

# The fear making Chinese women reluctant to have more children

October 25 2018, by Ye Liu

---



One's enough to worry about. Credit: Shepherd Zhou/EPA

I was waiting in a fashionable café for Tang Xiaohe (Names have been changed to protect anonymity) in the Dongzhimen district in Beijing. Every bit of the décor in the café signalled the prosperity of China's

capital city. So did the price of a cup of cappuccino.

Xiaohe is a 35-year-old mother-of-one who works in a large tourism company. She contacted me when I put a call out via WeChat seeking women born under China's [one-child policy](#) in the 1980s who were willing to talk about their transitions to employment and parenthood for my ongoing research. Xiaohe chose this café, which is two miles away from her office, to avoid any lunchtime haunts frequented by her colleagues.

So far, I've interviewed 82 women, and I always ask them how many children they have – and if they want another one. Xiaohe gave a resounding no. But this was hardly a surprise. According to the National Bureau of Statistics, the overall birth rate [increased by 0.9%](#) between 2015 to 2016, after the end of the one-child policy in late 2015.

Although there was a [rise in second births](#) in 2017, there is [little prospect](#) of a new baby boom now couples are allowed two children. Urban Chinese families no longer want more children.

In recent months the Chinese government [has even hinted](#) that it may relax the current two-child policy even further as way to solve problems caused by an ageing population.

## **Hemmed in**

Women born under the one-child policy between 1980 and 1987 are the first generation of Chinese women in many years to be given an opportunity to have more than one child. Yet this is a generation sandwiched between the responsibilities of child rearing and looming old-age care for elderly family members.

Xiaohe was born and raised in a small county in Hebei, northern China. Like many girls of her generation, she passed [China's gaokao](#) university

entrance exam with flying colours, went to university and subsequently worked in Beijing, which she now calls home. Like many generations before her, she manages the childcare for her six-year-old daughter with help from her parents and in-laws and is committed to looking after them in old age. Looking after her daughter and a mother in a wheelchair, on top of a senior management role, is challenging but manageable.

But these are not the main reasons she gave me for not having another child. It was her fear.

Her fear of [poisoned milk powder](#) and of lead-covered toys. Her fear of dermatologically untested nappies, [unsafe vaccines](#) and [child abuse in nurseries](#), followed by cover-ups. Under the glossy metropolitan lifestyle and outward appearance of having made it in the big city, Xiaohe confessed her anxiety and the worries which sometimes keep her awake at night.

It's the urban [middle class](#) who have been the main beneficiaries of China's economic growth. It has led to increasing personal income, ever-rising property value, the urban *hukou* or residency permit, and the associated benefits such as access to good-quality schools and healthcare. These so-called "[pocketbook](#)" factors keep them loyal to the state. The middle class tend to resist social reforms that would bring down the barriers between urban and rural citizens, between wealthy eastern and poorer western regions, or would introduce changes to the education system that might undermine their privileges.

## **Broken chain of trust**

Underneath unquestioning support of the state, there is a pathological distrust in the ethics of businesses and manufacturers and the power of local institutions to regulate them after a string of scandals related to

children's welfare. This [trust deficit](#) is best captured by a Chinese saying: "?????????" which translates as: "Don't get involved in anything not relating to my own interests and stay aloof like a lamppost from trouble."

Instead, people often mobilise their own resources or networks to solve any problems. Xiaohe turned to a university friend who was studying in the UK and asked her to ship [milk powder](#) regularly from the UK. She also begged her relatives or friends to buy foreign-made nappies when they travelled abroad. She paid much higher premium for all these products and also owed people for their help, known as "returning favours" or 人情. Xiaohe explained that this was a common strategy taken by members of the middle class – to solve problems by dipping into their own pockets.

She thought money could make any problem disappear – until a recent [vaccine scandal](#). Her daughter was given the standard vaccines for children against diphtheria, tetanus, polio and hepatitis B made by the pharmaceutical company Changchun Changsheng. But in July 2018 it emerged [hundreds of thousands](#) of the vaccines were faulty. "My daughter was vaccinated by this product. I was so angry but I am helpless. I thought I could avoid this. I avoided the nursery and the milk power. But there is no escape no matter how much money you have."

She added: "Why do I want to bring another child in the world like this? You just cannot trust anyone or anything."

The Chinese state has engineered one of the most successful economic transformations in the 20th century, keeping much of the population on-side in the process. Yet, it might have difficulty in mending the broken chain of trust between people and business, local institutions and society. The state can use every trick in the book to encourage Chinese citizens to have more children, either for the sake of the nation or for the nation's economy. But if couples are worried that their children's welfare will be

at risk, they won't see any point in having more children.

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: The fear making Chinese women reluctant to have more children (2018, October 25)  
retrieved 25 April 2024 from  
<https://phys.org/news/2018-10-chinese-women-reluctant-children.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.