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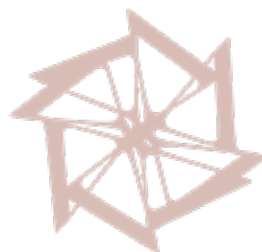
Shuai Yang's Wombs:

Affection Interpretations of One-Child Policy

Yubai Shi | essay | 100

Volume One, Issue Two

Fall 2020



SHUAI YANGS'S WOMBS: AFFECTIVE INTERPRETATIONS OF THE ONE-CHILD POLICY

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Some time ago, women in the countryside were compelled to go group by group by automobile to the hospital in the city for IUD insertion, abortion, and sterilization. The family planning cadres surrounded them. They guarded the gate out of the ward. They even watched the women when they went to the bathroom because they were afraid [the] women would run away. Then, I performed many 'family planning' operations.¹

I first heard the term IUD during a gathering my mother and her female friends held a long time ago, when I was still a child. They mentioned it briefly while talking about a person who used it to their advantage to seek U.S. asylum. The underlying assumption of the conversation was that everyone present had an IUD in their bodies, including my mother. As a child who had happened to overhear this intimate conversation, it felt inappropriate for me to ask: "What is an IUD?"

Shuai Yang's *Womb II* is composed of a large piece of red paper that hovers in the air, as well as a pile of paper scraps on the floor. Light penetrates the paper's negative spaces and creates a silhouette on the wall behind. The work is from a series called *Wombs* (*Womb I*, *Womb II*, and *Womb III*) which revolves around the One-Child Policy, a population planning policy implemented in China from the 1980s until 2013; the title "womb" refers directly to the uterus (Figures 1-3). Seeing these for the first time brought back memories of that conversation between my mother and her friends, as the works' interplay between negative and positive spaces reminded me of the IUD's function and shape. The paper design is based on a repetition of children holding hands. They are individuals, yet as copies of each other, they are fundamentally one single child (Figure 4). The paper scraps on the floor are carefully arranged into a shape that resembles both a uterus and an IUD (Figure 5). As a contraceptive means, an IUD makes void: it prevents pregnancy and refuses fertilisation to take place in the body. Yet, paradoxically, as the most intrusive contraceptive method, its physicality is vividly present in the uterus. Similarly, *Womb II* plays with the paradox between presence and absence. The body of the paper material intrudes into the space and air, yet the silhouette on the wall cast from the piece's negative spaces is a reminder of the irreparable void.

After learning of Yang's works, I had a conversation with my grandaunt about her experience as a gynecologist in a rural area in the Hunan province in the 1980s. As a rural gynecologist, she was only in charge of deliveries and abortions, not the contraceptive procedure, which was the family planning office's responsibility. Nevertheless, she worked closely with the office and told me that, one year, around 150 women in the area were forced to receive IUDs. Her description of how abortions were performed and her patient explanation of the difference between abortions and labor induction still stuck with me as the narrative of a person who went through the strictest period of the policy in the 1980s. IUDs, abortions, women's bodies: these are the concepts that I thought of when I saw the *Womb* series.

Stepping into the gallery space where the artworks stand, we assist in the process of cutting. As viewers, we cut open the space and enter a metonymic site of the female body. In the room, we either see a piece of delicate paper nailed to the wall (*Womb I*) or hover in the middle of the room (*Womb II* and *Womb III*).



Figure 1. Shuai Yang. *Womb I*. Photo Courtesy of the Artist.



Figure 2. Shuai Yang. *Womb II*. Photo Courtesy of the Artist.

Our perspective within the space creates both an intimacy with the works and also a sense of intrusion. The shadowing effect, the lighting, and the air envelops and infiltrates the works. Yang indicates that the entanglement of shadow and light is a vital component of the series. A dimly lit room is an ideal condition, she says, as it allows fluidity and stretches time.² Our bodily effects permeate both the work and the gallery space. We shift our bodies around and approach to examine the shapes, the patterns of designs in the form of children, and the material details. When looking from a close distance, our bodies block out the lighting, eclipsing the silhouette on the wall behind it, and filling into the shadow's positive spaces. We come into contact with the works and become part of them through our bodies, even though such interaction is constantly shifting depending on our movements in the space.

From afar, the crowd of yellow and red paper scraps on the ground resembles fallen leaves. Looking closely, it turns out that this field of debris matches the work's cut-out negative space (Figure 5). The paper scraps are on the ground but not grounded. We can crouch down to investigate their meaning on the floor. Standing too close, we risk making too much bodily agitation and disturbing them, as the featherlight scraps are susceptible to receiving our bodily energies transmitted through the slightest amount of airflow. Suspended in the air, indeed, but the works are not suspended in time. When our bodies move in the gallery space, the works' physicality also shifts.

Due to the works' direct reference to the most stringent population planning policy in modern history, categorizing the series as works that offer critical reflection on the history of state dominance over human life seems an evident choice. But by interacting with them, they offer more fluid messages. Instead of focusing on the objectivity of history, Yang investigates the effects produced by the policy from a different perspective and creates an atmospheric sensibility that interacts with and envelops the viewer. My own experience with them was quite personal as a result. My method focuses on conversations with the artist, personal narrative, and oral histories to align with the intimate dimension of the works. While the methodology challenges the objective history, it echoes the works' physical and sensorial ethereality, centering on an exploration of feelings.

THE HISTORY OF THE ONE-CHILD POLICY

The One-Child Policy was inaugurated as a nationwide reality in September 1980. The Chinese Communist Party delivered an open letter to its members and the Communist Youth League formally advocating for a one-child-per-couple policy to address the issue of population growth.³ However, there had already been various birth regulations put in place across China. In October 1978, the Birth Planning Leading Group of China, along with the Central Committee, advocated for a policy that followed the slogan "one is best, two at most," which then quickly evolved into "encourage one, prohibit three."⁴

The strategies for enforcing the Policy gradually grew more stringent once Xinzhong Qian (钱信忠) stepped up as the chairman of the National Family Planning Commission in 1982. Enforcement of contraception, sterilization, and abortion as a final resort were the central methods of Qian's agenda.⁵ Furthermore, Qian "authorized people to use any means necessary, including force and late-term abortions," to achieve the birth targets.⁶ Methods of punishment for couples who violated the regulations varied widely from region to region but centered on financial penalty and exclusion from or limited access to social welfare.⁷ In rural areas, the Commission deployed extreme tactics such as destroying one's house, confiscating furniture, utensils, and livestock, and even conducting surprise inspections to people's houses at night.⁸

Even though various regulations and levels of implementations divided social spaces, such as rural and urban, one thread links these intersections together: the female body. Concerns about "the side effects and complications of male sterilization and the traditional concept that men are not responsible for contraception led to the declining trend in male sterilization and the rather low level of condom use."⁹ In 1988, almost a decade after the Policy's birth, the percentage of women using IUDs was 42.1%, and that of women who were sterilized was 37.2%. Of men, only 7.4% were sterilized, and

only 3.9% used condoms as a contraceptive measure.¹⁰

Yang directly engages with the history of the One-Child Policy in her works. However, her approach also challenges and differs from the objective history by focusing on the female body and adding a personal and intimate dimension to her narrative.

PERSONAL HISTORY

Born in 1998 in Beijing, Yang was among the generation born when the Policy had already become a well-regulated reality. Both Yang and I are single children, the products of these strict rules. Similarly, the *Wombs* collection is a result of the Policy. When I asked Yang about what led her to create *Wombs*, I was curious about the political intention behind her works. In my mind, I was expecting a sharply defined commentary about the long-lasting harms and damages caused by the strict enforcement of the One-Child Policy in the 1980s and 1990s. I was expecting the works to reveal something significant. Instead, what Yang told me was more nuanced:

I do not want to define the Policy as “good” or “bad.” It was effective if we consider it strictly as a population planning policy, yet from the perspective of ethics and morality, the means of implementation were inadequate, violent, and inhuman. I think it cannot be simply reduced into the binary of “either good or bad.”¹¹

Though she did not answer my question as I originally had envisioned, Yang did share with me the personal stories she collected from women of different generations that had been dear to her: the experiences of a friend who is an “illegitimate” second child, a personal account from a teacher born in the 1980s, and more importantly her mother’s removal of an IUD in the summer of 2018. It was at that time that she first learned about the device’s existence within her mother’s body, and the revelation started a personal journey to come to terms with the history of the Policy. As she told me, “the stories that happened during its history of implementation are more attractive [to the artist].”¹²

The statistics that construct an objective history demonstrates that the Policy targets the female body. Yet crowded together, the numbers become disorientingly performative and lose their original intention that originated from the care to repair what really happened during the decades when the Policy was a harsh reality. The statistics detaches feelings and emotions from the bodies by converting them into abstract numbers. In turn, while providing the reader an overarching context of the collective history, the statistics also create a distancing barrier between the reader and what the reality in flesh means. On the contrary, if objective history evolves around hard statistics, the stories that *Wombs* narrate come from lived experiences. *Wombs* first stemmed from the artist’s personal journey. Starting from there, the series explores stories and feelings rather than institutional policymaking or the political regime. The emotions woven into the works push back against the objectivity and scientism of history with a capital “H.”

ATMOSPHERIC MATERIALITY IN THE ART-MAKING PROCESS

The materiality of the paper medium and its porosity makes *Wombs* extremely flimsy. Yang made *Womb I and III* from pieces of Chinese rice paper (or *xuan* paper, 宣纸), known for its delicate thinness (it is predominantly used for practicing calligraphy). *Womb II* consists of a type of red paper conventionally used for spring festival couplets (*chunlian*, 春联). Although thicker and stronger than the rice paper, the red paper remains fragile as a medium. When making *Womb I*, the artist first drew a cardboard template that resembles a pair of children whose heads and legs are connected to one another respectively. Tracing the template, she cut the rice paper into the two figures and then patched sixteen pieces of the



Figure 3. Shuai Yang. *Womb III*. Photo Courtesy of the Artist.



Figure 4. Shuai Yang. *Womb II* [Detail showing the shapes of children holding hands]. Photo Courtesy of the Artist.



Figure 2. Shuai Yang, *Womb II*. Photo Courtesy of the Artist.



Figures 6 and 7. Shuai Yang, *Womb III* [Detail showing paper scraps arranged on the floor, covered with the handwritten words “Elder brother, little brother, elder sister, little sister…”] (Left); *Womb III* [Detail showing the words “Elder brother, little brother, elder sister, little sister…”] (Right), Photos Courtesy of the Artist.

paper together.¹³ The other two works were made through a similar making process, except that *Womb III* involves more layers of complexity. The artist used screen printing to add a textual layer to its surface.

These physical characteristics, as well as the strenuous process of art-making, align with the stories that the artist wishes to tell through her work. Yang finds it regrettable that “the generation of our parents don’t want to share their experiences due to the influences and constraints of many factors, like how they were educated about the Policy under the state’s propaganda.”¹⁴ As there are few people who tell the stories, our understanding of this period of history becomes limited. Both my mother and Yang’s lived through the height of the One-Child Policy and rarely talked about it with us. It is through overhearing or accidental revelation that we started to know and understand. To counteract this reluctance to tell, Yang seeks to share personal stories by weaving them into the process of art. By coming into contact with raw pieces of paper, the artist pours emotions into them.

Red is a leitmotif that unites the series. In *Womb I*, the paper shows faint traces of red squares drawn with dotted lines, a physical trait inherited from the paper’s original function: to practice calligraphy (Figure 8). For Yang, the rice paper represents her identity and childhood, when she was encouraged to practice handwriting through tracing exercise books made of such rice paper.¹⁵ I, too, share this childhood memory. The red paper used for spring festival couplets in *Womb II* reminds one of writing or buying couplets for spring festivals during childhood. The medium is flimsy, yet its specificity also sparks communal memories and sentiments.

However, red can also be interpreted as a symbol of violence or a sign of the menstrual cycle. The title *Wombs* directly guides us to the uterus, an organ that physically structures the sex and socially mandates the implications of womanhood. Therefore, red also signifies the works’ underlying connection to womanhood. Yang painted across the surface of *Womb III* an orangish-red with a writing brush, referring to menstrual blood (Figure 9).¹⁶ The womb bleeds and sheds, its lining represented in *Wombs* as the fallen paper scraps, which remind us of the creative process, which heavily relies on cutting.

In the context of the works, the symbolic violence that the color red brings forward can be connected to abortions. When the birth planning policy moved forward, the state mandated abortion for couples who already had a child in order to further control the population growth: objectively, when contraception and sterilization failed, it became the necessary step to ensure the Policy’s effectiveness. As the artist’s hand refers to her bodily affects in the form of intimate touch with the artworks, it also resonates with the gynecologist’s touch. The hands performed the cuts through the scissor, an instrument whose shape evokes dilators and the curettes, medical instruments used for abortion. Seen closely, the shapes show the traces of the scissor which left the edges with ragged outlines (Figure 4). Moreover, the fallen paper scraps cut away from the wombs recall the dilation and curettage process in abortions, and their ragged shapes resemble the aborted bodily tissues.

It is by cutting away the negative spaces that the children holding hands emerge on the papers, and through cutting that the artist creates a twofold shadow. One is the silhouette of the work as reflected on the wall. Another is the fallen scraps as the shadows of the children holding hands together. The ghostly presence of scraps suggests the concept of unregistered personhood. In China, the *Hukou* system is a birth and household registration without which one is denied the access to (or required to pay extra fees to enjoy) essential benefits such as education, housing, and health care.¹⁷ Since the implementation of birth planning policies in the late 1970s, the process to obtain a birth certificate and birth registration for one’s children necessarily went through the Population and Family Planning department.¹⁸ Therefore, families had to pay financial penalties to register an unplanned child, or had them unregistered as people living outside of the legal structure. Although the government has banned local governments from excluding out-of-plan children from being registered, “many illegitimate children have remained outside the registration system for years, becoming not just unplanned children, but also unplanned adolescents and even young adults, statuses fraught with difficulties.”¹⁹

Yang confirms that the paper scraps are an integral part of *Wombs*.²⁰ Subtracted by creation, they signify the



Figures 8 and 9. Shuai Yang, *Womb I* [Detail]; *Womb II* [Detail] (Right), Photos Courtesy of the Artist.

children that fall away either through abortion, abandonment, or as unregistered human ghosts. They also stand for the sisters and brothers that people born under the One-Child Policy could never have. They are a reminder of the void in between the children's holding hands, a visual silence reinforced again by the floating silhouette on the wall. Recall the unplanned children born under the One-Child Policy: "Although literally created by the birth program, [they] represent its dark underside."²¹

Once we enter the gallery, our bodies cut through the space and interrupt the atmosphere. We are implicated in the works' interplay of void and intrusion, absence and presence. We create a presence in the space by casting our shadows onto the work, yet our presence is only transient. What we leave, what stays with us, are feelings and memories that the works evoke.

CONCLUSION

Seeing the *Womb* series also reminded me of a conversation I had with my mother in 2013. When my mother asked me, "Do you want to have a younger sibling?" I immediately refused. The context behind her question was the imminent implementation of the Two-Child Policy, which became a reality in 2015.²² My mother was already in her mid-forties at the time, and pregnancy would have caused severe burdens to her body. Yet the more haunting thought at the back of my mind was that I did not want a sibling. I had been a single child for the first eighteen years of my life and had never thought about what it would mean to have a sibling. My selfish reaction to my mother's question may have been peculiar, but it was the residue of the complicated effects the Policy produced in our generation of single children. *Wombs* reveal something significant. Through the works, the artist explores experiences both intimate to her and people around her regarding the Policy. They offer an intimate viewing space where bodies interact and exchange feelings.

Ms. Deng said that she had four children — the living daughter and the three aborted fetuses. She called each of her fetuses the little child (xiao wawa), observing that she often thought about "how old they would now be if they had lived":

"Three times I saw rolls of fine hair (rongmao , i.e., the aborted tissues, which resemble such rolls). After seeing them, I felt the little child (xiao wawa) was really pitiful. If the Policy [had] allowed, they would have been born. They were very little. If they were bigger, I would feel much worse. Everyone has emotion, right? I often think of them. I often imagine how old they would be if they had been born. If they had been born, one of them would have been in senior high school now."²³

NOTES

1. Jing-Bao Nie and Arthur Kleinman, *Behind the Silence* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 175-176. Quote taken from the account of Dr. Zhang, an OB/GYN doctor of sixteen years at the time of the authors' interviews.
2. Shuai Yang, video interview by author, June 27, 2020.
3. "Open Letter of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China to the General Membership of the Communist Party and the Membership of the Chinese Communist Youth League on the Problem of Controlling Population Growth in Our Country (September 25, 1980)," *Chinese Sociology & Anthropology* 24, no.3 (1992): 11-16.
4. Susan Greenhalgh, *Just One Child* (Berkeley: University of California Press: 2008), 87.
5. Liang Zhongtang 梁中堂, "Jiannan de licheng: cong Yitaihua dao Nü'erhu 艰难的历程: 从“一胎化”到“女儿户” [The Tortuous Course: From “One-Child” to “Daughter-Only”], *Kaifang shidai* 开放时代 3 (2014), 26
6. Susan Greenhalgh, "China's Population Policies: Engendered Biopolitics, the One-Child Norm, and Masculinization of Child Sex Ratios," in *Markets and Malthus: population, gender, and health in neo-liberal times*, ed. Mohan Rao and Sarah Sexton (Sage Publications, 2010), 305.
7. Liang Zhongtang 梁中堂, "The Tortuous Course," 15.
8. *Ibid.*, 27.
9. Xiaoying Zheng, Lingfang Tan, Qiang Ren, Zhijun Cui, Junqing Wu, Ting Lin, Jie He, and Hua Chen, "Trends in Contraceptive Patterns and Behaviors during a Period of Fertility Transition in China: 1988-2006," *Contraception (Stoneham)* 86, no. 3 (2012), 206.
10. *Ibid.*, 211.
11. Shuai Yang, interview by author, June 27, 2020.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*
17. Li Shuzhuo, Zhang Yexia, and Marcus W. Feldman, "Birth Registration in China: Practices, Problems and Policies," *Population Research and Policy Review* 29, no. 3 (2010), 298.
18. *Ibid.*, 305-313.
19. Susan Greenhalgh and Edwin A. Winckler, *Governing China's population: from Leninist to neoliberal biopolitics* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2005), 277.
20. Shuai Yang, video interview by author.
21. Susan Greenhalgh and Edwin A. Winckler, *Governing China's population*, 277.
22. The Two-Child Policy is a modification of the One-Child Policy that allows each couple to have anywhere between one child or two, depending on the condition that one of the parents is a single child. The Standing Committee of the National People's Congress officially passed the Policy in December 2015. For more details regarding the Two-Child Policy, see also the announcement made on the Fifth Plenary Session of the 18th Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee.
23. Jing-Bao Nie and Arthur Kleinman, *Behind the Silence*, 142.

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