2008, 98). Therefore, rather than arising from Communism, the one-child policy's authors struggled to make the policy fit Communism, given the traditional socialist belief that a large population was a "valued resource" for the government (Greenhalgh 2008, 69).

It is important to understand the political climate of the time to appreciate the leaders' focus on "catching up" with the rest of the world. China had just emerged from Mao Zedong's failed Cultural Revolution. His successors, searching for ways to bring the country out of misery, "saw a clear connection between the nation's rapid population growth and its stubbornly persistent backwardness" (Greenhalgh 2008, 74). The government's characterization of Chinese society as "persistently backward" manifests the insensitivity to the fact that China had just barely emerged from the "third world." China longed to position itself much closer to the leading Western countries of the day, comparing its population statistics to the "modern industrialized nations" and not to the third world countries to which it shared many more similarities in terms of development. These comparisons, unsurprisingly, painted China's economic, political, and demographic prospects in a very dim light. It is

undeniable that its large population was a factor in hindering China economically, yet its relative role among other social factors was very much distorted and politically crafted (Greenhalgh 2008, 111).

The policy was built out of a dream for “a new generation of healthy, wealthy, smart, and savvy young people to lead the nation’s rise to global prominence” (Greenhalgh 2008, xi). China felt international pressure to alter its consumption of the world’s resources as well. Green says in the *Journal of Public Health Policy* that “No country has felt greater pressure internally and externally to control its population growth than China” (Green 273). The ways in which the dictatorial Chinese government realized their demographic goals, however, are ways that do not adhere to typical Western thought about individual freedom and the role of government in private life.

The degree to which Western ideas influenced the means through which China would pursue political and economic ascent, however, is both astounding and enlightening, bringing about one of the inherent misunderstandings about the one-child policy. The American and Western view of the one-child policy is one of “Communist coercion,” a view that is, for the most part, a product of America media discourse during the 1980’s and 1990’s. In China, however, the formulation of the policy was not intended to be about “a strong state or its coercive practices,” but about “Western science” (Greenhalgh 2008, 2). The historical and political climate of China at the time was one in which “the embrace of science” was the new government’s ticket to success (Greenhalgh 2008, xvii). The focus on population studies, therefore, was motivated by a desire to integrate into the “global capitalist economy” by taking cues from “the scientifically and technologically advanced West” (Greenhalgh 2008, 98). It was only through using this strictly scientific and numeric approach that the policy came to such extremes, ignoring the “social, political, and cultural” implications for the policy (Greenhalgh 2008, 155).

It was, in fact, a non-Communist intellectual by the name of Shao Lizi who first called for the use of birth control to stem population growth (Aird 21). By 1973, a general consensus had been reached about the need to somehow control the population, which began with the slogan of “later, longer, fewer.” Its stipulations were general recommendations to marry later, space births longer, and produce fewer children (Greenhalgh 2008, 68). This policy was followed by a pattern of greater restrictions and subsequent loosening of actual implementation as a result of Chinese citizens resisting the policy at a local level. “The political and economic climate at mid-decade level (mid-1980’s) was unusually conducive to reproductive deal making at the village level” (Greenhalgh and Li 620).

It is through this micro-level involvement of the population that the policy first becomes gendered. This “bargaining’s” result was that “virtually all couples, regardless of their circumstance, were allowed to have two children” (Greenhalgh and Li 622). More importantly, however, was that “virtually all women were allowed to have a *son*.” Formal policy did not allow third births, but if the first two were girls, a third was allowed because of the hope for a son (Greenhalgh and Li 623). It is notable that the desires of Chinese parents indicated a welcoming of both male and female children; the one-child policy, however, through drastically restricting a couple’s reproductive opportunities, forced many Chinese couples to resort to thinking of their potential children in the most utilitarian of ways. This does not imply, however, that the one-child policy’s ends are not worthy of merit, or that Chinese parents do not love their children in the sense that Westerners do. Rather, it brings to the forefront a juxtaposition of cultures, and raises questions about the values of both and the ways in which they impact women. The original policy itself was not gendered, but it became so through its negotiation, mainly by the agrarian Chinese. The rural Chinese’s role of agricultural production and independent social security was based on the need for a son, and therefore the policy became gendered as a survival method.

Since informal practice was male-biased, the process of “opening a small hole” resulted in the writing of gender inequality into provincial legislation. In a step that would prove fateful for the villagers in later years, provincial policymakers adapted formal policy to one of the peasants’ desires-for a son- but not the other- for two children for all.

*Greenhalgh and Li 1995, 624*

It was a combination of the escalation of the strictness and severity of the policy, a refusal to allow exceptions to the one-child rule, and this “writing in” of a gender bias that contributed to the deleterious effects for women. Indeed, “the stronger the enforcement, the greater the dearth of daughters” (Greenhalgh and Li 628).

A dissenter to “strong enforcement” was a researcher by the name of Liang Zhongtang, a Marxian humanist who advocated that the birth plan should be “based on Chinese realities and consider the interconnections among population, economy, and society” (Greenhalgh 2008, 177). His main concern was for the families living in agrarian and rural societies in China. In other words, he was a voice for the disadvantaged who had a heightened interest in giving birth to multiple children on the grounds that it was the basis of their livelihood. Indeed, it is through the fact that the one-child policy has a disproportionate negative effect for those in rural areas that its lamentable consequences are mostly starkly seen. These deplorable effects include reduced “women’s reproductive health and violence against infant girls” (Greenhalgh 2008, 1). On the other hand, it is in the urban areas that the policy’s benefits for girls are manifested, primarily in increased educational opportunities and a funneling of their parents’ resources solely in their direction (Fong 1098). The weighing of these positive and negative effects for women and girls is of central importance to this paper. Later I will detail the specific consequences it has produced, but I now turn to the ways in which our Western perceptions and biases have contributed to myths and popular beliefs about the one-child policy, and therefore China in general.

We have already seen an ubiquitous misunderstanding about the policy, that about its origins and underlying ideologies. Clearly, it is far more in touch and aligned with Western

thought than is commonly held. As mentioned earlier, China was also experiencing great international pressure to reduce its population. When it tried to deal with these “demographic realities,” however, “the U.S. severely vilified its policies and withdrew financial support from the United Nations agency supporting the one-child program” (Green 273-274). Many of these criticisms come from the view of the policy as “coercive,” a question that invites further research. Though scholars disagree as to the degree of actual coercion involved, it is undeniable that insidious Chinese government propaganda has played a role in the public’s willingness to conform. This can be seen through the fact that at the policy’s incipience and before extensive propaganda efforts, it was found that, “birthrates soared the moment the pressure was eased” (Aird 14). It was only later, after intense government efforts to inculcate the policy in public thought, that couples began to voluntarily submit.

On the other hand, it is probable that biased Western media has exaggerated many aspects of the coercion. I find it intriguing that in my personal interview with Maria Dong, she presented the benefits reaped through the policy as 1) an increase in China’s modernization, and 2) the lessening of competition for valuable resources. These are the exact goals spelled out by the Chinese government (Fong 1100). Whether this response is a result of an educated and thorough understanding of the policy’s stated goals, or a succinct articulation of an inculcated propaganda message promoting the necessity of the policy is unknowable.

After speaking with Maria Dong, however, it seems that the West certainly has sustained a significant media bias against the policy. This has contributed to myths and exaggerated reporting. When I asked Maria about the recent article in *The New York Times* titled “Chinese Officials Seized and Sold Babies, Parents Say,” she was fairly adamant that these occurrences are rare to nonexistent, at least in her knowledge. The article details several



instances of Chinese family planning officials committing atrocities such as in the case of Hu Shelian, a forty-six year old woman living in rural China.

After she had a third daughter the following year, they levied a whopping fine of nearly \$5,000. When she pleaded poverty, she said, four officials snatched her newborn from her arms, muscled her into a car and drove her to the county hospital for a forced tubal ligation. Her baby disappeared into the bowels of the Shaoyang orphanage.

*LaFraniere 4.*

The vital point that Maria elucidated for me is the fact that the officials' actions were in no way government sanctioned. This important aspect of the atrocities is never noted in the media. Just as the United States police force has committed unacceptable brutalities and taken violent action that has resulted in the sometimes unjust loss of life in its crusade to implement domestic policies, so too do the varied personalities of Chinese government officials affect their carrying out of the government's policies. Lawrence W. Green articulates this point clearly when he says:

Chinese officials have been stung by Western criticism implying that the occasional excess in administering the policy at the local level and the occasional hardship in individual cases represents the policy itself. They point out that they do not interpret the muggings in New York subways as government policy.

*Green 277*

We should take care, then, not to formulate our views of the one-child policy by characterizations that paint isolated atrocities by low-level government employees as official government policy. The pressure from the national government that many of these employees face to meet their target populations at local levels is no doubt strong, but the way in which they do so is not explicitly directed by the central government. Likewise, Maria presents the one-child policy in a way that drastically reduces its violations of widely accepted human rights. From her experience, the main method through which the policy was ever coercive was merely through contraception, not abortions of infanticides. Now, at least in the urban areas, Maria stresses that the public very much supports the policy. The realities of living in urban China dictate an extreme restriction of finances, resources, and living space that those of us in suburban America, or essentially anywhere in America, cannot grasp. For this reason,

urban Chinese willingly submit to these state-mandated restrictions on their reproductive freedoms (Personal Interview).

I was still not convinced, however, that a Western media bias was solely to blame for the many reports of human rights violations. Therefore, I discussed with Maria an article from Amnesty International's website, "Mao Hengfeng's Bittersweet Homecoming." In it, the activist history of Mao Hengfeng, a human rights activist in China, is summarized. The article emphasizes the fact that she was imprisoned and tortured on account of "advocating on behalf of women's reproductive rights, the victims of forced evictions in Shanghai, and other Chinese human rights defenders." Hengfeng was most recently detained for protesting on behalf of the Noble Laureate Liu Xiaobo, a figure whom talk about and support for are prohibited in China, according to Maria (*Amnesty*). In response, Maria granted that, "There is no good result that comes from resisting government policy." Any dissenting voices, she said, are "useless" on account of the one-party rule. Only the leaders' ideas are important (Personal Interview).

Though this is a case of China's real and proven human rights abuses, a bias against the one-child policy in Western media can still clearly be seen. After reading the article, Maria surmised that the main causes for Hengfeng's imprisonments have not been the fact that she has three children or advocates on behalf of women's reproductive rights, but her involvement in direct protests and zealous outspokenness against issues that are more explicitly critical of the government and its leaders. The "homecoming" of main concern in the article has no relation whatsoever to the one-child policy. The article plays up Western interest and outrage over the policy, however, through mentioning Hengfeng's roles as both mother of three and women's reproductive advocate in the first two sentences of the article (*Amnesty*). Representations such as these in the media are not uncommon. Lawrence W. Green, for one, argues that,

The policy is not coercive as some journalists have characterized it and some others have implied, unless coercion is defined as government withholding of previously granted rewards to couples when the basis for these rewards is violated by the subsequent actions of the couple.

*Green 275.*

This “subsequent action,” however, would be the act of giving birth to another child. Even if one grants that the policy is not, in effect, coercive, viewing the situation in light of reproductive rights still problematizes the role of the Chinese government in this case. The fact that Chinese couples are not free to plan their families according to their own individual wills and desires is an issue that I, and I believe that Kant, would take issue with. Though this point of Green’s argument may be contentious, he later presents several aspects of Chinese society that are extraordinarily favorable to the welfare and education of the singleton children in these one-child families, especially if they are girls. “To offset the bias in some areas for sons, the one-daughter family receives additional rewards such as preference in job assignments” (Green 276). He compares the monetary rewards offered to one-child families to the American system of income tax deductions given to parents for the birth of their children (Green 277).

Additionally, Green combats the myth that Chinese society is anti-child. He says that, “Nothing could be at greater variance with all observations at every level in Chinese society today. The child is idolized, pampered, protected, and nurtured beyond most Western standards” (Green 278). The benefits that women receive as a result of China’s family planning policies are also of high caliber. “Special rest areas” are available at work sites in China for women in the later stages of pregnancy, and generous maternity leave is the norm. Before marriage, couples also undergo “counseling, as well as education about sexual intercourse and genetics” (Green 278).

Another writer who has looked at the particular benefits detailed by Green with an eye to their special meaning for women is Alexa Olesen, writing for the Associated Press in her article “One-child policy as surprising boon for china girls.” Her argument that the one-

child policy has affected girls in China in beneficial ways is the evidence I will use to show how Mary Wollstonecraft would perhaps have been in partial support of such a policy in her day. Reporting from Beijing, she says that:

“Never have so many (women) been in college or graduate school, and never has their ratio to male students been more balanced. To thank for this, experts say, is three decades of steady Chinese economic growth, heavy government spending on education and a third, surprising factor: the one-child policy.

*Olesen 1.*

It is with the evidence of this greatly improved education for girls that I assert that Mary Wollstonecraft would support some aspects of the one-child policy. In her introduction to *Rights of Woman*, she says that, “the neglected education of my fellow creatures is the grand source of the misery I deplore” (Wollstonecraft 74). She sets the tone for the treatise by ending the Introduction with the pithy, “intellect will always govern” (Wollstonecraft 78). By using “intellect,” her focus on education for girls is clearly seen. Likewise, her use of the word “govern” suggests that the purpose of this education should be to obtain a higher status in society outside the home.

Furthermore, the best education “is such an exercise of the understanding as is best calculated to strengthen the body and form the heart” (Wollstonecraft 89). The one-child policy is consistent with this view of education as including both “body” and “heart.” Olesen shows a prime example of this through Qihua “Mia” Wang, a freshman at Tsinghua University:

From the age of six, Wang was pushed hard, beginning with ping-pong lessons. Competitions were coed, and she beat boys and girls alike, she said. She also learned classical piano and Chinese flute, practiced swimming and ice skating and had tutors for Chinese, English, and math. During summer vacations, she competed in English speech contests and started using the name Mia.

*Olesen 3*

In the same way, as a result of the one-child policy, women in China have been able to surmount a societal focus on the importance of being beautiful and obtaining skills that would secure a husband rather than a good job. This is one of Wollstonecraft’s main critiques of her own society: “But in the education of women, the cultivation of the understanding is

always subordinate to the acquirement of some corporeal accomplishment” (Wollstonecraft 91). This, to an extent, has been achieved in China. ““In the past, girls were raised to be good wives and mothers,” Fong said. “They were going to marry out anyway, so it wasn’t a big deal if they didn’t want to study.” Not so anymore. Fong says today’s urban Chinese parents...try to help (their daughters) outperform their classmates, regardless of gender” (Olesen 1).

Another way in which the one-child policy has served to ameliorate harmful gender roles in China has been through the increased value placed on a woman’s earning power, and the subsequent adjustment in the focus placed on her role as a demure housewife. Mary Wollstonecraft urges women to realize that pleasing their husbands through fulfillment of domestic duties is not the way to win their lasting affections or respect. “The woman who has only been taught to please will soon find that her charms are oblique sunbeams, and that they cannot have much effect on her husband’s heart when they are seen every day, when the summer is passed and gone” (Wollstonecraft 96).

The need to focus on the extra-domestic education of girls in Chinese society is rooted in now-antiquated parental concerns that they would be given no support in their old age if they did not give birth to a boy, because a boy had the ability to secure the financial means to do so. In traditional Chinese society, girls marry into their husbands’ family and, as a result of lack of earning ability due to child-rearing responsibilities within the marriage, could offer no monetary support for their parents in their old age. The money earned by their husband went to support his parents (Fong 1109).

The one-child policy is doubly beneficial in this regard. First, it enables singleton daughters to receive an education, a job, and therefore the financial means to support their parents later in life. “Parents whose love, hope, and need for old-age support are all pinned on just one child tend to do whatever is necessary to make that child happy and successful”

(Fong 1102). Second, it frees women from the burdens of the “second shift” of housework unfairly placed in their court in a family with many children, as opposed to one, enabling them to find more success in their endeavors outside the home (Fong 1102).

Vanessa Fong’s many conversations with Chinese families show a clear pattern in the upsetting of gender roles, particularly those in the domestic realm, as a result of the one-child policy. In questioning the grandfathers of these families, they confirm that in their marriages they did little to no housework. The grandmothers’ roles were in the home- rarely did they work outside it. Talking with the mothers and fathers of the families, Fong discovered that in this next generation, it was much more common for women to have paying jobs. If the mothers and fathers’ jobs were similar in hours and compensation, the mother still did more housework. If the mother worked more hours or made more money, however, the *father* performed more household tasks. Where the progress can be seen most clearly, however, is in the generation most greatly affected by the one-child policy, the generation that includes singleton daughters. The males of this generation say that they expect the division of domestic labor will be even more equal in their own marriages. They predict they will have to offer to do more housework “to win and keep good wives.” The females of this generation have something to say for themselves too: “My husband will cook! Who says women have to be the ones to cook?” (Fong 1104).

Perhaps the greatest similarity between China’s rationalization for the policy and Wollstonecraft’s *Rights of Woman*, however, can be found in the shared idea of societal progress. Though Wollstonecraft’s vision of societal progress was one that sprang from republican patriotism, both Wollstonecraft and the creators of the one-child policy were motivated by national pride. Much of the reasoning behind Wollstonecraft’s justifications for the education of women was rooted in the belief that it was the “civic duty” and

responsibility of the mother to raise a new generation who subscribed to the same republican ideals.

According to Wollstonecraft, this duty and responsibility was given to women by nature. In *Vindication*, she says, “I have already inveighed against the custom of confining girls to their needle, and shutting them out from all political and civil employments; for by thus narrowing their minds they are rendered unfit to fulfil the peculiar duties which nature has assigned them” (265). Wollstonecraft sees childrearing as part of a woman’s “natural” role. Therefore, educating women coincides with her republican patriotism because it enables women to “form the minds” of their children in ways that are beneficial to the state. In regards to mothering, she says,

The formation of the mind must be begun very early, and the temper, in particular, requires the most judicious attention- an attention which women cannot pay who only love their children because they are their children, and seek no further for the foundation of their duty, than in the feelings of the moment.

*Wollstonecraft 243.*

The “further foundation” refers to a basis that takes into account the goals of the state and of republicanism. Wollstonecraft places such an emphasis on this because she finds fault with how the government is handling the matter of education. She grants that public schools are working towards the right goals, but it is evident that she sees the education of children for the state to be an endeavor most ideally undertaken in the home.

Public education, of every denomination, should be directed to form citizens; but if you wish to make good citizens, you must first exercise the affections of a son and a brother. This is the only way to expand the heart; for public affections, as well as public virtues, must ever grow out of the private character...

*Wollstonecraft 256.*

In light of the fact that Wollstonecraft supports the education of women not only for its own sake but also for the sake of the state shows how she would be in partial agreement with the reasoning behind the policy as well as some of its effects for women, particularly mothers.

Without this education, mothers run the risk of becoming the type of women who care more about their pets than about their children, and will “suffer her babes to grow up

crooked in a nursery” (Wollstonecraft 269). The cultivation of virtue in all children for the betterment of society and the strengthening of the state, through the education of their mothers, is Wollstonecraft’s goal. This goal is perhaps nowhere expressed more clearly than when she says, “A man has been termed a microcosm; and every family might also be called a state” (Wollstonecraft 274).

In “Chapter 9: Of the Pernicious Effects Which Arise from the Unnatural Distinctions Established in Society,” Wollstonecraft further comments about the state of society, abhorring the disparity of the classes and the “habitual idleness” into which the wealthy have fallen. She advocates for equality among the classes, and what better way to achieve that equality than through the education of women? “...This virtuous equality will not rest firmly even when founded on rock, if one half of mankind be chained to its bottom by fate, for they will be continually undermining it through ignorance or pride” (Wollstonecraft 230). Though China’s goals of economic progress and equally shared resources were to be attained through the one-child policy by limiting new life, and in practice new female lives, it has in fact been achieved through an alternate, unintended route: the “unchaining” of its women through equal education and increased parental support of their children regardless of gender. In the current state of society, Wollstonecraft holds that men are better parents because they are educated. She hopes that, by educating women, she can improve mothers’ parenting and create a more equal and just society for all. The one-child policy takes this a step further, however, allowing both the mother *and* father to be better parents by not only increasing the education of the mother, but also increasing the resources available to the parents for their use in bettering their children’s lives.

These benefits of the policy and the “unchaining” of women, however, have not occurred without significant concessions. What is left unsaid is that Chinese parents are only better parents to their *born* children. In Fong’s analysis, we can see how the one-child



policy's beneficial effects arise as a result of "the demographic pattern produced by China's one-child policy, and not necessarily the compulsory nature of that policy" (Fong 1105). The effects of the compulsory nature, therefore, must also be explored. Here Fong is implicitly recognizing the problem that the policy's characteristic of "mandatory" brings. Olesen brings the negative effect of the "compulsory" nature of the policy one more step forward by showing how, although it has awarded women educational benefits, its gendered implementation is undeniable. In Olesen's article, Therese Hesketh, a scholar of China's unnatural sex ratio, comments on the situation, calling it "gendercide." Olesen cites the UN, which asserts that "43 million girls have 'disappeared' in China due to gender-selective abortion as well as neglect and inadequate access to health care and nutrition." In the words of Yin Yin Nwe, UNICEF's ambassador to China: "The one-child policy brings many benefits for girls, but they have to be born first" (Olesen 2).

It is with the knowledge of statements such as these where Wollstonecraft would most likely depart from her agreement with the policy on account of the "rights-based" strain in her thought, which arises from Kant. Kant's conception of women's rights, however, is by no means entirely unproblematic. He entirely disregards thinking about the rights of *born* women in favor of focusing on the relation of an individual's rights to government and society. Kant's form of republicanism is one of self-determination and freedom, especially in regards to government. Wollstonecraft and Kant differ on their particular "types" of republicanism, but the fact that Wollstonecraft gets her notions of rights from Kant points toward the fact that she would oppose a coercive implementation of the policy. The one-child policy stands in complete opposition to Kant in many ways, and this is very much a result of his thinking about the role of the state. Kant says that "the end" of a social contract is "the right of human beings...it can be determined for each what is his own and the latter can be secured against the infringement of others" (Kant 1793, 44). If Kant is referencing private

property here, would it not then follow that human beings have an even greater right to their children than they do to their possessions? Their children are of even more value than private property because of their status as human beings, who for Kant are in fact the “ultimate ends” (Kant 1790, 38).

Kant would not sanction state control of either a couple's reproductive decisions or the child in the womb. He explains that a civil society is only possible where human beings are “free, equal, and independent.” Only then can its members be subject to coercive laws “that restrict the freedom of each to the condition of its being compatible with the freedom of all” (Kant 1793, 45). The outcome of a reduced population is not justified by the treatment of the family’s reproductive capacity as a means solely for economic gain, where the government decides for the couple the nature of their family due to concerns of the state.

Looking closely at the statistics surrounding the policy is disturbing. Nowhere was concrete data given to prove that the population was at fault for China’s economic problems. Therefore, even if the Chinese people had been “free, equal, and independent,” it is highly doubtful that the restriction of population would have been “compatible with the freedom of all” because it is not clear whether the population was at the root of the problems at all. Of course, this is a Western conception of freedom that envisions freedom as a holistic right encompassing ideas such as “freedom from want.” Greenhalgh makes clear the dubious foundation on which the policy rests when she says that, “The size of population’s contribution to China’s dismal economic state, either absolute or relative to other factors, *was never empirically measured*” (Greenhalgh 2008, 117).

The numbers were made to fit the political dogma of a need to reduce the population. “Social, cultural, and political” effects of the policy were diminished, and the ideal population of 650-700 million was pursued at all costs (Greenhalgh 2008, 155-158). A disturbing disregard for hard facts in preference of political rhetoric can be seen here.

Nowhere did the Chinese scientists work out what substantive difference it might make to their conclusions if...their estimates (as to the ideal population) were far off the mark...Given the flimsiness of its empirical foundations...the Chinese work might well have appeared highly problematic if not actually meaningless.

*Greenhalgh 2008, 160.*

The fact that the mathematics behind the policy were of questionable soundness is of even greater concern given Kant's belief that man not be used as "the primary tool for creating order and harmony in the nonrational nature external to him" (Kant 1790, 39). "Order" and "harmony" here could be in reference to the utopian state conceived of by Chinese leaders at the time.

Furthermore, according to Kant, the Chinese government's reasoning behind establishing and implementing the policy was deeply flawed. This can be held because the nature of the policy was that it determined for Chinese citizens what would bring them the greatest happiness. In *Theory and Practice* Kant argues that a government cannot be established on the basis of "benevolence." In doing so, that government reveals itself as "paternalistic" and "despotic." Kant returns to his ideology about individual human rights here when he argues that a government such as this would not enable its citizens to "decide what is useful or damaging to them" (Kant 1793, 45-46). In the case of the one-child policy, these rights were clearly not being exercised. A complete disregard for reproductive preferences was practiced, and it was commonly held that "a woman's fertility could be planned, and preferences altered through party propaganda and education, or if that failed, force" (Greenhalgh 2008, 163).

The freedom to have and pursue a preference was central to Kant's thinking about the role of the state in an individual's life. The one-child policy is inconsistent with Kant most stridently through his conception of the process through which public law is formed. He says that public law "must not be able to do anyone wrong" and must be representative of "the will of the entire people." Clearly, the dissent and opposition to the one-child policy were

blatantly ignored. Each person should be able to pursue happiness “as he sees fit” (Kant 1793, 46). As “he” sees fit, however, implies a disregard for women in this argument.

Therefore, though this way of interpreting Kant is very pro-woman, it only takes into consideration the rights of women so long as they are explicitly linked with those of the husband, who was seen as having the ultimate power in marriage. Anthony J. La Vopa elucidates some of the problems for feminism found in Kant’s writing. He says, “But the texts also have something in common: a steely cynicism on the subject of marriage that may at points have the disturbing effect of dehumanizing the institution, and that arguably rests on a very low estimation of women” (1). La Vopa says that this is due to Kant’s entrenchment in cultural traditions and his ability to convince himself that “what we see as prejudices were not prejudices at all” (1).

This disregard for women is seen in Kant’s *Metaphysics of Morals* (1797). Isabel Hull says that in *Metaphysics*, Kant’s articulation of his “liberal version of civil society” is one in which “the role of sexually potent, desiring, self-determining individuals would be limited to males” (La Vopa 2). Hull finds that this “striking lack of critical awareness about his sexual assumptions” can partly be attributed to the nature of *Metaphysics* as a reaction to other contemporary writing about society (2). La Vopa says that, “If his mechanical conception of sexual intimacy strikes us as eerily single-minded, that is in part, I will argue, because Kant was intent on countering an alternative figurative language” (La Vopa 8). The context in which Kant wrote, however, is not an excuse for perpetuating and creating the harmful gender roles of the time. Clearly, “the liberal conception of human nature and of political philosophy cannot constitute the philosophical foundation for an adequate theory of women’s liberation” (Alison Jagger, quoted in La Vopa, 2).

Though many aspects of Kant’s writing lack a critique of the degraded status of women, in postulating about how Kant would argue against the one-child policy, I believe

the point he would emphasize most ardently would be his beliefs about the ultimate purpose of human beings in society. In his *Critique of Judgment*, Kant says that, “nature calls us to a higher end than we know” (Kant 1790, 40). This leads to his definition of humans as, by nature, unique beings that exist “as the final end of an intelligent cause.” For Kant, humans are characterized by the statement that, “His existence has the highest end in itself,” and “all nature is subject to him” (Kant 1790, 42). This creates grave problems for the one-child policy. Although, as we have seen, the one-child policy has created educational opportunities for girls and perhaps bettered their quality of life, this would not justify the policy in Kant’s eyes, especially given his disregard for the rights of women in marriage. Kant is better seen in theorizing about the rights of the unborn. He says that a human being is not subject to nature, but it is “he alone (that is) able to be a final end, to which all of nature is teleologically subordinated” (Kant 1790, 43). I believe Kant would come fairly close to articulating a traditional right to life argument in this case. The fact that he says that the higher ends to which we are called “lie concealed within us” lends a spiritual sense to his writing (Kant 1790, 41). Kant thinks that the purpose for each of our existences is designed by a higher power and yet hidden from view. I think this would lead him to assert that the world is devastatingly less for the loss of the millions of “missing women” that has occurred as a result of the policy (Sen 2003).

Sen’s book *Idea of Justice*, as well as the articles he has written entitled “Missing Women” (1992) and “Missing Women- Revisited” (2003) bring together political theories and practical, lived experiences, addressing the morality of laws such as China’s one-child policy. To those who say that the posturing about global women’s human rights is a form of Western imperialism, Sen replies that a discourse that claims, “You are right in your community and I am right in mine” is unacceptable (Sen 2009, x). Like Kant, he advocates for the presence of democracy as necessary to further justice within a society (Sen 2009, xii).

His reasoning for this rests on the simple belief that a plurality of opinions is crucial in arriving at the best possible solution to a problem. “Discussions confined within a given society can be incarcerated within a seriously narrow understanding” (Sen 2009, 404). This is especially dangerous when we are confronted with not just the problem of a lack of viewpoints, but also a situation in which laws and policies are unable to be criticized. Sen references the one-child policy explicitly, saying that this way of theorizing is especially applicable in cases such as the “selective abortion of female foetuses in China” (Sen 2009, 405).

Many say that the cultural divide between Chinese and Western conceptions of life is too great. In my conversations with Maria, I can honestly say that I did indeed encounter variations of this problem. Maria explained to me that, in China, societal rights are the main focus, and thinking about individual rights within a society, especially within Chinese society, is rarely done. “Right to life” arguments about the status of a fetus/unborn child as a human life are simply not had, as per Communist control. This leaves one with a dilemma all too common in theorizing about women’s rights on an international level. Though critiquing another country’s laws and policies may prove controversial and problematic, I believe it is something we cannot fail to do if we are to live in a world that strives to be good. It is no coincidence that Sen quotes Kant’s *Idea of Justice*, saying that our pursuits of justice imbue “reason to the world.” These pursuits and “ideas of justice” are “humanity’s hope,” which we cannot forsake.

A pursuit of justice that involves roughly half of the world’s population is indeed one in which we cannot grow lax. In 1992, Sen was already gauging the global effects of discrimination. Though his first article entitled “Missing Women” only briefly addresses the possibility of female infanticide, it makes known a deeper-seated discrimination against women that has been affecting women for thousands of years. Sen brings to light that these

traditional and cultural sexist beliefs are in fact why the one-child policy was implemented with a prejudice against females. The sex ratio of males to females in countries that discriminate against girls, whether purposefully or subconsciously, show a much higher population of men to women. Using demographic research, he shows that females are actually better “survivors” if given “similar care,” which leads one to the conclusion that the drastically disparate sex ratio is a result of social factors (Sen 1992, 587). This is where he finds evidence to make the case for “missing women.” He says that, “given ratios of Western countries, China would have fifty million more women” (Sen 1992, 587).

It was on the question of these detrimental social factors that I gained insight from Maria Dong. Our conversations led me to be highly cognizant of the role that differing cultures can play in theorizing about women’s human rights. For example, it is near impossible for a typical Westerner to have a full understanding of the real population problem in China because we do not experience its effects firsthand. In rural areas, the result of the enormous population is that many struggle to merely survive. In urban cities, the stress that the population places on the school system results in one’s education and livelihood being singly dependant on a single placement test. One’s transcript, extracurricular activities, and other academic abilities such as critical and creative thinking are never considered. In this extremely competitive environment, it is not surprising that any advantage in the educational system is coveted. Other social elements are at play as well. Maria disclosed that many couples, in their “inner hearts” prefer a boy. This is mainly due to two cultural factors. The first is that most couples want to ensure the continuation of their surname through a son, and the second is that, especially in rural areas, the government does not support the elderly. Couples want a son with the financial and social capabilities to support them in old age. It is a dangerous environment indeed when a government policy allows for a cultural preference to alter natural design (the approximate sex ratio of males to females) (Personal Interview).

Sen is confident that these social factors, such as differences in healthcare, food allowances in childhood, and general neglect can be solved using public policy and the education of women (Sen 1992, 587). This is similar to Mary Wollstonecraft's crusade for the equal education of girls through, among other methods, government and policy reform. Sen's treatment of China is interesting because it is the one-child policy that is enabling the greater education of girls but at the same time also responsible for the abnormal sex ratio. Sen seems to foreshadow his 2003 article (which states China's human rights abuses clearly and directly) when he notes that the case in China is different from other countries whose sex ratios are also abnormal because of the fact that China's *birth* ratio is also skewed. Sen attributes this to the restrictions placed on families due to the one-child policy. He conjectures that if the difference in sex ratio occurs at birth, this must be a case where parents are either hiding the females or where infants are dying before they can be registered, though he is hesitant to declare that these deaths are induced (Sen 1992, 587). In "Missing Women-Revisited," however, Sen confidently states that the sex ratio has yet to improve because "a new female disadvantage- that in natality- through sex specific abortions aimed against the female fetus" is now present in developing countries, especially those that have gained access to new technology such as ultrasounds (Sen 2003, 1297). Sen notes that the realization of discrepancies such as these necessitates "intense research."

Scholars such as Aird, Fong, Green, Greenhalgh, Sen, and many others have devoted their careers to thinking about the one-child policy in light of women's rights. Although I have not contributed to this research in terms of field data, I have certainly tried to prove that the one-child policy is not as morally straightforward as it seems. Though the one-child policy increases the opportunities for education and personal development for girls, Maria Dong put forth a comment during our interview that I believe underlies the argument as to why this does not make the policy justifiable. "In China, there is no religion. We have no



God to rely on, and humans need that.” Though Kant does not theorize about a “higher power” in a religious sense, I believe it is toward this sentiment that he refers. It is likely that Mary Wollstonecraft would take a similar position. Though she emphasizes that “true dignity and happiness exist in education,” and that society will only experience progress if women are educated, it is probable that she would find the one-child policy greatly troubling due to its net effect on Chinese society (Wollstonecraft 2). The one-child policy has not just resulted in a failure to educate fifty million women, it has resulted in the complete denial of fifty million women their lives.