



Above left (clockwise): The moment mother and baby were reunited; the whole family together; Ji and Zhang

"She's alive?" Zhang gasped. "My baby is alive?" The police officer nodded. "Very much so," he confirmed.

"But they told me she'd died," Zhang cried. Shell-shocked, she and Zhai once again climbed into a car to be whisked back to the scene of her nightmares.

Hours later, amid a crowd of hospital and government workers, the baby who refused to die was placed back in the arms of her mother.

Zhang held her close, weeping tears of pure relief. "I'm here," she whispered. "I'll never let you go again." Her baby had wasted from 2.5kg at birth to just 1kg. She was filthy, with loose skin, but she was alive.

Six months later, in the family home where she will be allowed to remain, little Ji Huansheng — as she is now called — snuggles contentedly in her mother's arms, her peaceful face masking the trauma and drama she's been through. She's the picture of health — a happy, smiley baby, getting chubbier by the day.

Only her unusual name, which goes against Chinese tradition of giving family names to babies, hints at a tale to be told: Ji Huansheng, literally means 'brought back to life by journalists'. "Without them, she would have died," Zhang says simply, wiping away her tears. Ji's story is still not over.

Encouraged by the journalists who highlighted her case, Ji's parents have filed a complaint to the local police against director Yuan for trying to kill their daughter. But justice may be hard to come by.

Investigations by both the police and the health bureau have ground to a halt, and Yuan left the hospital in August. Her present whereabouts remain unclear.

And there is still the matter of the family's fine for bearing out-of-quota children. It could be enormous — as much as 60,000 yuan (more than £5,000).

If they don't pay, the child will remain unregistered in China's bureaucracy, one of the so-called 'black children', excluded from state welfare and education.

But everyone is hopeful that, as the case is so controversial, they'll be let off the fine. This is a couple, everyone agrees, who have suffered enough.

Ji's valiant fight for life probably won't have much impact, overall, on birth-control policy in China.

Gagging orders have kept her story out of the national press, but local people are hopeful it will prevent a similar case ever occurring again at their maternity hospital. Lessons, surely, have been learned.

Little Ji may well be that one tiny drop in the ocean whose ripples go on and on, saving lives she will never know about.

For now, though, Zhang is simply relieved that the daughter she always dreamed of is safe and well in her arms.

"We're poor, but we're happy," she says. "At least we are all healthy, alive and together. That's all that matters."

Zhang Lijia

BABY BANNING IN CHINA

The People's Republic of China is home to the world's largest population — almost 1.3 billion people, or 21 per cent of the global total.

Despite remarkable economic growth over the past two decades, it remains a rural, developing country, haunted by real fears about coping with such vast numbers.

Since the 'one-child' policy was introduced in the late 1970s, it has been credited with preventing some 330 million births, bringing down the country's birth rate from an average of six children per woman in 1970 and slowing population growth rate from 25.83 per cent to 8.77 per cent in 1999.

China now has one of the world's lowest fertility rates, but the success has come at a price. A sorry catalogue of forced abortions and infanticides has compounded China's awful human rights reputation in the West, and there are social implications too.

Rural families use ultrasound to determine, and abort, girl foetuses, meaning the nation's sex ratio is highly unbalanced, making finding a wife nearly impossible for a lot of young men.

The one-child policy has become a bit of a misnomer in certain areas of the population: peasant couples have long been permitted a second child if their first is a girl as, in these communities, sons represent the family's only pension.

This concession is extended to families in the cities where two only children who marry are themselves permitted two children.

Most Chinese citizens accept that their nation of 1.3 billion people will stay forever poor without childbearing controls. More recently, there's been a shift towards a voluntary approach to birth control, using education and communication instead of periodic 'crackdowns' on policy abusers.

This baby could change the world – a baby survives China’s strict family planning policy

Deep in her sleep, 6 month-old baby Ji Huansheng looks tiny on the big mud bed in her village home. Her peaceful face belies the trauma troubling her mother, and the drama of her short life to date. Only her unusual name hints at a tale to be told. For Ji Huansheng means ‘brought back to life by journalists’.

This is the miracle baby who refused to submit to the deadly enforcers of birth control, Chinese-style. Even as Beijing refines its methods to promote choice over coercion, abuses of the system remain commonplace. Yet they are also more likely to come to light. The journalists and nurses who saved the baby girl are typical of growing numbers of Chinese who still accept the goals of family planning but challenge its brutal enforcement.

There is no hiding from China’s womb police. On April 23 this year, Zhang Chunhong, pregnant then with an “out of quota” fetus, was picking through piles of rubbish when they came for her, to Wang Ha village, on the outskirts of Harbin in Heilongjiang province.

“I only discovered I was carrying a child again when I was about four or five months old,” recalls Zhang in her simple mud-walled house, “We did not mean to have another child because we had three boys already. I thought about having an abortion, but it would cost us about 500 yuan. We simply did not have that much money as we are so poor. So, we just dropped the matter, without telling any officials.”

Finally, Zhang’s bulge betrayed her guilt despite her padded peasant clothes. That very morning, family planning officials drove Zhang to Daoli District Maternity Hospital in the nearby city of Harbin. “They told me I would have to have an abortion to get rid of the baby because I violated the family planning policy. But I did not have to pay. So, I agreed. At that time, I only thought I did not have to worry to feed another mouth.”

An ultrasound scan explained their haste. The 31 year-old Zhang was eight months [35 weeks] pregnant, well past the government’s 24-week upper limit for abortion. Yet the next day nurses penetrated her womb with a long needle, and injected a saline solution to induce a still birth.

And then a loud cry in the operating theatre jolted her maternal instincts awake. The poisoning attempt had failed. “I asked them to show the baby to me,” Zhang remembers, “but the nurses refused.” Her husband Zhai Zhicheng snatched a glimpse of their newborn daughter. “I saw her and she looked healthy, but when I asked them to bring her back, they told me there was an order not to give us the baby.”

“I was very angry,” Says Zhang, “It would be another matter if she was aborted and dead. Why not give to us if she was alive? Lying at a hospital bed, I cried and cried. By then, I really wanted her. I love my boys, but it would be just wonderful to have a girl as girls are closer to mothers.”

Urged by the mother, Mr Zhai chased all the nurses and doctors for their girl. “One nurse said ‘she’s had the drug, so even if she’s not dead, she’ll be retarded in the future.’ Then, they said she was dead,” Zhai recalls with a shudder. “I could not believe that. I felt my heart was stabbed – she was our flesh and blood.” Zhang says today, with tears in her eyes. After repeated pleas drew the same response, the couple returned home with a heavy heart.

Back in the Daoli District Maternity Hospital, their baby was fighting for her life. When Director Yuan Yinghua learned of the botched abortion, she ordered a nurse to “to starve her, or freeze her to death,” by leaving the baby girl, wrapped in a thin gauze cloth, on the open balcony outside the abortion room. The temperature was sub-zero outside. Luckily, the nurse could not bear the baby’s scream. She secretly brought Ji back inside.

Word of the covert patient spread around the wards. “The first time I saw her she was less than three days-old,” recalls nurse Ling Zhihong. “The room was powerfully smelly as the baby soaked by her own discharges. I

burst into tears! I am a mother too. I just couldn't let this little being die like this. So, I cleaned her and wrapped her in a pair of woolen trousers her mother left behind."

After Director Yuan saw Ji back in the abortion room, with milk leaking from her mouth, she threatened to sack anyone who fed the condemned child, according to Ling and other staff. But sympathetic nurses and doctors continued to risk their careers to ask mothers for milk powder, and sneak some sustenance into the girl.

The scandal began to break on May 9 when some journalists called Dr Wang Hui at the hospital. "I decided to tell the journalists the truth because I wanted to give the baby a chance to live," explains Dr Wang. "Otherwise, I just didn't know how long she could hang on like that."

When Wang and Ling took the journalists to the abortion room, Ji was missing. Concerned that Yuan would literally bury this troublesome case, journalists alerted Harbin police, who quickly located the parents, and two days later delivered their baby girl, amid a crowd of hospital, family planning and government officials.

"I was shell-shocked and didn't know what to make of it all" Zhang recalls, "One moment, she was alive. The next, we were told she was dead. Then all of a sudden, she comes back to us again. She was so skinny she looked like a little mouse instead of a baby. And she was so dirty. What a bitter-fated child! I held her tight and cried for days."

Ji had shrunk from 5 jin (2.5kg) at birth to just 2 jin (1kg), a mere bag of sugar. Her skin was loose, her bellybutton leaked, her anus was falling out, but she was home, as the first sister to brothers aged 11, 9 and 4. Departing from Chinese tradition, Ji takes neither of her parents' family names. "Without the journalists, she would surely have died," explains her father.

Zhang Chunhong's milk had dried up in her baby's absence, adding the unwelcome expense of milk powder to a family of eight, including Zhai's aging parents. The family struggle to make ends meet by tilling the land and picking up rubbish. But the greatest burden is the fine of up to 60,000 yuan for bearing an 'out of quota child'. Unless they pay, Ji will remain unregistered in China's bureaucracy, a 'black child' barred from state welfare and education.

Yet they soon spurned a ready chance to clear that bill, when several officials arrived offering cash if the family moved away. They did not identify themselves, and warned against speaking to the press. "We didn't trust them," explains Zhai Zhicheng. "They wanted to buy us over."

Reports by several Harbin journalists, including a local TV crew who captured the whole dying room horror, were banned by local authority as the subject was viewed as too sensitive. Still, Xin Liang, a Beijing-based reporter, together with two other journalists, managed to publish a series highly critical articles, drawing shocked responses from readers, in 'China Times', a non-main stream newspaper in capital.

Director Yuan had forbidden her staff from talking to the press, but Xin, found nurses whose anger compelled them to speak out. "I see it as a human rights issue," says Xin. "No matter how the girl's birth violated the family planning policy, the director has no right to deprive her of the right to live."

Encouraged by Xin, Ji's parents have filed a case to the local police against director Yuan for trying to kill the newborn. "Director Yuan is too evil. We want justice."

That may require another miracle. Chinese officials lurk within a protective web of secrecy spun tight with mutual favours. Only the brave or the foolhardy challenge their superiors, yet on May 25, a dozen hospital staff bravely reported Yuan to Daoli district police and demanded the district health bureau to remove her from the position. "We were infuriated by her behaviour," explains nurse Lin. "A doctor's duty is to cure disease and

save lives, but Yuan wanted to kill an innocent life. She lacks basic humanity. We felt she is not qualified to be a doctor, let alone hospital director.”

Unsurprisingly, both the police and health bureau investigations have slowed almost to a halt, arguing that “this case involves national policy. We have to be careful in handling it.” Nervous of a wider scandal, health bureau officials warn nurses against pursuing this fight.

Ever since Beijing belatedly enforced family planning from the late 1970s, a sorry catalogue of forced abortions and infanticides has reinforced China’s enduring infamy in the West. The nation’s sex ratio is now highly unbalanced, as rural families use ultrasound to abort girl fetuses. Yet most Chinese citizens accept the argument that their nation of 1.3 billion people will stay forever poor without childbearing controls.

‘One child’ policy has long been a misnomer. Peasant couples are permitted a second child if their first is a girl. The Chinese authority now hopes to curb policy abuses and strengthen the new, service-oriented approach with China’s first Population and Family Planning Law, to be passed later this year. Yet implementing any policy adjustment across this vast land is fraught with difficulty. For two decades, family planning and health officials have had the primacy of achieving birth quotas drummed into them, on pain of losing their jobs. Nurses at Daoli hospital believe Director Yuan feared hurting her promotion chances by allowing repeat ‘offenders’ like peasant Zhang Chunhong to rear another child.

The villain of the piece has suffered at least a temporary setback. On August 16, Yuan left Daoli hospital amid conflicting reports that she had either been sacked or transferred elsewhere to avoid the scandal. Health bureau officials refused to confirm her new post, or current whereabouts, and declined interview requests.

Whatever result comes out the investigation, director Yuan’s successor at Daoli hospital may think twice before acting with similar brutality. The challenge for Beijing is to fight such abuses nationwide, and still keep the population down.

Back in Wang Ha village, a confused Zhang Chunhong wipes away her tears. “I still don’t understand why they put my baby through so much suffering. No baby suffered as much as my little girl,” she says, hugging her tighter to her thin body, as if worried little Ji could be snatched away again.