

SPEAKING THE UNSPOKEN AND UNSPEAKABLE: LIVING WITH THE AFTERMATH OF SIBLING ABORTION UNDER CHINA'S ONE-CHILD POLICY

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Abstract

This is an autoethnographical paper on the experience of living with the aftermath of an abortion in my family due to China's One-Child Policy. My paper shows how the loss of a younger sibling has affected my personal life and how it is like to bring the unconscious grief into awareness. Moving between theories and personal experience, I seek to understand my experience of being a sibling abortion survivor under China's One-Child Policy through the psychodynamic concept of melancholia, drawing particularly on conceptual resources offered by Freud, Leader and Kristeva. Links are made between the experience of losing an unborn sibling and melancholia which involves loss and grief that are unspeakable and unknowable. By presenting this paper, I seek to give voice to the Chinese generation that is affected by the One-Child Policy and whose voice is seldom heard.

Keywords: China's One-Child Policy, Sibling Abortion, Loss, Melancholia.

1 CHINA'S ONE-CHILD POLICY

1.1 The Introduction, Abolition and Effect of China's One-Child Policy

China's One-Child Policy was introduced in 1979 to limit China's population growth especially in urban areas [1][2]. It was introduced in the context of economic reform following the economic stagnation after the Cultural Revolution and intention to improve living standard [3][4]. Prior to the launch of the One-Child Policy, a family planning campaign began in China in 1971 which encouraged later marriage and fewer pregnancies [3]. Though having some coercive elements, the family planning campaign was technically voluntary [3]. In comparison, China's One-Child Policy that followed was more radical and coercive [3]. As suggested by its name, the One-Child Policy restricts the number of children per family can have to one. It was applied throughout the whole China, however, there were exceptions. For instance, people of ethnic minority, families with a severely disabled first child and families living in some rural areas were allowed to have more children [1][3][4]. In comparison, the policy was stricter for urban residents and government employees [4]. The policy was operated through a reward and penalty system [2][4]. Couples who complied with the policy would be rewarded with financial benefits while couples who broke the rules would face substantial fine and the possibility of dismissal from work especially for those who worked for the government and state-owned institutions or enterprises [3][4].

Sterilisation and abortion campaigns were carried in order to enforce the birth control planning [5][6]. The number of birth control operations including abortions, sterilisation, intrauterine device insertions (IUD insertions) rose nearly 50 percent from 21.72 million in 1978 to 30.58 million in 1979 [6]. The most drastic raise happened in 1983. There were 14.4 million abortions, 20.7 million sterilisations and 17.8 million IUD insertions in that year alone in China [6]. Under the One-Child Policy, pregnancies after the birth of the first child were usually classified as 'unplanned pregnancies' which were not

eligible to receive some welfare benefits such as prenatal care and postnatal care from the government [7]. The consequences of giving birth to the 'unplanned' baby such as job loss, high amount of fine and ineligibility to welfare benefits [2][4][8] were unaffordable to many families, which had led to abortions of a second child in some Chinese families. The penalty for unplanned pregnancies had also led parents to hide their children from the government, causing China to have an unknown number of children who were not registered with the household registration system and thus unable to receive public education and welfare benefits [2]. Due to the traditional preference for a son that was ingrained in many Chinese families especially in rural areas, the One-Child Policy had caused families to choose sex selective abortion after ultrasonography in order for the family's only child to be a son [4]. Acknowledging this, in 1980s, the Chinese government relaxed the policy in some rural areas to allow families in these areas to give birth to a second child if their first child was a girl, after which they should stop, even if the second child was also a girl [6].

There had been reduction in fertility rate in recent decades following the introduction of the One-Child Policy, though whether it was directly led to by the policy was questioned [3][4]. Statistics show that there was significant and persistent reduction of fertility rate from the year of 1971 to the late 1970s; after the introduction of the One-Child Policy, the reduction continued, however, the fertility rate stabilised after around 1990s [3]. A rapid decline of fertility rate was realised before the launch of the One-Child Policy under the less strict family planning campaign [5]. These lead researchers to question the effectiveness and necessity of the One-Child Policy [3][5].

The One-Child Policy had led to various unintended and unwanted effects. Among the most discussed negative effects were the imbalance of sex ratio and the imbalance between the working-age population and elderly populations [3][4][5]. The negative effects of the policy had been recognised by scholars and from the beginning of the 21st century, based on their studies on China's demographic reality, some scholars had been calling for a change of the policy from the government [5]. Comparing to the 'rushed launch' of the One-Child Policy [5], the relaxation and final abolition of the policy was a gradual process. In 2013, Chinese government announced that couples were allowed to have a second child if one of them was an only child [5][8]. From 2016 onwards, every Chinese family is allowed to have a second child, which marks the end of the One-Child Policy [5][8].

1.2 The Lack of Research on Family Abortions related to China's One-Child Policy

China's One-Child Policy has attracted research interests from scholars in various areas. In the field of mental health and wellbeing, studies have been conducted on the topics such as the interpersonal relationship [9][2], socialisation [10], behaviour patterns [1][11], academic performance and personality traits [12] and the general mental health wellbeing [13] of the only-child. The theme of bereavement and loss has been researched in relation to the context of the One-Child Policy. Valuable attention has been paid to the wellbeing of Chinese parents who have lost their only-child [14][15]. However, little attention has been given to the impact of the loss of an unborn child on individuals and families due to the One-Child Policy. As mentioned above, the One-Child Policy had contributed to a drastic increase on the number of induced abortion, some of which involuntary. How did those parents who had lost their unborn children to abortion due to the policy experience their losses? How were these losses mourned or were they mourned? Were they even recognised as significant losses?

Though had been aware of the abortion in my family due to China's One-Child Policy, I never considered its psychological impact on me until the second year of my counselling and psychotherapy training when the theme of family myths and secrets was discussed. I was unexpectedly and deeply upset when I spoke about the abortion. It was only by then, more than twenty years after the abortion of my unborn sibling, that I started to identify myself as a sibling abortion survivor, as Ney and colleagues suggest [16][17]. Here, I adopt the definition of 'survivor' by Ney *et al* – it indicates 'those who remain alive after some force over which they had no control prematurely ended the life of somebody near and dear to them, namely a preborn sibling' [18]. In the past four years, without conscious intention, the impact of being a sibling abortion survivor revealed itself to me in various

areas of my life, such as my research, my personal therapy, my clinical practice, my sandplay, my reading and writing. Acknowledging its impact on me and yet still not knowing how it has impact on my parents' and many other parents and sibling abortion survivor's emotional lives, I recognise that this is what needs to be spoken about and to be heard. There lacks existing research on this matter. Therefore, the resources in which I can gain understanding of this topic is to delve into my own experience. Through understanding and speaking about my own experience, I hope the often unspoken grief over a unborn family member under China's One-Child Policy in the last three decades can be shed light on.

This paper does not intend to comment on the One-Child Policy itself. The political, social or ecological impacts or outcomes of the policy are beyond this paper's scope and intention. Instead, this paper focuses on the emotional, often unconscious, unrecognised and unspeakable experience of loss.

2 A PERSONAL STORY

2.1 Enfranchising the Disenfranchised

May, 2019

'It felt like as if it understood you. When you felt sad, it became quiet; when it was kicking and you were tired, just put your hand on your belly and told it to give you some rest, it would stop the kick; if you were happy and excited, it sometimes seemed to jump inside with you. It just seemed to understand you.'

We were walking home through the meadows. My mother was telling me about her experience of pregnancy, under my request. She told me this intimacy she shared with her baby during the pregnancy. Listening to her talking, all I could think about was that she did not use 'you' to refer to this baby. She used 'it' or 's/he' (there was no difference in spoken Mandarin between it and s/he).

Maybe it was not me that she was speaking about. Was she talking about another baby, the baby who was with her for eight months and whom she had lost?

Nov. 2015

It was halfway through my counselling and psychotherapy training. Week seven into the psychodynamic part of the training. The weekly theme was 'ghost, myths and secrets'. Without knowing what it was going to bring up for me, I started to share in the community group what I considered as most related the theme of 'ghost' in my family – the abortion of a younger sibling.

It was never a secret. I grew up knowing that I was supposed to have a younger brother, who, according to a fortune teller, was going to be an intelligent and successful man. About a year after my birth, my mother was pregnant again. Under China's One-Child Policy at that time, it was an 'unplanned' pregnancy. Giving birth to this second child would have caused a fine and my dad's job both of which my family could not afford. My parents waited for eight months before making the final decision to abort their second child, their first son.

This was a story that I had always known. I thought nothing was hidden. Therefore, my unstoppable tears took me by surprise when sharing this story in the community group. I had always been a relatively quiet group member, but on that day my sudden yet intense grief took most of the space. And I finally realised, the lost life of an unborn baby in my family had been talked about as a fact, however, it had never been registered as a significant loss. I thought nothing was hidden about it, that there were no myths nor secrets. However, it turned out that something was hidden all along. The grief over the loss of a life, a family member and its effect on us had been hidden all along, from my and my family's consciousness, disenfranchised [19]. It revealed itself in that Tuesday afternoon in

November 2015, two months before the official abolition of China's One-Child Policy on the 1st of January 2016.

2.2 The Unspeakable Melancholia

I have always struggled with telling my stories. Many hours of my personal therapy were pervaded with my general sense of sadness that I could not talk about nor give reasons to. I had the space and time every week to tell my stories and yet I struggled with finding one of my own to tell. That sense of permeating sadness has been an unwanted yet familiar companion throughout my life. It occupies a good amount of my emotional life and yet it only represented itself as a void when given space in my personal therapy. I not only could not give it reasons or tell a story about it, but also could not describe it satisfactorily. Nothing could be shared. Everything was locked inside.

With the frustration and puzzlement, I settled the topic of my doctorate thesis on narrative in/coherence, delving into the experience of incoherence and that which cannot be spoken. Writing as an inquiry was used as my methodology. I wrote into my experience of not being able to speak what was felt inwardly. The theme of loss repeatedly appeared in my writing. Whatever I wrote down, it felt inadequate in speaking about my experience. Something always slipped away through my fingers.

During and after the process of my research project, when I came across writings on the subject of melancholia and its symbolic impasses, by writers such as Sigmund Freud [20], Darian Leader [21] and Julia Kristeva [22], I found a language to talk and think about what was, perhaps is still, locked inside me. I started to recognise that something was indeed unspeakable. Instead of inadequacy, I started to understand the unspeakable as a characteristic of the pervading melancholia that I have been living with and to connect it to that implicitly experienced yet never truly spoken grief of a lost could-have-been family member.

In his classic essay *Mourning and Melancholia*, Freud suggests that mourning and melancholia are both related to grief [20]. However, melancholia strikes people as pathological because it could not be explained; for melancholia, comparing to mourning, the loss is more notional in nature. The grieved person does not know what has been lost or what has been lost in losing the loved one. Melancholia, according to Freud, is a refusal to let go of the lost loved one. The melancholic identifies with the lost object to perpetuate its existence in their own psyche. As Quinodoz writes, 'loving the object becomes 'being' the object [23]. Therefore, the hatred directed to the external loved object is now directed to oneself, since a part of the ego identifies with the loved object is developed [20], which generates self-reproach. As Freud's famous statement suggests, 'in mourning, the world has become poor and empty, in melancholia it is the ego that has become so' [24]. Based on Freud's theory, Leader writes that a choice of identification with the dead or the lost object for the melancholic is to die, physically or psychically, with them [21]. Therefore, the melancholic situates in an impossible position of in-between two worlds: the world of the dead and the living [21]. Finding words to articulate this dual existence becomes impossible for no words describes this impossible experience of being in two worlds simultaneously [21].

'Because of me, my broth did not get a chance to live. I feel I have been living for both of us.' I said this in tears in that November afternoon when I recognised the disenfranchised grief for the first time. The belief, however irrational it might be, that my existence took away my younger brother's life was deeply rooted in me. I talked about the abortion in therapy, in groups, with friends and I wrote letters to my unborn brother. However, nothing lightens that existential guilt - as Ney and colleagues identify in other sibling abortion survivors [17] - which my life almost develops upon. My younger brother did not get a chance to see this world and to breathe, because I took his chance. My life was the sole reason that he died.

Therefore, I carry his life for him within me. I live for him too. I strive to fulfil the fortune teller's prophecy for him and for my parents. I studied hard since I was a pupil for I deeply fear to be a disappointing child for my parents when they had given up another child. I also carry his death within

me. A death that my family have not properly mourned but also cannot let go. A part of me becomes him. So that my melancholia keeps him and his death alive, for my family and for the potential attachment [16] I could have developed with him if he was allowed to be born. I live in the indescribable in-between of the two worlds [21]. A part of me has died. In a letter I wrote to my unborn brother, I wrote 'if you were here, I would not be the same person I am now'. Along with the sense of irrevocable guilt [21] and obligation is a sense of resentment. I yield for a life of my own, a life for myself. Freedom becomes something of significance to me, preconsciously knowing that something is inhibiting me from my development into being [16]. It has driven me to move far away from home – I moved from the very south of China to the north and then to Europe, striving for that life of my own. And yet, I do not know how to lose, the loss of him entails also the loss of my being [22]. The refusal to let go of the lost life of my younger brother declares the death of a part of me. My lost brother's life and mine intertwine, bringing a mixture of love and hatred, guilt and resentment. I hate myself for taking my brother's life and I hate him for taking mine too. I 'live a living death ... absorbed into sorrow' [25]. That hatred and resentment towards my unborn brother perhaps turn back to myself to form my self-reproach and deepen my guilt, as Freud suggests about the melancholic's ambivalent love and hatred towards the lost object [20].

Like the depressed narcissist Kristeva writes about, I mourn not only the object, but also the Thing from which the object is separated from, something unrepresentable [22]. That sorrow itself becomes a substitute object that I become attached to [25]. Throughout my life, I have been afraid of loss. I have broken emerging attachment due to this fear. I have found it hard to imagine, tolerate and recover from separation with others and yet I indulge myself in the pain of losses, paradoxically finding familiar comfort in it. The paradox of fear for losses and the comfort I find in the pain of losses casts its shadow on me, contributing to the sadness, the sorrow that I cannot reason thus cannot talk about in the language of logic and consciousness.

In that early summer day when my mother was talking about carrying a baby inside her, I started to wonder how my life was in that eight months of pregnancy and the months followed the abortion. Listening to her describing her experience with the baby, I felt as if I was an excluded third in the mother-baby dyad. I imagined her in the state of heightened sensitivity, being preoccupied with the baby inside to the exclusion of other interest, as Winnicott describes in the state of primary maternal preoccupation [26]. At the same time, how was it like for her to carry a baby inside that she knew would be taken away from her. How was it like to be preoccupied not only by love and care but also by sorrow and pain? How was it like for me in the exclusion of the intimacy my unborn brother and my mother shared. If a baby sees himself/herself in the mother's eyes when s/he gazes at the mother [27], what did I see in my gaze at my mother's face? And what did I internalise as my sense of self? Was it that permeating sorrow that I have been so familiar with in my everyday life and was it what has been bringing me frightening yet familiar and somehow comforting pain? What did my mother see when she gazed at me? Was it similar to what Kristeva writes: 'Conscious of our being doomed to lose our loves, we grieve perhaps even more when we glimpse in our lover the shadow of a long lost former loved one' [28]? Did my mum see the lost child when she looked at me? Perhaps these are the questions that I will never have answers to.

While struggling with articulating the loss, the meaning of the loss and the permeating sadness and sorrow, as Leader says about the melancholic, I have realised that strong need to be heard and to be known while words fail to touch my referent [21]. A symbolic impasse presents for me [21]. Throughout the past few years, in the process of writing, sandplaying and doodling, I have relinquished the desire to tell an organised, coherent and consistent story and let go of the shame of being inarticulate, because organisation, coherence, consistency and articulation are exactly what lacks in my experience of being a sibling abortion survivor. The solution for the impossibility of expression in melancholia suggested by Leader is to find expression to say how words or symbolisation fails [21]. This is what I have been doing in my research, my therapy, daily life and now. I have wanted to tell a story and what I have drawn you into so far is perhaps wondering without answers, pieces of memories and not so

organised telling. A part of my is apologetic for a false promise of a story and yet another part of me thinks perhaps this is the best way to show how it is like to be me, as a sibling abortion survivor in the time of the One-Child Policy, living in the midst of the unspeakable loss and grief.

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