BUY ME THE SKY

THE REMARKABLE TRUTH OF CHINA'S ONE-CHILD GENERATIONS

XINRAN

Author of *The Good Women of China*

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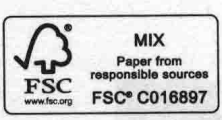

BUY ME THE SKY

By the same author:

The Good Women of China
Sky Burial
What the Chinese Don't Eat
Miss Chopsticks
China Witness
Message from an Unknown Chinese Mother

To my godchildren for their love and kindness, and who are like sisters and brothers to my son Panpan (Yibo)

一个孤独的时代造就了一代孤独的人，

他们在拥有的海洋中孤独地守着自我。

在大陆和海洋的孤岛之间构筑隧道和桥梁，

正是今天中国的独生子女们在做的事情—

An age of loneliness created a generation of lonely people,
Solitary, they keep lonesome watch over their own selves in a sea of plenty.

Building tunnels and bridges between lonely islands and the mainland,

This is what today's only sons and daughters are doing.

Xinran

INTRODUCTION

EVER SINCE I came to live in Britain in 1997, I have tried my best to return to China twice a year, in order to keep my 'education' up to date. This is because the immense changes taking place in China today far, far exceed anything that can be found in school books or historical records. The evolution of the whole country, from the stratospheric rise of the economy, to the transformation of society, and the continual new and surprising developments in the relationships between people, have all come together to produce a society that is moving at unprecedented speed. Everything in China, the people, events and objects have been agitated so much that it feels as if they are fragmenting at the speed of light. I know that if I don't keep on top of my 'education', I will find myself suspended in the space and time of what my son calls 'ancient China'.

Almost every time my son, Panpan, comes back from China, whether from volunteering in the remote countryside, taking an ordinary train for twenty hours (he often does this as homework on China), or visiting friends and family in the city, he always comes back awash with new questions. Why is there such a great difference between the cities and the countryside? How can there be decades of separation between places in a country run by the same rulers? How can one make sense of the changes that are taking place in China? Who represents Chinese people today – the white-collar workers, circling between cities and airports? Or peasants and migrant workers, travelling on foot in rural villages and jolted between long-distance bus stations? If China is a communist country,

why do the rural poor have no safety net in childbirth, sickness and death? And if it is a capitalist country, why is the economy run by a single-party government? Does he himself even count as native Chinese? At these times I feel like clapping my hand over his mouth! It is just impossible to find answers that would satisfy him. Truthfully speaking, I don't even know where he *can* find the answers. But I cannot give up seeking them, not just for his sake, but also for myself, as a daughter of China and a Chinese mother.

In the summer of 2010 I returned once more to China to update my 'knowledge of the motherland' and to research this book. I went back to a place that I had not seen in twenty years – Harbin, the capital of China's northernmost province, Heilongjiang. The first time I visited Harbin was in 1991, on a flying visit to research the history of the city's Jewish residents. Both the Jin and Qing dynasties originated in Harbin. In AD 1115 the Jin dynasty set up their capital in what is now Harbin's Acheng district. At the end of the nineteenth century Harbin was still made up of a dozen or so villages clustered together, with a population of only some 30,000. However, this was all about to change, as the city's transport links, trade and population began to expand rapidly. By the time the China Far Eastern Railway was constructed, from 1896 to 1903, connecting Siberia to Vladivostok through Heilongjiang province, Harbin already had the embryonic form of a modern city. By the early twentieth century, it had become an international trading port, with 160,000 foreigners from thirty-three different countries and sixteen consulates.

I have always felt that in the last century of China's history, long before the Reform and Opening-up policy of 1980, Harbin was a gathering place for immigrants. It seemed that out of every ten people, nine were from somewhere else. The city was also a great hub for the children and grandchildren of explorers, for wanderers escaping war or looking for work, and for thousands of escaped

convicts in search of shelter. From the end of the Qing dynasty, thousands upon thousands of Jews came to Harbin along the Trans-Siberian Railway, fleeing pogroms in Europe and Russia, making it the largest Jewish community in the Far East. Together with Chinese immigrants from the four corners of the country, Harbin's Jews helped shape a century of the city's history.

The Harbin of 2010, like the rest of China's 600-plus cities, was racing to reinvent itself into a network of skyscrapers, densely populated and surging ahead with commerce, hell-bent on ignoring the character of the settlement and rejecting its traditional style. The same rush for the standardisation of living space was also devouring Harbin's old Russian backdrop and traditions, its old Jewish customs, and the lively, unpretentious workshops and stalls. There was only a handful of places that still carried the imprint of the years: mosques sitting incongruously on the noisy streets, calling out their prayers in proud voices several times a day; the cathedral of St Sophia surrounded on all sides by serried ranks of shopping malls; and Central Street, chock-full of signs using the Western alphabet. Among these man-made constructions, the Songhua River silently witnessed the shifting geography and customs of the city, its riverside culture flowing down the generations. In winter, generations of Harbiners would gather to admire ice-carved lanterns. While in summer, they would take to the river in boats, talking, singing and dancing in a boiling stream of humanity. The Songhua River was the classroom that taught me to understand Harbin.

Strolling quietly and leisurely past its people, watching their words and gestures, occasionally pausing to ask old people respectful questions (even when they found them silly) was a great and genuine pleasure for me. I remember one time in particular seeing something that struck me as entirely new. Six people spanning three generations, all standing around one precious child, watching intently.

Passers-by craned their necks to see and hear the piping tones of a toddler just learning to speak.

'Mummy, buy me the river!' the three-year-old girl said in a lisping voice to her mother.

One of the girl's little hands was clutching her mother's finger, while the other pointed out over the Songhua River. 'Mummy, I want that river, buy me that river!' she said in a determined voice.

The young mother tried to pacify her. 'Sweetie, we can't buy this big river!'

Close behind the mother and daughter, four old people who might have been her grandparents were debating in low voices. 'You can't say that, it's not that you can't afford it, it's that it's not possible to buy it.'

'Don't upset the child, just say we'll buy it when she's grown up. Wouldn't that do?'

'Yes, just tell the little cutie to ask her daddy how to buy a river.'

'*Aiya*, if you say that, won't you be teaching her from an early age to believe in lies?'

'What does the dear little thing know about true and false? Just keep her happy, once she's grown up she won't want to buy any rivers!'

'Be quiet, all of you, listen to what our precious little thing is saying!'

The quietly arguing family suddenly fell silent, as though they were listening to an imperial edict. 'Then I want to buy a star in the sky!' the little girl demanded in her babyish voice.

I did not stop to listen to any more, so I never knew if the little girl had further requests, but I found it impossible to understand those old people's words, and the way they took their little granddaughter's naïve demands so seriously. That evening, I telephoned a friend, and didn't hold back my feelings on the subject, but to my surprise she didn't agree at all. 'What's so special about that?' she

said. 'My four-and-a-half-year-old grandson once kicked up such a fuss about wanting the moon. It went on for days and days, until my daughter-in-law bought a round Japanese paper lampshade for the light in their house, and tricked him with a tale about how the moon had sent her child to our house for him to play with. In order to keep him happy, all the family invited the moon-children to visit, and we ended up buying loads of lanterns. When some visitors from my hometown came over, they thought we were in mourning with all these white lanterns around! There's nothing you can do about it, Xinran. These single-sprout children are more precious than gold.'

'But what if the child brings up owning the sea, or the blue sky?' I didn't know why I was making things so difficult for her.

'Who knows what we'd do . . .' It was as if a black hole, of the kind that Hawking, Thorne, Preskill and their peers are continually debating, formed by the weight of the answers we could not find, had dropped between our two worlds at either end of the telephone line, plunging us both into silence.

In fact, that black hole of silence has already drawn in countless families with only children, all desperately racking their brains for ideas, and this includes me, as a mother of an only child myself. As we bring up our 'one-and-onlies', we spend our days and nights in fear of some one-in-a-million accident. As they grow, our precious 'one-and-onlies' seem to be creating black holes of their own that suck in all the surrounding energy, wearing down us parents, who set out full of vigour, determination and ardour, into exhaustion, but without freeing us from worry. We constantly ask the question, 'Is our "one-and-only" safe and happy?' Together with our children, we have written a 'one-and-only' chapter in China's history books, a black hole of invention and truth – the age of the only children.

After ten or so years of living in the UK, almost all of my Western friends have expressed interest and concern over the phenomenon of China's only children. Western society's speculations and lack of

understanding on this issue were highlighted for me when I searched the world's media for information on the subject. Understanding the one-child policy seems to have become a 'marker' of whether someone knows about modern China. It has even become the 'winning hand' of some media people, in their attempt to 'keep up with the fashions of Chinese politics'.

With regard to the history of the one-child policy, a lot of background information can be found in my book *Message from an Unknown Chinese Mother*. So here I will only give a basic reintroduction for readers who are not yet familiar with the policy, and there is also more information in Appendix I.

For a while at the end of the 1950s, China emulated the Soviet Union in encouraging high birth-rate families. In July 1957 Chinese population expert Ma Yinchu published an article in the *People's Daily* newspaper, 'On the New Population', in which he suggested a policy of population control. This directly contradicted the government's policy of strictly limiting abortions and encouraging population growth. Ma paid a heavy price for not toeing the party line, and was killed in a 'struggle session' during the Cultural Revolution. However, come the early 1960s, and the disastrous economic stagnation that followed in its wake, Tianjin, Shanghai, Guangdong and other big cities all proposed population control measures of their own. The turning point came in December 1979 when Vice-Premier Chen Muhua, the first woman to reach that rank, stated that the nation's economic development was lagging behind, and was out of proportion to, the huge growth in population. She then suggested that it would be best if married couples only had one child. By 1981 this suggestion had become a firm duty for Communist Party members, and an unavoidable responsibility for every citizen. However, the promotion of the one-child policy met with resistance from all over China, in ways that the policy-makers had never anticipated, and resulted in several bouts of advance and

retreat between rigorous implementation by the government and desperate resistance on the part of the populace. This animosity led to an amendment in 1982, stipulating ten conditions under which people in the countryside could have a second child. After this, resistance from the population calmed somewhat. In April 1984 the term 'population control policy currently in effect' was first coined in official government documents. It was split into three categories: 'residents of towns and cities', which mainly covered large and medium-sized cities, and mainly applied to Han Chinese, where married couples were restricted to one child (multiple births excepted); 'rural areas', where a second child was allowed if the first was a girl (although in practice, many families went on to have three, the policy being difficult to enforce in these regions) and 'ethnic minorities', who were permitted between two and four children. There were some slight variations between the rural provinces as to what was permitted, but there was such a huge difference between city and countryside in terms of living conditions that no one would ever dream of moving to a rural area to have more children.

In post-1949 China *fagui*, which means laws and regulations, refers to rules based not on the law, but on issued government policy. However, those who disobey these rules face sanction under the law. Family planning and the one-child policy are both *fagui*.

Although the one-child rule had been government policy for a long time, it was not until 29 December 2001 that it became enshrined in law. It was put into effect on 1 September 2002 as the Population and Family Planning Law of the People's Republic. After all the years of the one-child policy, this was the first time that it was actually set down in writing as a law. Moreover, the wording of the document was far more relaxed and humanitarian than the terms that had previously been enforced. For example, the twenty-seventh article of the seventh chapter states:

> For married couples who agree to have only one child during the course of their lives, the nation will issue a 'One-child Glory Certificate'. A married couple who has been issued such a 'Glory Certificate' will be rewarded as set down in the national regulations, as well as in the regulations of the province, autonomous region or centrally governed city in which they reside. All work units are responsible for implementing the laws, *fagui*, rules and regulations regarding these rewards, and all work units must carry out this policy. If an only child suffers unexpected injury or death, the local People's Government must provide parents the necessary assistance to have another child or adopt. Twins or multiple births will not enjoy the treatment afforded to only children. Those who contravene the one-child policy must pay a 'legally required social fostering or maintenance fee' or see above-quota children confiscated by the government; fee to be determined at provincial level, to take into account average incomes of urban and rural residents.

Over the course of more than twenty years from the start of the one-child policy to near when it was enshrined in law, average birth rates in China fell from 5.44 in 1971 to 1.84 in 1998. These twenty-odd years of birth control resulted in 238 million fewer children in China. By 2012 this number had swelled to approximately 400 million fewer births. One could argue that this is a great contribution to global population control. However, it is harder to put a price on what two generations of Chinese people have had to endure. Countless families financially ruined by fines, incalculable numbers of baby girls abandoned, a catastrophic ageing of the population, and generations of only children who have missed out on close sibling relationships.

The majority of stories in this book come from the first generation of only children affected by the one-child policy, born between 1979 and 1984. Unlike in the West, a 'generation' in this context can be counted in only a few years because change is so rapid.

By around the year 2000 this first generation had all finished

studying and were beginning to make their way in the world. By 2002 they had reached the age when Chinese people commonly marry. The time they spent with me corresponded to this point in their lives, when they were entering the world of work and starting to think about getting married. These children have been similar to both my godchildren and my teachers in life. Those who I remember so fondly are mostly now already parents themselves, with careers of their own: a businessman in a multinational corporation, a teacher in an art college, a Chinese-Western media planner, a chef specialising in Japanese food, an architect, a hotel manager, and an academic with a PhD in researching Chinese diaspora. As with the difference between China's 656 cities* and the tens of millions of rural villages, these young people from the same generation are as different as the earth and sky. They travel alongside the 'Emperors and Aristocrats', yet have absolutely none of that sense of superiority. Just as their fathers' generation found things difficult they, too, are struggling for survival: in the vanguard of huge change.

These young people are the same generation as my son, and, as a member of the older generation and a mother, common sense forces me to ask, is it possible for me to understand them? There is an old Chinese saying that the separation between professions is like the separation between mountains; how much more so when one is separated by a generation. Listening to them speak from their hearts, talking with them frankly and without reserve, and striving to understand what has influenced them at their age and in their

* The country's sixth national census (May 2014) divided China's 656 cities into four categories: Mega-cities (54): non-agricultural population of above 1 million. Big cities (78 as of the year 2004): non-agricultural population of between 500,000 and 1 million. Middle-sized cities (213 as of 2004): non-agricultural population of between 200,000 and 500,000. Small cities (320 as of 2004): non-agricultural population of below 200,000.

generation have been the three principles by which I have observed their happiness, anger, grief and sorrow, and followed their ideas and desires. As a mother of a Chinese only child myself, instinct propels me to try to understand them, as it is these only children, more than 100 million in number, who will determine the future of China.

When I first set pen to paper for this book, I wondered how I could summarise a whole generation in just a few chapters. Having gone through the records of my previous five books, I found them loaded with scars and grief. So after two years of racking my brain for ideas, I decided to give myself a breather, and became determined to make the main focus of this book about a generation of characters who materially were much better off, and share some of the interesting, sometimes shocking and sometimes amusing, incidents in their lives. And my intention was to act, not as an expert or as a critic, but as a bridge between them and the readers, listening to their views and representing them as they are, so others can make up their own minds.

Then in January 2011, just as I was finishing the first draft of this book, the Yao Jiaxin incident rocked China, causing the following stories, which had started out as light, to take on a more sombre tone.

Late on the night of 20 October 2010, Yao Jiaxin, a twenty-two-year-old student in his third year at the Xi'an Conservatory of Music, ran over a twenty-six-year-old female migrant worker with his car. Not only did he make no attempt to help her, on the contrary, he was so afraid that this woman from the countryside would make trouble for him when he saw her memorising his number plate that he then stabbed her eight times with a knife he used to peel fruit. He killed this mother of a three-year-old child on the spot. Yao then fled in his car to another junction, where he ran over and injured another pedestrian, and it was only then