

World

FROM OUR CORRESPONDENT

China is reaping the whirlwind of its one-child policy — and there is no obvious way to repair the damage done

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China



Through the monastery towns of Tibet, the villages perched around the gorges of Yunnan and the urban outposts that dot the grasslands of Inner Mongolia, China's beauty is daubed with doctrine. No matter how romantic the vista, the one-child policy will usually be somewhere near by, anxious to shrivel the loins.

Communist slogans, painted on walls or banners in angry characters, are everywhere, and have been since 1949. Some call for faith in the party, others repeat the latest Politburo buzzphrase or issue blood-curdling warnings against

poultry disease, but the bluntest and most psychologically invasive are the ones about birth control.

Since population control measures were introduced 35 years ago, the one-child policy slogans have made metre-high renderings of the words "abortion", "sterilisation" and "IUD" part of the nation's street furniture. "If you don't abort what should be aborted, your house will be torn down," reads one. Others offer rewards for those grassing up illicit mothers of two; a reminder of how China co-opts communities to do its dirty work.

The grim truth, whatever your views on the morality of the policy, is that once a government has decided to impose something

as fundamental as a limit on reproduction, this is pretty much how to go about it. To bully, brutalise and beguile a vast human population off its most basic impulses would always require ruthless implementation and mass psychological warfare. That is exactly what China has supplied.

From the very beginning, the success of the one-child policy lay not just in performing 13 million abortion operations a year, but in colonising people's instincts. And that has clearly worked.

When Chinese children misbehave, their parents do not threaten them with no dinner, but with a little brother or sister. If we have a second child, runs the subtext, the family resources will be halved and you will have fewer toys, fewer sweets and less love.

This has made China's current dilemma all the more alarming. Faced with ominous demographic consequences of the policy — a shrinking workforce and a huge gender disparity foremost among them — China relaxed the one-child controls in late 2013.

It has not triggered the predicted frenzy of child-production. In

Shanghai, 90 per cent of women of child-bearing

A sibling is a threat to the spoilt only-children of China

age with one child were eligible to have a second, but only 5 per cent of them applied to do so. Elsewhere, the take-up has been similarly disappointing.

The standard analysis is that the raw economics make a second child unattractive to most couples. Kids are expensive, and there are elderly relatives to care for and future healthcare costs to consider in a system still without a convincing welfare safety net.

The ferocious battle for good schools and good universities is so expensive and emotionally draining that no parent would want to endure it twice. And on China's doorstep are Japan and South Korea; cultures in more advanced states of economic development that have decided, even without a one-child policy, to stick to one child.

This analysis, though, underplays the long-term impact of the 35-year brainwashing experiment. It is childish for the present leadership to imagine that simply telling China it is now OK to have a second child can instantly unravel a policy that was so relentlessly implanted in the national psyche.

Shanghai's Population and Family Planning Commission has begun actively calling on couples to have a second child — but a generation of women have grown up with ubiquitous slogans telling them that their ovaries are weapons of both their own and the country's economic destruction. If China truly intends to reverse that, the world may be about to see the sexiest sloganeering in history.

