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## Hong Kong crackdowns on Chinese families looking to get around one-child policy

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KIN CHEUNG / THE CANADIAN PRESS

A nurse holds a baby in a hospital in Hong Kong, Jan 17, 2007.

**By:** Kit Gillet Special to the Star, Published on Wed May 16 2012

Zhao Jingjing is pregnant, but not so pregnant that it shows yet.

The 30-year-old Chinese homemaker and her businessman husband already have a young, healthy son, but they wanted a second child to complete their family.

“I heard that for parents who have only one child it is especially hard when they grow up and leave the house,” she says. “So I wanted to have another child and a bigger family.”

In China that is not a simple desire. For many mothers-to-be like Zhao it involves a difficult choice: crossing borders to give birth to a second child or have the child in China and be heavily fined and potentially lose your job for violating the country’s strict one-child policy.

In the past, the chief destination for mainland mothers looking to give birth overseas has been Hong Kong.

While officially part of China, the former British colony retained much of its economic and political independence after the 1997 handover. Those born there have Hong Kong passports, Hong Kong rights and are not classified as mainland Chinese citizens.

Over the last decade the number of mainland babies born in Hong Kong has risen from 620 in 2001 to more than 40,000 in 2010 — almost half the total 88,000 births in the territory. Some experts estimate that upwards of 60 per cent of these are second children.

The rising numbers are no doubt due in part to the rising incomes of Chinese couples. According to one agent who helps arrange such trips, it can cost upwards of RMB 188,000 (about \$30,000 CDN) for the best Hong Kong birth packages.

But over the last few years, the mood has hardened against mainland mothers.

In April, the territory refused entry to a heavily pregnant mainland woman wanting to give birth there. The woman, from Beijing and seven months pregnant, was ordered off a train and told to return to her home province to give birth.

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Earlier this year, Leung Chun-ying, the territory's new chief executive, announced that starting in 2013 "zero" mothers from the mainland will be permitted to give birth in public Hong Kong hospitals unless they have a Hong Kong husband. Private hospitals have also agreed to drastically cut their quotas.

In addition, those born in Hong Kong will no longer be given automatic citizenship, which entitles them to education and other residential rights.

"If they have registered and prepared to give birth here next year, it is very likely that their child will not be entitled to the residency rights," Leung told public Hong Kong broadcaster RTHK.

Zhao and her husband live in Shenzhen, the Chinese border city with Hong Kong. They have already made reservations to give birth in the former British colony.

"I've been to Hong Kong and made reservations in a private hospital," she said, optimistic that they will get in before it becomes even harder.

Yet even a successful Hong Kong birth might no longer be a solution. China has also started to tighten the law on those going overseas to circumnavigate the law.

Tian Liang, a gold medal winning diver at the 2000 and 2004 Olympic Games, was recently stripped of his position as vice-director of a provincial level swimming administration and is expected to be fined around RMB 2 million after his wife gave birth to their second child in Hong Kong earlier this year.

"No matter where their house registration is located, Tian and his wife broke the law," Ma Li, director of the China Population and Development Research Centre, told the state-owned Global Times.

According to the Chinese press, several women from the mainland who had a second child in Hong Kong have been fined upon their return home, just as if they had given birth on the mainland.

Fines are typically between two and nine times the couple's total income of the previous year, or the local average income of the area, and couples can still lose their jobs, especially if they work for state-owned companies or in the public sector.

For Chinese couples unwilling or, more likely, unable to afford a trip overseas there are few remaining options; chief among these is hiding the child, at least until school age — and then pay a fine.

Women regularly share their concerns on an increasing number of online forums used to find ways around the one-child policy regulations.

"I have two solutions," posted one young schoolteacher recently on Tianya, a popular internet forum. "Ask

for a month's leave, plus the school holiday, which will be long enough to hide my child's delivery. [Or] resign and go back to hometown and give birth there. My pregnancy will be concealed from my husband's company — we live far from his workplace — and he makes enough money to provide for the four of us.”

According to some estimates, since China introduced its one-child policy in 1979 to help control population growth, up to 200 million babies have been born in contravention of the law.

Since the 1990s minor changes have been made to loosen the one-child policy — couples that are themselves both only children can now have a second child — but wholesale changes are unlikely.

“The central government is not going to relax the policy right now because in big cities like Shanghai and Beijing migrant workers have relieved the pressure of an aging population,” says Chen Wei, a professor at the Centre for Population and Development Studies, People's University of China.

“Unfortunately this has made the problem far worse in the countryside than cities,” he adds.

In some rural areas the one-child policy is strictly enforced. Blind dissident lawyer [Cheng Guangcheng](#), who recently escaped to the U.S. embassy in Beijing and who is now waiting to see if he will be allowed to leave the country, has been persecuted for his investigation into women forced to have abortions or sterilization for disobeying the one-child policy.