

# Preface

China's one-child-per-couple policy was animated by a beautiful dream. It was a dream of a once powerful but now downtrodden nation, just emerging from the horrors of Maoism, seeking to create a new generation of healthy, wealthy, smart, and savvy young people to lead the nation's rise to global prominence. I can still remember the frisson of delight that swept through me when, back in 1982, on my first trip to China, I encountered on the streets of Zhangzhou a troupe of Chinese children, decked out in colorful outfits, parading around in a circle singing:

One child is the very very best; One child is the very very best!

*Yige haizi zui zui hao; Yige haizi zui zui hao!*

For some—primarily city residents—this appealing dream came true, if at great cost to parents. For most Chinese—those living in the tens of thousands of villages that dot China's vast countryside—it did not. Never did I imagine, as I watched that sweet performance, that I would spend some twenty years of my life bearing witness to the dark underside of that dream. Initially as policy analyst for the New York-based Population Council and later as anthropologist at the University of California, during the 1980s and 1990s I traveled frequently to China to talk with the people who made the policy, carried it out, and endured its restrictions. As a village fieldworker I came to know in a very immediate way how the effort to hold couples to one child tore families and communities apart. As population specialist I came to see that the policy's effect

on fertility was uncertain, but its effects on society were only too clear: accelerated aging and a growing gap between the sexes. As time went by, the one-child policy came to inhabit me. I was gripped by one question: Why? Why did China's leaders adopt a population policy that was certain to fail in reaching its demographic goals while producing so much harm in the attempt? Where did the one-child policy come from?

In the conventional distribution of scholarly labor, the policy question has belonged to political science and the newer interdisciplinary field of policy studies. In an effort to create a true science of politics, historically these fields have sought to understand public policy by constructing ideal models of the policy process. In these frameworks, that process is represented as an orderly set of procedures that move linearly from agenda setting to policy formulation, implementation, effects, and evaluation. Although such stage models of the policy process have heuristic value, real-world policymaking rarely if ever conforms to their specifications, as students of policy in these fields now understand well. Far from following a regular sequence, the policy process is characteristically messy and disorderly: policies often skip stages, loop back around to previous stages, or disappear from view before being implemented. Newer institutional approaches escape some of these difficulties but face other problems, especially in capturing human agency and incorporating the role of ideas and ideologies. A recent overview of policy research portrays an intellectually vibrant field with a wealth of approaches, including new postpositivist ones, but lingering dissatisfaction with its ability to resolve certain persistent problems (Peters and Pierre 2006). Those include a state-centrism despite the importance of nonstate actors; the assumption of rationality in the face of haphazard processes and irrational actors; and difficulty assessing the often diffuse effects of policy. My own very superficial reading of the political science literature has uncovered other assumptions that will probably seem unproblematic to colleagues in political science but perhaps a bit worrying to anthropologists. That literature assumes that policies are formed of elements belonging to "the political system," when nonpolitical things often go into policymaking. More broadly, it presumes that generic features of political structure and/or process are more important determinants of policy outcomes than are ad hoc, contingent features of the local context. Are policies in fact generalizable? I am doubtful; to me it seems that the more closely one examines the social life of particular policies, the farther one gets from a general model of the policy process.

Might anthropology have fresh ways to think about and study public policy? Nearly thirty-five years ago, Laura Nader issued her famous manifesto urging anthropologists to abandon their preoccupation with the marginal and powerless of the world to study elites and how they exercise power in contemporary society (Nader 1974). In the past few decades, anthropologists have increasingly answered the call. The field has seen an explosion of interest in topics such as bureaucracies, networks, documents, and the elites—economic, cultural, and scientific—that manage the complex processes of globalization (Ong and Collier 2005; Ong 2006; Riles 2001, 2006; Rabinow and Dan-Cohen 2005; and many, many more). To study this new landscape of power, anthropologists have devised novel methods for defining “the field” and for ethnographically exploring the rapidly changing dynamics of a globalizing world in which the comfortable distinctions of the past (local/global, ethnographer/informant, and so on) have collapsed (e.g., Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Marcus 1998). Despite this expanding interest in modern power and its elite makers, until very recently one domain—the creation of public policy by political and intellectual elites—has escaped the ethnographic gaze. Although applied anthropologists have worked *for policy makers*, and public-minded anthropologists have promoted their findings *to policy makers*, historically academic anthropologists have exhibited little interest in the ethnographic study of *policymaking*.

In the last few years, however, a small but growing number of anthropologists has begun to explore the making, working, and effects of public policy as problems of modern governance. A study of public policy, these scholars have suggested, is crucial to the discipline’s understanding of issues such as the operations of modern power, the localization of global processes, and the formation of modern subjects (Shore and Wright 1997; Wedel et al. 2005). With its critical theories, ethical concerns, and ethnographic eye for the ad hoc and the contingent, anthropology would seem especially well equipped to develop a new, more politically and ethically engaged approach that aspires not to be a generalizable science, but to illuminate the characteristic complexity, messiness, and specificity of policy processes. The most humanistic of the social sciences, anthropology is also well placed to bring out the human dimensions of public policy that tend to be neglected by political science. Judging from the enthusiastic response to the new Interest Group on the Anthropology of Public Policy formed within the American Anthropological Association in 2004, interest in policy is strong. The anthropology

of policy is incipient, however; what the field can contribute and how is just now being worked out.

The small body of work published so far has focused primarily on how policy is carried out and produces its social effects. How policy gets made is a theoretically and methodologically more challenging question. Today anthropologists are keenly aware of the tight link between knowledge and power, expertise and policy. So far, however, the insights of science and technology studies (STS), the field devoted to understanding how expert knowledge is created and politically advanced, have not been applied to the anthropological study of policy. In this book I seek to empirically expand and theoretically enrich the anthropology of policy by examining the making of public policy and by rethinking the field of policy study through the intellectually productive lens of science studies.

As the authoritative knowledge in the modern era, science is fundamental to modern governance and its policy instruments. This book brings together two powerful fields of thought—governmentality studies, which explores governance “beyond the state,” and STS, which examines science in social context—to study the making of public policy by political and scientific elites. Although neither field has systematically addressed the question of policy, together they provide a formidable toolkit of concepts for illuminating the critical role of scientific logics, techniques, cultures, and politics in policymaking today. By greatly expanding the domain of the political, these domains of inquiry allow us to ask important new questions about how the policies that structure our everyday worlds come into being.

This book takes readers to the People’s Republic of China, surely one of the world’s politically most fascinating, complicated, dynamic, and significant nations, to explore policymaking in the highly secretive arena of the party and state Center. Despite growing anthropological interest in the state, recent work has focused on processes unfolding along its peripheries (e.g., Das and Poole 2004; Gupta and Sharma 2006). To study the making of public policy, we need to observe political elites operating at the center of the state apparatus. Despite very real limits on ethnographic access, by creatively tapping into personal networks or working with international organizations engaged in policy and program work, anthropologists are finding ways to gain entrée to political elites. It was through employment with such an organization that I got to know some key makers of China’s one-child policy.

I develop an *epistemic*, or *knowledge-centered*, approach to policymaking that gives analytic pride of place to policy constructs and the

knowledges, discourses, rhetorics, and visual representations with which they are created and contested. In studying the making of those policy constructs, I extend the insights of STS, which are based largely on observation of laboratory science, to the office science of population studies. Because policy constructs are institutionally crafted, and institutions shape the constructs that are made, the approach gives due weight to institutions, formal and informal, and the individual actors who populate them. Yet it goes beyond conventional interest in what institutions do to examine more contemporary questions of organizational sense making: how institutions think (Douglas 1986), how states see (Scott 1998), and how laws know (Jasanoff 1995). My central concern here is how regimes reason. To guide the analysis of the making of the one-child policy, I introduce a cluster of three interrelated concepts: policy problematization, policy assemblage, and the micropolitics of science making and policymaking. I hope scholars working on other policies in other settings find these notions helpful as well.

I also advance arguments about ethnographic method and ethnographic knowledge. The one-child policy is one of the most sensitive policies of the PRC regime. How it was made is a closed and politically dangerous question. I came to learn the answer through a combination of serendipity and dogged persistence fueled by intellectual curiosity and moral outrage. Institutional good fortune also played a role. My research was crucially enabled by my employment as a policy analyst for the Population Council in the early years of the policy's existence. As I returned to China again and again to pursue various research projects, I gradually innovated a set of methods for accessing Chinese elites and opening closed subjects without endangering informants. What I know was decisively influenced by how I came to know it. Because the how is an important part of the story, in telling it here I occasionally insert methodological asides on the politics or techniques of fieldwork. Beyond this analytical point, the research methods I improvised on the ground may also hold lessons for ethnographers interested in studying hard-to-access policy elites and dynamics in other settings.

The study of public policy opens windows on many domains of modern life, inspiring fresh questions about the role of policy in modernity's making. In this book I seek answers to four sets of questions: First, what are the origins and broad effects of the one-child policy? What can we conclude about its likely future? Second, what are the implications of the novel process of "scientific policymaking" that produced the one-child policy for China's politics writ large? How did that

new mode of decision making rearrange the relations among state, science, technology, and society? How has this reordering shaped the rise of China and the character of modern China now emerging on the world stage? Third, this close study of “scientific policymaking” in the PRC also raises some larger questions of interest to students of modernity generally. Among the most provocative are these: What culture is Chinese science? After the political ascent of science and technology, what now counts as Chinese politics? What practices count as problematic policy science in China and why does it matter? What gives population its vital significance as a field of politics today? Fourth and finally, what is the anthropology of policy? What theoretical, methodological, and ethical resources can anthropology contribute to the understanding of modern policy, governance, and power?

Though trained in anthropology and China studies, my work has always been broadly interdisciplinary, engaging with ideas of colleagues in population studies, women’s studies, and, more recently, STS. Perhaps foolishly, in this book I seek to reach researchers in all these fields, as well as political scientists intrigued by the notion of an anthropology of policy. I would also like to reach natural scientists curious about how one of their kind happened to become involved in shaping Chinese social policy and, more generally, how science gets made in the PRC. Writing for scholars in fields as different as, say, anthropology and demography (to say nothing of anthropology and natural science) is challenging. Colleagues in different disciplines make different assumptions about how the world works, value different theoretical perspectives, and even speak in different disciplinary tongues. Despite these barriers to communication, by defining my terms clearly and writing in accessible language, I hope to reach some if not all readers interested in my subject.

This book is a close relative of another text, *Governing China’s Population: From Leninist to Neoliberal Biopolitics*, which I coauthored with the political scientist Edwin A. Winckler (Greenhalgh and Winckler 2005). Empirically, that book (*GCP* for short) traces the emergence and transformations of China’s population policies over the half century 1949 to 2004 and their broad effects on China’s society, politics, and international standing. This book treats one subset of policy issues (the origins of the core policy) during one small slice of time (1978–1980). Theoretically, the two projects share the same broad framework, Foucault’s notion of governmentality, but emphasize different constructs. *GCP* centers on the concept of governmentalization—the historical process by which population comes within the purview of rationalized

control—and the attending rise of a “biopolitics,” or politics of life. This book focuses on concepts relevant to the making of a single policy—problematization and assemblage—and it adds the insights of STS that are limned but not theoretically elaborated in *GCP*. Substantively, this book confirms the arguments about the origins of the one-child policy developed in *GCP* but goes beyond them to develop a more in-depth explanation of what happened, when, how, and why in those crucial first years of Deng Xiaoping’s rule. Part 1 of *GCP*, on the making of policy from within institutions of the political Center, is based on the research and analysis of Winckler. Emphasizing a convergence of elite interests, he argues that the one-child policy was adopted because most senior members of Deng’s coalition agreed that drastic limitation of population growth was necessary to achieve core regime goals. This more fine-grained study fully affirms that argument while adding the epistemic dimensions of policy and the policy work of actors beyond the state that in my view are essential to understanding how and why top Communist Party leaders agreed on the necessity of a one-child policy. I argue that the one-child policy was a product of a new kind of scientific sense making within the regime that emerged in a historical context in which the embrace of science was politically essential to the regime’s survival. I also build on some other, smaller-scale arguments from part 1 of *GCP*. In particular, chapter 2 on the Mao era draws on *GCP*’s arguments about institutionalization, legitimation, and policy-making in the 1970s, interweaving them with new arguments about the destruction of population science and its impact on policymaking. Finally, my overview of the social and demographic effects of the one-child policy, offered in chapter 1, finds full elaboration in part 2 of *GCP*, which I wrote.

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