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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The entombed lives – the experience of sibling abortion under China's One-Child Policy

Ying Liu[1,2]

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Abstract

Drawing on the author's own experience, this paper explores the rarely researched experience of sibling abortion under China's One-Child Policy through a psychodynamic lens. The author uses writing as a method of inquiry to delve into the emotional impact of losing a younger brother to abortion due to the One-Child Policy and to dialogue with relevant psychodynamic literature on loss and grief. The main body of this paper consists of three separate yet interrelated sections. In the first section, drawing on the concept of The Dead Mother, the author explores the possible impact of her mother's bereavement of a second child on the author's emotional life in her formative years. The second section draws on psychodynamic literature on melancholia to understand how the lost life of an aborted brother is kept alive in the author's psyche and the ambivalence this brings to the author's psychical world. The third section is an analysis of the first two sections, constructing an understanding of the missing psychosocial elements in the first two sections. This paper gives voice to the longing and mourning brought by sibling abortion under the One-Child Policy, presenting the author's process of trying to understand such experiences and attempt to understand the personal and the psychical under the influence of the political.

Keywords Sibling abortion · One-Child Policy · The Dead Mother · Loss and melancholia · Writing as inquiry

Introduction

I grew up knowing that I was supposed to have a younger brother. It was never a secret. My mother had a second pregnancy one year after my birth. It was a boy, my parents were told. According to a fortune teller's prophecy, this child was going to

✉ Ying Liu
61yingliu@gmail.com

[1] The University of Westminster, Counselling and Mental Health Services, London, UK

[2] Private Practice, Ying Liu Counselling and Psychotherapy, London, UK

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grow into an intelligent man with high achievement. This second pregnancy was an 'unplanned' pregnancy under China's One-Child Policy at the time. Giving birth to this child would have cost my father his job and incurred a high fine both of which my family could not afford. It left my parents with no choices but to have an abortion.

I had always known this story, but what I did not know was how it had haunted and perhaps would continue to haunt me throughout my life. I did not know it was going to take possession of me in such a way that, in my mind, it turned my existence into a crime.

What was hidden revealed itself on a Tuesday afternoon in November 2015, 2 months prior to the official abolition of China's One-Child Policy on the 1st of January 2016. It was the second year of my counselling and psychotherapy training, week seven of the psychodynamic module on the theme of 'ghosts, myths and secrets'. I shared in the community group what I never considered as a secret – the abortion of my younger brother. It took me by surprise when my intense grief and unstoppable tears filled the whole space of the group. I said in the community group: 'Because of me, my brother did not get a chance to live'. I only realised then that the disenfranchised grief (Doka 1999) over the lost life of an unborn baby, my brother and my parents' first son, had become the myth and secret in my family and the ghostly dweller of my psyche. I thought nothing was hidden about the abortion, but I realised on that day that the emotional impact of the abortion on my family and my psychical world had been hidden all along. The abortion was spoken about, but it was never told as a story of loss and grief.

That afternoon in 2015 marks the beginning of my ongoing journey of becoming aware of and understanding the impact of losing my sibling to abortion under the One-Child Policy. However, in the years that followed, I had found it difficult to both voice and understand this loss. As Freud (2005) points out in his famous essay *Mourning and Melancholia*, a main difference between mourning and melancholia is that the melancholic does not know what they have lost in losing the loved one. For so long, I could not mourn, for I did not know, perhaps still do not know, what I have lost in losing my unborn and could-have-been brother, my parents' first and only son. It was not until I read into some psychodynamic resources on the theme of melancholia, loss and grief, including among others, Leader (2008), Freud (2005), and Kristeva (1989), that I started to be able to give words to my unspoken grief and understand, personally and theoretically, the impact of the sibling abortion on my psyche.

This paper is an attempt to make sense of such experience through a psychodynamic lens. I engage in a process of writing as inquiry (Richardson and St. Pierre 2005), embracing the generative power of writing and unexpected connections (Dorman 2017). As we, counselling and psychotherapy practitioners, do in our practice, I trust my emotions and feelings in the process of writing this paper while connecting with theories. I speak 'the heart's discourse' to stay close to what matters (Pelias 2004, p. 7). I discover as I write. Therefore, this paper is not only a product but also a process. It is a process in which the experience of living in the aftermath of sibling abortion under China's One-Child Policy is (partially) understood. My writing is both the data and the analysis in this paper.

Following a brief introduction to China's One-Child Policy, the main body of this paper consists of three separate yet interrelated pieces of writing. The first two pieces of writing were produced over a 6-month period in 2020. These writings were not produced in a linear or structured way. Sometimes I wrote from my memories, visceral senses and fantasies, and sometimes I wrote in response to the reading of theories, which makes my writing both personal and analytical. I sometimes continuously wrote for days and weeks. There were also times when I completely put it aside and entered periods of incubation as Moustakas (1990) may call it. I left my writing and returned, again and again, following the lead of my unconscious mind. The third piece was written 4 years after the first two pieces. This piece considers the first two pieces as its 'raw data' for analysis. It detects what is split and repressed in my previous writing and constructs a leap from the personal loss to a national melancholia.

In the first piece 'The Dead Mother', drawing on André Green's (1986) influential concept of The Dead Mother which speaks about the impact of a bereaved mother's depressive mind upon her child, I explore how my mother's loss of her second child might influence the development of my internal world and seek understanding of my longing and existential pain which I call 'the black hole'.

In the second piece 'Living in Death', I delve into the intertwined lives and unlived lives of my aborted younger brother and me. Based on both Freud's (2005) and Leader's (2008) analysis on loss and melancholia, I understand my melancholia as a way to keep my younger brother alive in my psyche, which situates me between the worlds of the living and the dead that contributes to my struggle to tell my story of loss and grief. Through the process of writing, I realise how the unlived life of my brother has both constructed and inhibited my being.

The third section, 'A Sinner in A World Ruled by God', analyses the unconscious silencing of the psychosocial aspects of my loss and grief in the first two pieces. In this section, I come to realise the terror of an individual's ultimate powerlessness and vulnerability in the face of a state-enforced policy and violence. I analyse in this section how my and many other Chinese people's refusal to delve into the psychosocial injury as an attempt to preserve hope and psychic security in the state of absolute dependency on the Mother(land).

As a piece of autoethnographic research, this paper delves into particular personal experience in order to understand shared cultural experience (Ellis et al. 2011). Without commenting on or evaluating the Policy itself, this paper seeks to shed light on how the personal is affected by the political. As Leader (2008) recognises, in mourning sometimes we need others' stories in order to tell our own. I hope that this paper about my loss can help many others who have been through similar losses to find voices for their own stories.[1]

[1] Due to the autoethnographic nature of this paper, I aimed at centring the analysis of experience and chose to only draw on literatures that are directly relevant to my analysis and avoid a lengthy objective literature review. For a broader coverage of psychoanalytic literature relevant to sibling abortion elsewhere, please see Liu (2023).

A brief introduction to China's One-Child Policy

Initiated in 1979 and officially implemented in 1980, China's One-Child Policy was a national policy that intended to improve China's living standards and promote modernisation by limiting China's population growth particularly in urban areas (Lin 2019; Greenhalgh 2003; Wang et al. 2016). As its name suggests, the One-Child Policy limits the number of children each family could have to one, though with some exceptions, for instance, families of ethnic minority, with a severely disabled first child and living in some rural areas were allowed to have more children(Cameron et al. 2013; Zhang 2017; Hesketh et al. 2005). Operated through a reward and penalty system, couples who complied with the policy were rewarded with some financial benefits, while those who did not could face substantial fine and dismissal from work especially if they worked for the government and state-owned institutions or enterprises (Lin 2019; Zhang 2017; Hesketh et al. 2005). Under China's One-Child Policy, a pregnancy after the first child was classified as an 'unplanned pregnancy' which was not eligible to receive welfares such as prenatal and postnatal care from the government (Ni & Rossignol 1994). Those children who were born 'illegally' were often hidden from the government by their parents, which caused an unknown number of children who were not registered with the household registration system and were unable to receive public education and welfare benefits (Lin 2019).

The One-Child Policy led to some unintended effects such as increased number of sex selective abortion, sex ratio imbalance and the imbalance between the working-age population and elderly populations (Hesketh et al. 2005). These negative effects have been recognised by researchers since the beginning of twenty-first century who had been calling for a change from the Chinese government (Feng et al. 2016). In 2013, the Chinese government announced that those who were the only-child in their original family were allowed to have a second child in their marriages (Feng et al. 2016; Sun et al. 2018). Three years later, in 2016, the One-Child Policy was abolished entirely, allowing every Chinese family to have a second child (Feng et al. 2016; Sun et al. 2018).

One-Child Policy has received mixed and opposing comments from scholars worldwide in the past few decades. Some regard it as a policy that lifted hundreds of millions of people out of poverty (Potts 2006) and that enabled the empowerment of urban daughters in a traditionally patrilineal kinship system in Chinese society (Fong 2002), while others criticise it as coercive and abusive (e.g. Aird 1990; Mosher 2006). It needs to be highlighted that the One-Child Policy was not an impulsive decision made independently and arbitrarily (Wang et al. 2016). It emerged in a complex context that involves events that vitally shaped China's development including the Great Chinese Famine between 1958 and 1961, the Great Leap Forward—China's Second Five-Year Plan between 1958 and 1962, the Cultural Revolution and the 'reform and open up' policy implemented in 1979 through which China underwent enormous changes. Additionally, what is often overlooked is that, as Greenhalgh (2003) and Wang et al. (2016) point out, the One-Child Policy is a product of naïve imitation of Western population

science. China's strong tendency to worship (natural) science and technology that are featured by quantitative methodologies and its obsession with Western-style modernisation at the time (Wang et al. 2016) allowed 'what had been merely a scientific exercise in Europe [to become] a real policy proposal in China' (Greenhalgh 2003, p. 179). In the 1970s, population growth had become an international concern (e.g. Meadows et al. 1972), which also shaped China's policy making. Evaluations and critiques on the One-Child Policy without a thorough review and consideration of these complex historical contexts would not be fair or even valid. Therefore, this article does not intend to evaluate or comment on the Policy itself. Instead, it is an effort to understand the potential impact of a national policy on the life of an individual that may be shared by others.

The dead mother

In an early summer afternoon in 2019, while we were walking home through the meadows, I asked my mother what it was like to be pregnant. She shared with me the unique experience of having a baby inside her – how the baby would stop kicking and become quiet when she felt sad or tired, how the baby would start moving when she felt excited or happy, how she talked to the baby and it seemed to understand.

'It just seemed to understand you', she said. She talked with tenderness, as if she travelled back in time to that exclusive intimacy that she had shared with her baby, as if she still carried that baby inside her, her body and her mind. When talking to me, she did not refer to the baby as 'you'. She said 'it' – or s/he, as spoken Mandarin does not differentiate these three pronouns – but not 'you', not even once.

She was walking beside me and yet somehow, she was not with me. I was the excluded third when she talked about the at-oneness with her baby. Perhaps, it was not me with whom she shared that intimacy. Perhaps it was the baby whom she once had and yet was forced to lose, my unborn younger brother.

This sense of being an excluded third when listening to my mother made me start to wonder what the earliest years of my life were like during my mother's months of pregnancy with my younger brother as well as after the abortion. If, as Winnicott (1971) suggests, what a mother looks like when she is looking at her baby is related to what she sees in her baby, what did my mother see when she looked at me in the midst of her loss of and grief for her other child who did not get a chance to live as I did? If a baby sees him/herself when s/he looks at his/her mother's eyes through which s/he starts to develop a sense of self (Winnicott 1971), what did I see when I gazed into my mother's eyes during that time and what did I then internalise as a part of myself? When my mother held a baby inside her, whom she knew she would lose, as an inseparable part of herself, how was it for me to be excluded from that intimate dyad my mother shared with my unborn brother? Could I see myself in my mother's eyes?

In my doctorate thesis which values the experience of narrative incoherence and the moments when words quite literally fail to describe lived experience, I wrote about the intense and indescribable pain that I encountered when my

previous personal therapy was approaching an end which I did not understand. Drawing on J.G. Ballard's short story *The Drowned Giant* as cited by Abbott (2013), I described the ending of the therapy as washing up the giant of *'origin unknown'* to the shore of my consciousness and I named it 'the black hole'. I wrote (Liu 2019, p. 65):

> The black hole confronted me with the fact that life can lack inherent meaning and purpose, in spite of the striving for them, and we are alone in facing our worlds, internal and external. And ultimately, we are alone in facing death (Jacobsen 2007).
> I cannot describe the intensity of emotion I felt then. I was deeply sad, lonely (even in the room with a therapist), horrified, astonished and panicky.

The black hole asked questions about my existence. I wrote that '[i]t is the life that I live. It cannot be 'healed' or cured. Actually, it does not ask for cure' (Liu 2019, p. 65).

Months after the completion of my thesis, Green's (1986) writing about the impact of a bereaved mother's depressive mind upon her child which he describes as a catastrophic hole instantly brought me back to the black hole that I wrote as the life I lived.

According to Green (1986), a mother who is absorbed into her grief of the death of a loved one psychically withdraws her presence. Even though she is physically present, for her young child, she is experienced as psychically dead. What is left for her child is a hole in which she once had been.

My mother was pregnant with a baby whom she could not keep and whose life was bound with death from the beginning. My mother's womb was also my brother's tomb. The celebration of life turned into grief for the pending death. In those few months that I shared with my brother in utero and the months that followed the abortion, how could I have understood my mother's detachment from and her lost love for me (Green 1986)? Was that lost love felt as what Green (1986, p. 154) writes:

> The dead mother had taken away with her […] the major portion of the love with which she had been cathected before her bereavement: her look, the tone of her voice, her smell, the memory of her caress. The loss of physical contact carried with it the repression of the memory traces of her touch.

I have been puzzled by my lack of memory of my mother's caress. I have never been able to be consoled by my mother's hugs in times of distress. Awkwardness sits between us. I had denied my need for physical intimacy until recent years. However, meeting the need for physical intimacy somehow bore a sense of loss within it. The fear of losing that intimacy was enormous compared to the satisfaction. I broke links with others as if I somehow want to hold on to the aloneness, sorrow and sense of loss that I have been attached to for so long, just to be back with the hole, the emptiness that could not be filled or let go.

Although walking right beside me, my mother was far away from me in that afternoon when she was talking about her pregnancy and that exclusive intimacy

she had shared with her baby. Was it how I felt when I was a little child? A mother who was far away from me.

Reading Green (1986), an image arose to me. I saw my mother, dressed in white, laying in a closed ice coffin. I sat outside, crying and waiting in vain for her to come back to life. Deep down, I knew she would not wake up and yet I could not leave. I could not relinquish the waiting in vain. The mother in the ice coffin did not look like my mother in any way. She was a young mother. However, I knew she was my mother. I was outside the coffin, waiting for my mother. Perhaps, she was the mother whom I longed for and did not have. Or perhaps, she was the mother I once had and yet forever lost, the mother whom I could not hug.

I was indeed entombed with my dead mother. In the place where she and her love once had been was a hole. By unconsciously identifying with that hole, I reunited with my mother (Green 1986). I lived in the black hole, the tomb, with the dead mother whom I refused to let go. Hope and despair came together in my entombment with the dead mother, keeping me in that impossible place of in-between worlds of the living and the dead (Leader 2008), hunting for 'an unintrojectable object, without the possibility of renouncing it or of losing it' (Green 1986, p. 153–154).

In my previous personal therapy, I asked for a mother. I cried and, though knowing it was not rational, I asked for a mother from my therapist. When I was told by my therapist that she could not be my mother and that she would help me to parent and take care of myself, I sank into despair. My personal therapy at that time was the only place in my mind that could bring alive the mother I deeply longed for. I did not know where to go if I could not bring my mother to life even in my personal therapy. As Green (1986, p. 156) writes, '[a]rrested in their capacity to love, subjects who are under the empire of the dead mother can only aspire to autonomy', and they become their own mother. I had been my own mother for so long and I did not want to be anymore. I wanted to be my mother's baby and rest in her arms. Being told to be my own parent made me angry and put me back to the confinement in which I had always been. Perhaps sinking into death and waiting for the dead mother next to the ice coffin became the only way to hold on to the hope. Maybe this was why the ending of this previous personal therapy washed the black hole to the shore of my awareness. I again lost the mother that I had never had.

Living in death

For so long, I was locked in a general and permeating sense of sadness that I could not understand and speak about. As a child, I often experienced a sense of aloneness in this world that I did not quite fit in. There was a sense of separateness and there was another world that I absorbed myself into. I carried with me this sense of sadness and being in a different place into my adult life. So many times, I sat in the therapy room struggling to describe and explain this to my therapists. Something was pressing for expression, but I could not find proper words for it. It created for me much agony. I was frustrated by not being able to describe and not being able to explain. Everything was locked inside, searching in vain for ways to be told and to

be heard. I had even wished it to be worsened so that I could give it a name such as depression, as if in this way my feelings would be more legitimate.

These struggles drove me to write a doctorate thesis on the topic of narrative incoherence in which I wrote about the permeating yet inexpressible sorrow of mine. I wrote about the 'expressive impossibility' of my experience, resonating with Meister Eckhart's (cited in Abbott 2013, p. 27) words:

> What is He then? He is nothing. He is neither this or that. Any thought you might still have of what He might be – He is not such at all.

I wrote about the struggle to use the language of known to speak about what is unknown. I wrote about the need for solitude, for the 'little back-shop' that is all my own, entirely free (Montaigne 1927, p. 237–238), in which I do not need to communicate in language.

To touch that which could not be languaged, I engaged in sandplay sessions in which I played with sand and various objects including toys, stones, and shells. In the second sandplay session, I placed a little elf with green hair in a corner of the sandtray. I later called it my 'green-hair elf brother'. In my reflective writing afterwards, I recognised that I felt strongly protective of him and yet I knew that I had to let him go. I called this sand world I created 'the world beyond reach' because I was so deeply attached to this world, but I knew that I did not belong. Later, I wrote that I knew I could not go there, otherwise I would not want to come back (See Liu 2019).

Writing about melancholia, Leader (2008) argues that the unconscious effort to keep the dead alive situates the melancholic in the impossible place of in-between worlds – the world of the dead and the living. Perhaps, this in-between has somehow become the place I situate myself to which language fails to give full expression.

I am starting to understand more about my struggle to tell a story. How could I have spoken about a story longing to be told that I do not know? How could I have spoken about the black hole of origin unknown that I have been living with or living in for years? How could I have spoken about living in death?

I took a stroll in a serene cemetery in my neighbourhood one afternoon recently. As I read the names and stories written on the gravestones, a thought suddenly hit me. I thought, my brother did not have a grave. There is no gravestone that has his name and story written on it. Where is he buried? In my family's unconscious mind? Has my body also become his tomb?

Freud (2005) sees melancholia as a refusal to let go of the lost loved one. The melancholic identifies with the lost object, which allows them to perpetuate its existence in their own psyche (Freud 2005). Therefore, loving the object becomes 'being' the object (Quinodoz 2009). Perhaps a part of me has become my unborn brother. My melancholia keeps him and the potential attachment I could have developed with him alive within me.

I started to write letters to him few years ago and it felt like writing to an old friend who had always been there. I somehow had always felt his presence, without knowing. I realised when writing those letters that my younger brother and I had shared a few months of our lives together before the abortion. We shared a

bond that I did not consciously know, both before and after his death. I realised that I had been living for both of us.

Since that Tuesday afternoon where my grief surfaced, I began to talk about the abortion of my younger brother with friends, in groups, and in therapy. However, almost four years later, when I wrote a conference paper in January 2020, the existential guilt—as Ney and colleagues (2010) identify in other sibling abortion survivors – still haunted me, as if my life has developed upon that guilt which not only has a grip on me but also partially forms the root of my psyche. I wrote in that paper (Liu 2020, p. 70):

> 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 have given up another child.

Two years ago, in a late-night chat with a friend, I told her how overwhelmed I was by my parents' love and how I ran away from it, firstly from the south to the north of China, then to Europe. I recently came across Dali's (cited in Schützenberger 1998) words about how he already experienced his elder brother's death and his parents' grief even when he was in his mother's belly. His accusation of himself—a 'theft of affection' (Dali, cited in Schützenberger 1998, p. 131) – struck me as the perfectly accurate accusation of myself. Perhaps just like him, I 'learned to live by filling up the gap of affection which was not really given to me' (Dali, cited in Schützenberger 1998, p. 131).

It took years before I could articulate my experience of my unborn brother. He is my companion. The presence of his absence constitutes the world beyond reach that I am so attached to. He has also become my predator. The presence of his absence inhibits my development into my own being (Ney 1983). As I wrote in the conference paper, I yearn for a life of my own (Liu 2020). Therapy and reflective writing confronted me with the reality that I cannot be my brother, the bright son that the fortune teller promised my parents. How could I possibly compare with this perfect son who could never fail because he never lived? How could my female body possibly fulfil the promise of a flawless son?

I took his chance to live and he has taken mine. My unborn 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' (Liu 2020, p. 71).

Three years after I first got in touch with the loss of my unborn brother that had been haunting me, I recognised in the form of sandplay that I needed to let him go. Another two years passed, and I still do not know how to let him go. I do not know how to lose him. Leader (2008) says that mourning for the lost loved one involves giving up parts of ourselves. My brother's unlived life and my life are so intertwined that I do not know how to give up these parts of me and still be myself. Klein (1940) says, in order to lose an object, we need to reconstruct it

first. Perhaps, all these writing, reading, sandplaying and researching are my ways to reconstruct my lost unborn brother, so that one day I can lose him eventually.

I live with my dead brother. As I wrote this, I realised that this is my first time to call him my 'dead brother'. I previously only called him my unborn brother, as if he could be born eventually. I refuse to put him in the grave which never existed. I keep him alive, at the price of letting a part of myself die.

I am entombed with the mother I wanted and the brother I lost. I not only mourn for them but also the parts of myself that never got a chance to grow into being. 'The entombed lives' are the could-have-been life that I have lost, my brother's unlived life that is kept alive in my psyche, and the lost or shifted connection between my mother and infant me. They are the lives never lived and the dead that could not be put to rest.

A sinner in a world ruled by God

Summer 2024, I went to see a performance by the Playback Theatre in London where audiences volunteered for their stories to be played by four performers on the stage. I told my story of the sibling abortion and watched it being played on stage. I watched an actor waving a red cloth and shouting 'stop' aggressively, then an actress spoke loudly with anger in her voice. This was the first time I heard my voice in an angry form. I wrote about the experience of sibling abortion many times and my voice always seemed to be sinking down as opposed to raising up, directing inwardly as opposed to directing outwardly.

I was reminded of the first time I presented a paper on the topic of sibling abortion under China's One-Child Policy in February 2020 at a conference in Malta. An audience mentioned 'murder' in her response to my paper. The word and the rage beneath frightened me. I wanted to hide. I wanted to flee. And I felt like a betrayer. I was terrified by the anger evoked by my paper. The above two pieces 'The Dead Mother' and 'Living in Death' were written after this conference presentation. Revisiting these two pieces now, four years after they were written, I started to see what was split and then silenced in these pieces – anger, the sense of being wronged, an individual's powerlessness in the face of a state-enforced policy, and the attempt to avoid such powerlessness and despair. This section attempts to analyse this splitting and repression in my previous narratives and the psychosocial forces that drove this splitting and repression.

'Language is repressive as well as expressive' (Billig 2006, p. 22). The 'expressive impossibility' in the above two pieces of writings does not lay in what has been expressed, but in what has been repressed. Unknowingly, in my writings I tried to contain my grief within a personal and familial boundary, eliminating any feelings towards the Policy. The audiences' anger when listening to my story confronted me with a sphere of experiences that I believe not only my parents and I, but also many other Chinese parents and sons and daughters who live under the Policy, were afraid to get in touch with.

After writing the above two pieces, I asked my parents seriously for the first time about what they thought of the abortion and how it had affected them. Their answer

was that the unborn was not a life and the abortion did not matter as they were following the national policy as many other people did. In Nanfu Wang and Jialing Zhang's (2019) documentary *One-Child Nation* about China's One-Child Policy, I recognised a response that is shared between many interviewees and my parents – 'policy is policy' and 'we had no choice'. Another similarity that struck me was people's lack of, at least obvious, rejection and anger towards the Policy. Like my parents, people accepted the Policy and defended the narrative that national interests are above personal feelings. It again reminded me of the sense of terror I felt when a White audience at the conference accused the enforced abortion and the Policy as murder. I am starting to piece together the splitting that is happening at both a personal and national level.

Like Nanfu Wang (Wang and Zhang 2019), I grew up with One-Child Policy propaganda blended into my day-to-day life—'fewer and better births, a service to the nation', 'carry out family planning, implement the basic national policy', 'having only one child is good', and so forth. I believed that my family was doing the right and good thing. I had never doubted. Even in the time I wrote the above two pieces, I stayed as far away as possible from commenting on the Policy. Laskin (2019, p. 309) describes propaganda's ambition as 'to make people sacrifice their personal wishes and even their own lives for something bigger and, presumably, more important' which the One-Child Policy propaganda achieved. The propaganda operates on the mechanism of symbiosis which Fromm (1941, p. 157) describes as 'the union of one individual self with another self (or any other power outside of the own self) in such a way as to make each lose the integrity of its own self and to make them completely dependent on each other'. Behind the 'policy is policy' and 'it did not matter, everyone did it' narrative was the priority to unite with a bigger power at the price of personal feelings. The individuality is dissolved in a larger entity (Laskin 2019).

Coupled with this dissolution of individuality is what Butler (2004, p. xiv) called 'a national melancholia'.When the names, images, and narratives of those a country or nation has killed are erased from public representations, a 'disavowed mourning' – a 'national melancholia' – follows (Butler 2004).

Featured in Nanfu Wang and Jialing Zhang's (2019) documentary is a Chinese artist Peng Wang who positioned in his artwork the image of an aborted dead foetus wrapped in plastic bags with 'medical wastes' printed on them. I wonder if my brother was also considered 'medical waste' and casually dumped. With no tombs or gravestones, no names, no eulogy, no obituaries, my brother's lost life and many other lives like his are deemed 'unthinkable and ungrievable' (Butler 2004, p. xiv). Without any public recognition, not only physically but also in the public and private narratives, these deaths become, as Butler (2004, p. 35) calls it, 'unmarkable'. The refusal of discourse produces dehumanisation as a result; 'violence against those who are already not quite living, that is, living in a state of suspension between life and death, leaves a mark that is no mark' (Butler 2004, p. 36.). In those few months of pregnancy, my family lived with my brother's being that was between life and death. His unmarkable death has left my family a loss that is ungrievable, unspeakable, and unburiable. This becomes my family and the nation's melancholia, as when 'someone is lost, and that person is not someone', we struggle to know what and where the loss is (Butler 2004, p. 32), and thus to mourn.

When the word 'murder' was spoken at that conference, the fear of being a betrayer was one of my initial reactions. I worried my paper would open a portal for criticism towards the One-Child Policy. Beneath this worry was the terror of being othered and ostracised which is a terror that my parents' families, particularly my father's family, lived through as the consequence of China's Culture Revolution (see Liu 2023, for detailed analysis).[2] The brutal consequence of being the 'other', of being the 'enemy' is too close to the memory of many Chinese people. The collective killing that although does not live in the public discourse in China lives on in the often concealed memory of my parents' and grandparents' generation and in the visceral implicit memory of my generation (see, Liu 2023). Lewin (cited in Lewin Papanek 1974, p. 72) argues that 'membership in a group is part of the 'ground' upon which a person stands'. I wonder if the splitting off and then the silencing of anger in my writing above and in the discourse of the Chinese public is an effort to preserve this membership that is so crucial to people's survival, literally.

This collective injury confronts us with what Butler (2004) called our primary vulnerability to and fundamental dependency on others as human beings. In violence, we are put to face the reality that ' [t]he body has its invariably public dimension' (2004, p. 26). It challenges our claim for bodily integrity and self-determination. A deep sense of helplessness and powerlessness follows. To be angry, to experience the loss and grief, and to mourn, means to bring this primary vulnerability to the forefront of our emotional life and to see clearly how this vulnerability is exploited and how one is trapped in this dependency and exploitation.

This encounter with our primary vulnerability and dependency is complicated when the injury occurs in the tie with the Mother(land). I argue that a citizen's relationship with their motherland – a word frequently used in China when referring to the country – can involve the state of absolute independency experienced by a child in their relationship with the mother. The child is at the mercy of a mother who can both satisfy and frustrate (Fairbairn 1974). No matter how much the child wants to reject the bad object– the object who is unsatisfactory or persecuting, they cannot get away from her. And this is not only because she has power over them, but also because they need her for their survival (Fairbairn 1974). The memories of the bad object are too important to forget and 'too disruptive and threatening to the ongoing relationship with the object to remain in awareness' (Celani 2007, p.123). The child is caught in a relational precarity where expression of their aggression and hatred towards the bad object can increase her rejection towards them (her badness) and decrease her love towards them (her goodness) which they rely on to survive (Fairbairn 1974). Meanwhile, it becomes dangerous for the child to express their affection and need towards the Mother as they risk being received by an emotional vacuum which is devastating (Fairbairn 1974). As Kerr (2024, p. 9) paraphrases: 'if I express aggression, I am threatened with the loss of my good object; on the other hand, if I express my relational need, I am threatened with the loss of my feelings for my good object'. To combat this, the child splits the object into good and bad and

[2] A detailed analysis of family history and transgenerational trauma is beyond the scope of this paper. For readers who are interested in a more detailed analysis in this area, please see Liu (2023).

take in the bad object in order to achieve a sense of external security (i.e. preserving the good object) at the cost of their internal integrity, as the terror of living with an unloving mother on a day-to-day basis is too unbearable (Fairbairn 1974; Kerr 2024). And this, I argue, is the psychical reality of the Chinese citizens living under the Policy and other political traumas.

My parents' and many other Chinese's compliance towards and acceptance of the Policy, their comment 'policy is policy', their – and my—lack of anger and complaint, are the effort to 'be a sinner in a world ruled by God than to live in a world ruled by the Devil', as at least 'there is always a certain sense of security to be derived from the fact that the world around is good' and 'a hope of redemption' (Fairbairn 1974, p. 67). To feel the loss, the pain, the anger or even rage, is to accept a badness in the world around us that we cannot escape; there is 'no sense of security and no hope of redemption' and the only prospect is 'one of death and destruction' (Fairbairn 1974, p. 67).

When I read back on the above two pieces of writing, I am struck by the extent of self-reproach, self-accusation, and undeservingness I felt. I realise that I had taken in the hatred, the sense of badness, in the national melancholia that cannot be directed to the Object, the Mother(land). In a world where those who we rely on the most for survival are also who inflict injury and pain, it is easier to be depressed than to be angry. Thus, 'policy is policy', 'it did not matter', 'we had no choice'. The melancholic dimension of social suffering that cannot be worked through are somatised and embodied, enacted or projected (Hoggett 2008). I and perhaps many other sons and daughters like me, being at the receiving end of the projection, turn the collective anger upon ourselves, feeling like a sinner, taking our brothers or sisters chances to live, occupying the affections that should not have been not only for us.

In the process of writing this section, I understand why I am able to access the anger now without the strong terror that I used to feel. September 2023 marked my 10th year in the UK. Having received my Indefinite Leave to Remain means that there is no longer a time limit to my stay in the UK and I am regarded as 'settled in the UK'. I no longer live on an unstable ground where my leave or stay completely depended on my Visa sponsorship. This relatively more stable ground allows me to move from the psychological state of absolute dependency on the Mother(land) and to integrate in myself some of the experiences that were so frightening to get in touch previously. And this is a luxury most people do not have.

Circling back to what I mentioned previously, the impossibility of expression in my above writings does not lay on what has been expressed. It lays on what has not been expressed. My writings are a record of the non-existence or what is not allowed to exist. Something happened in the past yet has not been experienced (Ogden 2014) in the collective mind of the Chinese people. My paper is an attempt to live for the first time the unlived event of the past (Ogden 2014). Meanwhile, the sense of not being fully alive and the deadness of some realms of the experience—the injury, the anger and rage, the sense of being wronged—in my writings were an attempt to protect myself and my family the experience of the bad object and an unescapable bad world.

The day at the Playback Theatre was the first time I was confronted with my anger. I wrote in my diary entry that day: 'I forgive myself, for the wrong that I

did not do'. Finally, the anger was not directed inwardly. I was no longer deemed a sinner. It took public acknowledgement for this to happen. The performers felt and spoke for me. The audiences watched and listened. In the above two pieces of writing, I was unknowingly trying to keep the loss and grief within the boundary of my psyche, like the child's effort to take in the badness of the object so that a good world can be preserved. I did so also to preserve my 'group membership', knowing both consciously and unconsciously the terror of being othered and ostracised. By understanding myself more now, I understand more the Chinese discourse about the Policy and the loss and pain it inflicted. The silenced and melancholic discourse attempts to preserve hope and psychic security, so that one would not resort to death or destruction.

While my brother does not have a gravestone and obituary, this paper is a eulogy for my brother's life and many unborn lives like his, and for the unlived emotional life of many Chinese mothers and fathers, sons and daughters. Perhaps what I am doing here is what the performers at the Playback Theatre did for me – I am speaking and feeling for others what they cannot speak and feel. And perhaps when you, my readers, read and listen to this eulogy, the collective remembrance will help us to forgive but not forget.

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Ying Liu Ying Liu is a BACP (British Association for Counseling and Psychotherapy) accredited counsellor and psychotherapist. Having worked as a lecturer in counselling psychology between 2020 and 2023, she is now a university student counsellor at the University of Westminster, a psychotherapist in private practice, and an independent researcher. She is interested in the aesthetics of qualitative research and the process of the inquiry itself. Her current research interests include the experience of sibling abortion under China's One-child Policy, group analysis and transgenerational trauma, and Chinese women's attitude regarding and experience of abortion.