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Minter: China's 'Birth Tourism' Isn't About the U.S.

By Adam Minter - Nov 3, 2011

Why do wealthy [Chinese women fly](#) to the [United States](#) to give birth? Last week, this phenomenon known as "birth tourism" became a national topic of discussion in [China](#) when a [rumor](#) circulated that [Wang Baoqiang](#), a baby-faced A-list movie star who is popular for his comedies, had accompanied his pregnant wife to Los Angeles, where she is to give birth to the couple's second child.

If one goes by the conventional U.S. wisdom about "birth tourism" [featured](#) recently in American news media, the answer is self-evident: Children born in the U.S. are entitled to U.S. passports, free American education and other rights of U.S. citizenship that are not readily available to their Chinese-born parents. This is a neat (if self-flattering) explanation that undoubtedly finds support in the growing number of "[birthing centers](#)" in [Los Angeles](#) and [New York](#) that cater to Mainland Chinese clients.

But for many Chinese, the obvious explanation for Wang Baoqiang and his wife traveling to Los Angeles to give birth wasn't to give their child U.S. citizenship, but because they are restricted from having a second child born in China, where population control rules -- popularly known in the West as the "[one-child policy](#)" -- have been in force for decades.

Under the policy's complicated rules, there are exceptions that allow many couples -- including those belonging to ethnic minorities and those coming from one-child families themselves -- to have second children. The government provides local officials with great leeway to enforce the policy -- a factor that results in sometimes brutal punishment for couples who defy the rules. As a result, Chinese couples seeking siblings for their children, or boys as heirs, can risk the wrath of local governments, or go abroad to give birth.

[Hong Kong](#) has been a popular destination for expecting Mainlanders, as it is officially exempted from China's population control policies and children born there are ensured Hong Kong residency. In 2010, however, the city's medical facilities were [severley tested](#) when 40,648 Mainland mothers gave birth to children in Hong Kong. Earlier this year, Hong Kong's food and health secretary capped the number of non-residents allowed to give birth there to 34,000 for 2012.

The United States is a more costly destination for couples wishing to evade the one-child policy. If Chinese couples give birth in the U.S. but raise their new child in China, the parents would be required to pay for educational and other social benefit expenses that an American citizen -- such as Wang's

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new child -- is not entitled to receive.

And so, in the days following the news of Wang Baoqiang's Los Angeles sojourn, China's netizens and newspaper editorialists quickly drew the inevitable conclusion: The right to a large family belongs to China's wealthy.

Wang Baoqiang's personal history only intensified a sense of injustice. Born to a peasant family in rural [Hebei Province](#), Wang became -- through luck and pluck -- a beloved, well-known rags-to-riches story. The editors from the Yangtze River Network, the leading internet portal in the boomtown of Wuhan, [referenced](#) the legal restrictions on child-bearing that apply specifically to individuals from his home province of Hebei:

According to Wang Baoqiang's situation, he can't have a second child. Though he has registered as a rural household, only rural residents who live in mountainous areas and the Bashang prairies can have a second child in accordance with the relevant regulations of Hebei Province. Wang Baoqiang's ancestral village in Xingtai of Hebei Province is neither in a mountainous area nor Bashang grassland. Apparently, he doesn't meet the qualifications ... if he has his child in this country he will be punished.

China's pseudonymous microbloggers, ever keen to tweet about injustice and inequality, focused intently on the punishment that Wang could have received for having a second child born in China. In some rural areas, families that exceed the one-child limit imposed by their local family planning agency will be subjected to excessive fines and the demolition of their homes. FreeTalker555, a user of Sina Weibo, China's most popular microblog, [tweeted](#):

Ordinary people will exchange a demolished home for another baby. Have you ever heard of a star punished by having their house demolished because they had children outside of the State directives?

Likewise, a netizen named Claire Xin Min, also writing on Sina Weibo, [asked](#):

Why does the Family Planning Commission send pregnant women for tubal ligation or to abort their still living babies and, in addition, blackmail them thousands or ten of thousands of yuan ... while stars can make high-profile announcements of their new progeny?

These days, any conversation in China about money, privilege and equality eventually veers into the topic of corruption. Thus, tales of local family planning agents who blackmail families that seek children beyond the quota are rife in small towns -- and, in the wake of the Wang Baoqiang rumor, on Sina Weibo. Another netizen, Yang Zili, [tweeted](#):

Even if you support population controls, you should oppose the present family planning

policy. For nearly all of the fines become welfare for government officials. The government officials even encourage you to have more children and pay more money.

China's one-child policy has created a large class divide. In major cities, it commands broad-based support (though everyone has an opinion on how it can be improved), especially among wealthier and more educated citizens. But in rural China, where education, in particular, is lacking, and large families are embraced (for, among other reasons, their utility as farm labor), the policy enjoys less backing. Local governments in rural areas, under pressure to meet national population goals, use [brutal means](#) to enforce the policy and thus manage to further damage their credibility in the eyes of poorer Chinese.

One view very much in vogue among wealthy elites and newspaper editors is that a family planning system which makes implicit, if not actual, exceptions for the wealthy would benefit China. On Sept. 1, almost two months before the Wang Baoqiang rumors began to circulate, this idea received support from Voices Online, a news portal owned by the highly independent Hunan Daily Group. It published the [editorial](#), "Don't Force the Rich to Have a Baby in the U.S.," which might suggest to some that [Ayn Rand](#) has a following in China (she doesn't):

Now more and more intellectuals don't want children because of the pressures of their daily lives. Such "population control" is not a hope, but a hidden danger for the future of the country ... If they [the wealthy] want to have a second child, it's better to allow them to give birth in our country rather than force them to send money and themselves to the U.S.

The results, the Voices Online editors argued, will accrue for everyone: "Rich people who have more children stimulate consumption and bring job opportunities for ordinary people."

Binbinxiaokui, a Sina Weibo user, [agreed](#) with this line of thinking when he commented on Wang Baoqiang, his wife and those Chinese who can't afford to give birth abroad:

They [Wang and his wife] have the ability to offer a happy life for their child. So why shouldn't they have the ability to bear a child? On the contrary, there are some people who don't have the means to live well and who still have three or four or even six or seven children ... They add to the quantity of poverty and pull down the quality of the whole nation.

Wang Baoqiang and his wife have neither confirmed nor denied their presence in Los Angeles, nor their purpose for being there -- if they are in fact there. They likely have no interest in becoming involved in a dialogue that paints Wang -- a movie star whose peasant past is an important facet of his public persona -- as privileged and, perhaps, un-patriotic. After all, [Yao Ming](#), the now retired NBA basketball star, was heavily [criticized](#) for choosing to have his daughter born in the U.S. in 2010.

Chinese reporters, meanwhile, have made little to no effort to cover -- or clear up -- the story, despite the intense interest it has generated on microblogs and editorial pages. And American journalists

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continue to generate stories about birth tourists from China, most often explaining them as seekers of the American dream. They rarely touch on what the Chinese people, and their media, know is a leading cause of the phenomenon: an attempt to evade the Chinese government's population controls.

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