China’s one-child policy is one of its most controversial among people who do not live in the PRC. Even among Chinese citizens, there are still many who do not fully accept it. Some are willing to put their jobs, party membership and personal reputation on the line in order to have one more child. But, because of its highly politicized nature, few would ever dare to ask how this policy came about or question its legitimacy. In her latest book, *Just One Child*, Susan Greenhalgh presents a grand yet rather stunningly strange picture. The far-reaching one-child policy that to a large extent determines the nation’s present and future did not emerge from a careful blending of the views and arguments of population specialists, social researchers or sophisticated policymakers. Instead it was the result of mathematic calculation designed and guided by leading aerospace scientists, who would normally be far away from the centre of such a policy debate. Greenhalgh looks at the origins and future of the policy by examining what she calls the process of ‘scientific policymaking’, which was a new mode of decision-making in the Dengist era that privileged the role of science and technology as opposed to Mao’s prioritization of ideology over science. This change in direction had its roots in China’s anxiety to recoup lost ground in global competition. Science was associated with modernity and nation salvation.

Compared to her earlier book coauthored with Edwin Winckler, *Governing China’s Population*, which deals with the adoption and effects of the policy over a fifty-year time span, Greenhalgh now focuses on a much shorter yet crucial period, 1978-1980, when the one-child policy was in the early days of its introduction and implementation. In the first section of her book, she investigates the history of the ‘population problem’ in the Chinese context. As in her earlier work, she uses the lens of Foucault’s concept of governmentality, but this time adds the perspective of science and technology to produce three interrelated concepts that guide the whole inquiry. These are: policy problematization (which is the process of problem identification and solution, including an assessment of the associated costs and benefits); policy assemblage (which refers to the intersection of different elements in a particular policy problematization process, such as actors, institutions and knowledges); and the micropolitics of science and policy making (which refers to a field where the different elements mentioned above are brought together to make public policy). In the second section,
Greenhalgh maps out the ideas of three groups competing to determine China’s population policy. The first, composed of university scholars, wanted a ‘go-slow one child policy’. This allowed for a gradual and patient implementation of the policy. The second, made up of Marxian humanists, supported a ‘two-child-plus-spacing’ policy. This envisaged imposing an eight to ten year time interval between a couple’s first and second child. The third alternative was ‘rapid and universal one-childization’, which was proposed by a technocratic clique headed by Song Jian, a key figure in China’s defense science establishment. In the third section, Greenhalgh reveals the reason for the final victory of the natural scientists. Her work demonstrates that the one-child policy was a contested arena, where the interests, ideologies, and visions of different groups, with their own policy agendas, legitimacy pursuits and narratives of ‘truth’, collided. It reveals the interweaving and complex power relations created by the influences of science and technology, culture, and the nation-state’s own interests, political strategies and global development.

This book is much more than a fresh, engaging and comprehensive analysis of the one-child-per-couple policy. It offers a new interdisciplinary perspective, using an anthropological approach to policy studies. This compensates for some of the weaknesses of new policy study approaches, particularly those which view policy making as a linear and orderly process. Greenhalgh brings out the importance of social actors (including non-state ones) and human agency, which introduce elements of irrationality and haphazardness into a seemingly rational policy process. She thus makes an important contribution to our understanding of knowledge making, privileging the constructiveness, discursiveness, contingency and situatedness.

There are only a few weaknesses in the arguments and analysis of this book. The most important one is the over-emphasis of Song Jian’s influence as an individual, and thus a weakened estimation of institutional power. Greenhalgh insightfully points out that ‘a [solely] state-based institutional approach, though necessary, is insufficient’ (p. 309). However, in a party-state system such as China, state institutions do not simply ‘channel’ policy, but serve as the essential or even primary actors of policy making and policy implementation. Women’s studies scholars might also take issue with Greenhalgh’s weak analysis of the consequences of the one-child policy. How this policy affects people, especially women’s lives, choices and aspirations, and how women employ individual strategies to embrace, resist or alter the policy remain largely unclear.

On the whole, this is a thought-provoking and highly original book. The knowledge-centred and epistemic approach is innovative, the findings appealing and the arguments clear
and refreshing. Its publication is unfortunately a little belated, as the one-child policy has already been rigidly implemented for thirty years. Nevertheless, it provides a timely and meaningful starting point for a new round of debates. The book is a must read for everyone interested in contemporary China, demography, political science, women’s studies, science and technology studies, as well as natural science, specialist and non-specialist alike.

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