



Culture Notes

Girls on the Line

By Jennie Liu
Fiction, set in China

Carolrhoda Lab, 2018.

2018 Honorable Mention, Freeman Book Award for Young Adult/High School

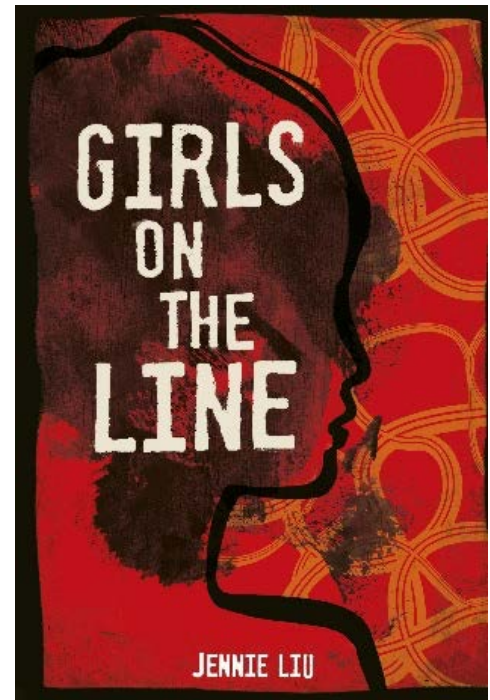
Yun and Luli grew up together in an orphanage in China, and, after aging out of the institution, are now working in a factory in the city of Gujiao (pronounced: "goo-JOW"). Yun's unplanned and unauthorized pregnancy, along with the suspicious behavior of her boyfriend, who is rumored to be a "bride trafficker," throw both girls into an action-packed quest for safety and freedom, in which they find themselves navigating the complex reality of the one-child policy, urban migrants' rights, and family planning in China.

What was the One-Child Policy?

The one-child policy was a program designed to control the size of the rapidly growing population of the People's Republic of China. The policy, issued by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China in 1979, set a limit of one to the number of children a couple could have; while some modifications were allowed (such as permitting rural parents to have a second child if the first was a daughter, and allowing exceptions for ethnic minorities) the policy was strictly enforced until January 1, 2016, when a reversion to a two-child limit was introduced.

Why was the One-Child Policy applied?

The extreme measures were deemed necessary due to concerns over the rapidly expanding Chinese population, which had ballooned from 540 million in 1949 to 940 million by 1976. Amid global concerns about overpopulation, food shortages and fear of a repeat of the devastating famine of 1959-61, the Chinese government decided to limit families to one child each, although exceptions allowing for two children were common. The policy succeeded in dramatically decreasing the birth rate, which fell from 2.8 births per woman in 1979 to 1.5 in 2010.





Culture Notes

Girls on the Line

By Jennie Liu

Fiction, set in China

Carolrhoda Lab, 2018.

2018 Honorable Mention, Freeman Book Award for Young Adult/High School

How was the One-Child Policy enforced?

During the thirty-six years of the one-child policy, national and local governments ensured compliance through the use of contraception, abortion, and sterilization. In millions of cases yearly reported, these measures were forced upon women, and they included infanticide of newborns, especially girls. Steep fines were imposed for violations, often ranging between five and ten times the annual disposable income of the parents. Monetary rewards and recognition were also employed in order to incentivize parents to follow regulations. For example, couples who abided by the mandate were awarded a "Certificate of Honor for Single-Child Parents." Compliance with the law was seen as a revolutionary good for society; however, cases of forced sterilization, forced birth control, forced terminations of late-stage pregnancies, and infanticides were widely reported, and drew criticism to the policy.

Why was the One-Child Policy ended?

The government's reasoning for abandoning the one-child policy, "to improve the balanced development of population" and "increase labor supply and ease pressures from an aging population," hints at the gender and age imbalance in China's demographics.

What is the gender imbalance in China's demographic?

Gender imbalance is a result of the sex-selective abortions, usually of girls in rural China, and of the abandonment of many children, also predominately girls, thus resulting in a skewed sex ratio of males to females, with males exceeding women by 30-40 million, a number that is expected to increase in the next decades. Critics of the one-child policy have also pointed at the brutally enforced methods, crippling fines, and overcrowding in orphanages as other urgent issues.



Culture Notes

Girls on the Line

By Jennie Liu

Fiction, set in China

Carolrhoda Lab, 2018.

2018 Honorable Mention, Freeman Book Award for Young Adult/High School

Why did sex-selective abortions and infanticide affect females more than males?

A preference for male offspring might have to do with the traditional need of male sons to help with field work and manual labor, along with the financial burden on a family having to pay a dowry when marrying off a daughter. Traditionally, daughters would also leave their families once they got married, and concerns over caretaking of elderly parents might also have led to preferring sons. While rooted in tradition, or connected to the poverty and lack of resources of rural settings, the preference towards sons was exacerbated by the strict enforcement of the One Child Policy and the punishment for any violations of the policy.

What is the age imbalance in China's demographic?

Age imbalance is a consequence of what is known as the "4-2-1" problem—for every four elders, there are only two children and one grandchild to support them in their old age. By 2050, the number of Chinese nationals older than sixty-five will climb to 329 million – roughly equivalent to the entire population of the United States. As China's seniors age out of the workforce, there are fewer and fewer people to replace them. Currently, there are five workers for every retiree, but by 2040 that ratio will shrink to 1.6 to 1.

What are the issues resulting from gender imbalances in China?

A surplus of males in China, with around 115 boys born for every 100 girls, has led to millions of men being unable to marry; isolation, depression, violent behavior, and substance abuse are some of the most common consequences of the forced celibacy. This phenomenon is mostly present in the countryside, where "bachelor villages," rural villages where a high percentage of the local population consists of unmarried men in their twenties, are a common reality. Furthermore, young girls tend to leave small villages to pursue work opportunities in the city, leaving behind unmarried men who are



Culture Notes

Girls on the Line

By Jennie Liu

Fiction, set in China

Carolrhoda Lab, 2018.

2018 Honorable Mention, Freeman Book Award for Young Adult/High School

often defined as “bare branches,” for failing to expand the family tree. Families with male offspring often compete for a bride, commonly engage matchmakers, and are willing to pay a high “bride price” (like a dowry, but with the man’s family paying the woman’s). Scarcity has also given families of eligible girls more bargaining power to demand that potential suitors own at least a car and a house in the city. As a result, young men with limited financial resources have virtually no opportunity to find a life partner.

How is human trafficking in China related to the gender imbalance?

The difficulty many Chinese men face finding wives is driving a brutal business of selling women and girls from China and neighboring countries. Foreign women and girls are typically tricked by brokers who promise well-paid employment across the border in China, where they are forcefully sold to Chinese families for around \$3,000 to \$13,000. Once purchased, they may be held prisoner and pressured to have children as quickly as possible. Cases have been documented by journalists and researchers in Myanmar, Cambodia, North Korea, Pakistan, and Vietnam, among others. Women and girls being trafficked tend to be from ethnic or religious minorities, from impoverished communities, or, in the case of North Korea, on the run from their own abusive regime.

The kidnapping of Chinese women is a less documented phenomenon, as it is likely less frequent in incidence. While illegal in Imperial times, marriage by abduction occurred in rural areas of China until the 1940s, when it was officially abolished by the Communist Party. This practice has resurfaced lately, and it consists in the abduction of young women in big cities (often migrant workers), or of younger girls in the countryside (sometimes as young as twelve). Girls are usually sold to rural areas to (often older) men who wouldn’t be otherwise able to find a companion, or to afford an expensive wedding. The selling price is about 1/10 of the expense of a full-scale traditional marriage in China. Girls are sold in distant provinces, where the compliance of local authorities can sometimes hinder the investigative efforts.



Culture Notes

Girls on the Line

By Jennie Liu

Fiction, set in China

Carolrhoda Lab, 2018.

2018 Honorable Mention, Freeman Book Award for Young Adult/High School

How are orphanages in China today?

In 2018, there were approximately 305,100 children in state-run orphanages in China, a number that has been in decline since 2012. Children in orphanages are not necessarily parentless, as they might have been given up voluntarily by parents who can't take care of them. Whereas in the past healthy children (especially girls) were often given up, today the vast majority of abandoned children suffer from severe birth defects and serious health concerns. They are usually unable to find homes that can provide specific medical attention, and after a certain age, some live within senior homes. According to the Adoption Law of the People's Republic of China, children over the age of fourteen become ineligible for international adoption, at which point they are either transferred to a senior living center or have to find work. Following reports on the poor living conditions and abuse that children suffered in orphanages, and the subsequent international pressure by humanitarian organizations and agencies, the government has recently made a commitment to improving these institutions. This has had a significant impact on orphanages in big cities, which often have resources to support the children's physical and mental development. Orphanages in rural, impoverished areas tend to receive less funding and attention, and cases of abuse and neglect have been reported in recent years as well.

Are many children being abandoned or given up in China today?

While still a persistent issue, the number of children abandoned by parents is in decline due to a combination of higher living standards, decline in birth rates, prenatal care, education about special needs support, and a relaxation of the one-child policy. Total adoptions in mainland China have nearly halved from 34,529 cases in 2010 to 18,820 in 2017. As of 2017, just 2,300 children went to live with families abroad. The decrease in international adoption can be traced not only to a lower number of children in orphanages, but in the tightening of criteria for potential adoptive parents (related, for example, to financial or marital status) issued by the Chinese government in 2007.



Culture Notes

Girls on the Line

By Jennie Liu

Fiction, set in China

Carolrhoda Lab, 2018.

2018 Honorable Mention, Freeman Book Award for Young Adult/High School

What stigma or superstition is associated with adoption?

Stigma surrounding orphans in China might be related to a traditional belief that children born with disabilities were “cursed.” State-run orphanages routinely gave orphans the surnames “*Dang*” (meaning Party) or “*Guo*” (meaning Country), which would identify someone as an orphan for life. These names were banned in all orphanages only in 2012. Furthermore, children marked with “unlucky” symbols could exacerbate the superstition around adopted children. Numbers have always played a significant role in Chinese culture, with the number four being considered an unlucky number, as it is nearly homophonous to the word “death.” As a result, a child with a combination of four marks on their face or body could be considered to be “cursed.”

Who are the migrant workers in China?

Rural migrant workers are workers with a rural household registration who are employed in an urban workplace and reside in an urban area. While it is often difficult to collect accurate statistical data on floating migrant populations, it is estimated that there are more than 290 million migrant workers in China’s cities today, a number expected to grow in the new decade as more people pursue better salaries and opportunities in bigger cities. For the past two decades, migrant workers have been the most important engine for growth in China’s labor market and now make up about 36 percent of the total workforce. The overall gender distribution of migrant workers in 2019 was 64.9 percent male, 35.1 percent female, roughly the same distribution as urban workers.

What is the *hukou* system and how does it relate to migrant workers in China?

The *hukou* 户口 (pronounced: “WHO-cow”) system is a system of governmental household registration used in China. It officially identifies a person as a permanent resident of an area, and establishes rights and limits, and what social policies and



Culture Notes

Girls on the Line

By Jennie Liu

Fiction, set in China

Carolrhoda Lab, 2018.

2018 Honorable Mention, Freeman Book Award for Young Adult/High School

benefits to which they are entitled. Experts often compare the *hukou* system and its rigidity to a social caste system. One's *hukou* record includes identifying information such as name, parents, spouse and date of birth. Established in 1958, this system historically classified each individual in an agricultural or non-agricultural *hukou* (commonly referred to as rural or urban) and further categorized by location of origin. This two-fold organization structure was linked to social policies, and those residents who held non-agricultural (i.e. urban) *hukou* status received benefits not available to their rural counterparts. Internal migration was also tightly controlled by the central government, and only in the past few decades have these restrictions been loosened. While this system has played a major role in China's fast economic growth, it has also promoted and aggravated social stratification. It is in fact extremely difficult for individuals who hold a rural *hukou* to change their status, regardless of how long they have worked in a city. The system bars migrants from certain jobs and prevents access to health care and education for their children. Furthermore, as China's first wave of urban migrants approach retirement age, many find themselves locked out of urban pensions, since their *hukou* remains in their hometown.

In recent years, steps have been taken to alleviate the inequalities promulgated by the *hukou* system, with the most recent major reforms announced in March and July 2014, which included a provision that eliminated the division between agricultural and non-agricultural *hukou* status. Application barriers to acquire an urban *hukou* have also been lowered, and urban status can be given to home buyers. However, reforms remain decentralized, modest and progressive, and critics point at the fact that migrant workers would need to give up their original *hukou* (and relative rural land rights) in order to obtain a city *hukou*.

Where do migrant workers work and how do they live?

The vast majority of rural migrant workers are employed in low-paid jobs in manufacturing, construction, and an increasingly wide range of service industries. While wage levels for migrant workers have grown steadily, albeit increasingly slowly, over the last decade, the average monthly wage in 2019 stood at 3,962 *yuan*, which is in



Culture Notes

Girls on the Line

By Jennie Liu

Fiction, set in China

Carolrhoda Lab, 2018.

2018 Honorable Mention, Freeman Book Award for Young Adult/High School

striking contrast with the average salary for non-migrant urban workers of 82,413 *yuan* (2018). In addition to low pay, migrant workers often work long hours, have little job security, and few welfare benefits and educational resources, along with the restrictions and barriers stemming from their *hukou* status.

While historically allocated in work dormitories, the majority of migrant workers now live in rented accommodations, which often take up a sizable proportion of their monthly salary. In the vast majority of cases, migrant workers and their families are excluded from public housing. Regardless of their location or *hukou* status, the children of migrant workers in China all face a range of broadly similar issues; unequal access to family support, education, healthcare, and community and social support.

Do migrant workers support their families in rural areas?

While lower than their non-migrant city counterparts, migrant workers' salaries are often sent to the left-behind families in rural areas, and they can double the yearly earnings of a rural family unit. Migrant workers' remittances have made a great contribution to rural development, but the huge amount of money they have been able to remit is made possible partly by the poor working and living conditions that they endure in cities. Couples that migrated together often support their families back home, which in most cases include the so-called "left-behind" children, who often only see their parents once a year. These children grow up in impoverished and remote rural areas with their grandparents as the primary caregivers, and are unfortunately likely to suffer more than other children in terms of their psychological and educational development (since grandparents are often unable to assist children with their schoolwork).

How are working conditions in factories? Are they legal, and have they changed over time?

The Labor Contract Law of the People's Republic of China is the primary source of labor law in China and went into effect on January 1, 2008, following a series of reports

To learn more about the Freeman Book Awards, please visit:

www.nctasia.org/freeman-book-awards/



Culture Notes

Girls on the Line

By Jennie Liu

Fiction, set in China

Carolrhoda Lab, 2018.

2018 Honorable Mention, Freeman Book Award for Young Adult/High School

denouncing grueling working conditions in many companies. While the Labor Law is comprehensive, and includes a 40-hour work week with fixed overtime rates, social insurance and severance pay, violations and poor implementation are common, especially in factories employing migrant workers. Rights violations in Chinese factories have been well documented by human rights activists, investigative journalists and labor NGOs. Mandatory overtime, lack of rest days, physical punishment, and exposure to toxic chemicals were just some of the inhumane conditions workers had to endure and that resulted in physical and mental exhaustion, injuries, and even death. While the law addresses these issues, it is common for the management to overlook or ignore it due to pressure of deadlines and production quota. Furthermore, local authorities tend to turn a blind eye, as they rely heavily on investment for economic development. This has resulted in strikes, protests and, in several instances, mass suicides. Among others, the *New York Times* exposed the working conditions in the Taiwanese manufacturing company Foxconn, one of Apple's suppliers, in 2011. The domestic and international attention, along with the strikes, protests and unrest of workers, has resulted in an increase in higher pay packages and new regulations, with amendments added in 2013 to the Labor Law intended to provide better protection to workers. Despite this, reports on illegal working conditions, while decreasing, have continued up to today, and they still include excessive overtime hours, low base wages, and dangerous working conditions due to the use of toxic chemicals.

Are there positive aspects for women migrant workers working in factories?

According to some observers, including former *Wall Street Journal* writer Leslie T. Chang, women are more likely to value migration for its life-changing possibilities than men, since gender roles are less restrictive in cities than in the traditional countryside. Social and financial independence is highly valued by female migrant workers, as well as the social mobility resulting from many assembly-line women moving into administrative roles or other fields. Professional development, such as business etiquette, English, or computer skills classes, is often offered. Factory turnover is also generally high, as women frequently moved from one job to another in search of better prospects. In the case of single women supporting families in the countryside, it is



Culture Notes

Girls on the Line

By Jennie Liu

Fiction, set in China

Carolrhoda Lab, 2018.

2018 Honorable Mention, Freeman Book Award for Young Adult/High School

common for them to be able to send home double the amount that the family makes in the countryside in a year. This allows them to take part in the decision-making when allocating the new financial resources, thus improving the woman's influence and social status, and results in women being more likely to seek equality in marriage, as well.

What is the Spring Festival and the relative migration that occurs?

Chinese New Year, also known as Spring Festival or Lunar New Year, is the grandest festival in China, with a seven-day long holiday. The dates vary according to the Chinese lunar calendar, but generally fall on a day between January 21st and February

20th in the Gregorian calendar. As the most colorful annual event, the traditional celebration lasts longer, up to two weeks, and the climax arrives around the Lunar New Year's Eve. China during this period is dominated by iconic red lanterns, loud fireworks, massive banquets, and parades.

The Spring Festival travel season is a period of travel in China, and with an extremely high traffic load around the time of the Chinese New Year, it is considered to be the largest annual human migration in the world, with the number of journeys varying from 1.8 to 3 billion. Migrant workers and students return to their hometown to celebrate the New Year's Eve with their families, or, given the two week-long national vacation, they travel to tourist areas. The travel season in China usually begins fifteen days before New Year's Day and lasts for around forty days. The majority of travelers use railways and road networks, as even middle-class citizens might not be able to afford air travel. Because of the travel rush, tickets need to be bought ahead of time, and long waiting periods in train or bus stations are a regular occurrence.

Author: Silvia De Cassan, Assistant Director, East Asia Resource Center at the University of Washington

December, 2020



Culture Notes

Girls on the Line

By Jennie Liu

Fiction, set in China

Carolrhoda Lab, 2018.

2018 Honorable Mention, Freeman Book Award for Young Adult/High School

Sources & Resources

Bar, Heather. "China's Bride Trafficking Problem." *The Diplomat*, October 30, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/10/chinas-bride-trafficking-problem/>

Cai, Fang, ed. *The China Population and Labor Yearbook*, Volume 3. Brill, 2012.

Chang, Leslie T. *Factory Girls: From Village to City in a Changing China*. New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2009.

China Daily Census Data, [Total population, CBR, CDR, NIR and TFR of China \(1949-2000\)](#).

China Labor Bulletin. "Migrant Workers and their Children." <https://clb.org.hk/content/migrant-workers-and-their-children>

China Labor Watch. <https://chinalaborwatch.org/reports/>

The Economist. "For People in China, Adopting Chinese Children is Getting Easier." June 4, 2020. <https://www.economist.com/china/2020/06/04/for-people-in-china-adopting-chinese-children-is-getting-easier>

Fong, Mei. *One Child: The Story of China's Most Radical Experiment*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016.

French, Howard H. "China's Twilight Years." *The Atlantic*, June 2016. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/06/chinas-twilight-years/480768/>

Journeyman Pictures. *Kidnapped Wives – China* (Excerpt). 2007. On Youtube.com at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LvmOmaLB8d8>

Poston, Dudley L. Jr., Eugenia Conde, and Bethany DeSalvo. "China's Unbalanced Sex Ratio at Birth, Millions of Excess Bachelors and Societal Implications." *Vulnerable Children and Youth Studies* 6, no. 4 (2011).

Research-China.org. "The 'Science' of Orphanage Naming." June 27, 2011. <http://research-china.blogspot.com/2011/06/science-of-orphanage-naming.html>



Culture Notes

Girls on the Line

By Jennie Liu
Fiction, set in China

Carolrhoda Lab, 2018.

2018 Honorable Mention, Freeman Book Award for Young Adult/High School

Ritchie, Hannah, and Max Roser. "Gender Ratio." On OurWorldInData.org (2019),
<https://ourworldindata.org/gender-ratio>

Statista. "Number of orphans in China from 2010 to 2020."
<https://www.statista.com/statistics/687316/china-number-of-orphans/>

Trading Economics. "China Average Yearly Wages."
<https://tradingeconomics.com/china/wages>

United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs. *Child Adoptions: Trends and Policies*. New York: 2009.
<https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/publications/pdf/policy/child-adoption.pdf>

Zhang, Junsen. "The Evolution of China's One-Child Policy and Its Effects on Family Outcomes." *The Journal of Economic Perspectives* 31, no. 1 (2017).