

Current Events

How Chinese Art Explores its One-Child Policy

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Culture

2 October 2013

How Chinese art explores its one-child policy

By Clarissa Sebag-Montefiore

Huiyun started her life in the garbage. As an unwanted baby girl, her parents abandoned her in the poor province where she was born in central China. There, a pair of refuse collectors found her with her umbilical cord still attached. They kept her, bringing her up as their own.

Huiyun is now 12 years old, and life has taken a turn for the better. This year she became one of eight models featured in provocative French artist Prune Nourry's new exhibition *Terracotta Daughters*, now showing in Shanghai's Gallery Magda Danysz. An exploration of China's skewed sex ratio, the exhibition dishes up a new version of a national treasure – with a twist. Nourry has fashioned more than one hundred sculptures in the same clay, and using the same techniques, as the ancient Terracotta Warriors, the famous collection of sculptures representing the armies of the first Emperor of China. But instead of producing a brigade of soldiers, the artist has created an army of schoolgirls. They symbolise China's millions of missing women.

"I wanted to highlight the girls that are not cared about, by mixing them with a strong familiar symbol [the Terracotta Warriors]," explains New York-based Nourry. "When you change something slightly that everyone knows it creates something bizarre – and people want to know more."

For *Terracotta Daughters* Nourry modeled eight life-size sculptures on eight real orphans. Combinations of these prototypes were then used to make a further 108 sculptures in collaboration with traditional Chinese craftsmen. Funds from the sales of the original eight will pay for three years' education for each orphan in co-operation with the NGO Children of Madaifu. The artwork is enabling a handful of children like Huiyun, who has dreams of becoming a nurse, to stay in school.

Nourry is not alone in her exploration through the arts of the consequences of China's controversial one-child policy. Since it was introduced in 1979 the policy has inspired debate that has consumed the population. In just three decades it has dramatically refashioned Chinese society, affecting an entire generation that has largely grown up without brothers and sisters.

A lost generation

China has the most uneven sex ratio in the world, with 117 boys born for every 100 girls. In a culture that traditionally favours male offspring, girls have been abandoned, murdered and

aborted. (In the year 2000 ninety percent of aborted fetuses were reportedly female.) As such it is estimated that by the end of this decade the country will have a surplus of 24 million bachelors. This has led to fears that there will be a rise in the kidnapping and trafficking of women as brides and, for single men stuck in the impoverished countryside with no hope of marriage, a spike in gambling, depression, and alcohol abuse.

Unsurprisingly, artists have focused on the more abominable aspects of the policy. Pieces range in tone from quiet despondency to open activism. Last year, the Chinese artist Li Tianbing exhibited *LC Body and Me* and *My Brother* in London. Li created paintings based on black and white photographs of himself as an only child, in which he added in the imaginary siblings he never had. At the opposite end of the spectrum is the artist Xing Xin who locked himself in a 6.5 ft (1.98m) long by 3 ft (0.9m) wide iron box for 49 days at 2009's Venice Biennale in protest of a policy he believes has curtailed human rights.

One issue rarely discussed publicly is what happens to parents whose only child dies. In July two Chinese schoolgirls perished in the San Francisco plane crash, sparking debate on local microblogs about the plight of parents left behind. Beijing-based director Emily Tang has masterfully broached the subject in her understated film *All Apologies*, which was released last year at international independent film festivals and will be showing in Chinese cinemas this November.

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The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences estimates that over one million parents in China have lost their only child, many of whom are either too old to try again or have undergone (sometimes involuntary) sterilisations at the hand of the state. The death of a child not only leads to grief, but in many cases fears of financial ruin: China's scant social welfare system means most parents still depend on their children to support them in old age. Shame at being childless adds further stigma. "For a migrant worker, the only hope for them is to have a child. So if that child dies the blow is huge," says Tang. "I therefore wanted to focus on a theme that could attract more attention from society and raise heated discussions from the viewers."

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Dissenting voices

Sheng Keyi is an up-and-coming author whose novel *Northern Girls* was published in English last year. In the book one character, a sweet-natured 19-year-old migrant worker, is mistaken for a married woman with children. Officials drag her from her home to a hospital where doctors heave her to the operating table and sterilise her. In a single moment all her hopes for a future are dashed; in China no one will marry a peasant girl unable to bear children.

Ma Jian, the celebrated dissident author, goes one step further in his latest novel *The Dark Road*, published earlier this year. The book turns a critical eye on the one-child policy: his heroine Meili, a peasant woman pregnant with her second child, goes on the run from family-planning officials. She faces infanticide, forced abortion, and invasive IUD insertions (enacted not only on her but her mother-in-law as punishment for Meili's flight). Ma uses the

metaphor of a Chinese sturgeon fish, a species that swims upstream to lay their eggs. Like the fish, Meili must go on her own journey down the Yangtze to try and find a safe place to give birth.

Ma, many of whose books are banned in China and who now lives in exile in London, travelled to his homeland in 2009 to research *The Dark Road*. There he stayed with family-planning fugitives and visited clinics that perform abortions, sterilisations and IUD insertions. "One element was always the same," observes the author. "The requirement that every woman of childbearing nature should attend these compulsory three months internal examinations where doctors would check that the IUD cervical coil was in place and that she hadn't fallen pregnant without permission. I was bewildered that this horrific form of control was still in operation at a time when China's birth rate has fallen."

It is a control that may not be in place for long. Increasing social and demographic pressures – including a surfeit of men and the risk of fewer working people being able to support an ageing population - have led to speculation that the one-child policy will be significantly relaxed within the next five years. No matter. Even if it is discontinued the reverberations of the one-child policy, a curb on population growth that is unprecedented in human history, will continue to resonate, providing fodder for artists for years to come.