

Nanfu Wang - Documentary filmmaker

My name is Nanfu. In Chinese, “nan” means “man.” And “fu” means “pillar.”

My family had hoped for a boy, who would grow up to be the pillar of the family. And when I turned out to be a girl, they named me Nanfu anyway.

I was born in 1985, six years before China announced its one-child policy. Right after I was born, the local officials came and ordered my mom to be sterilized.

My grandpa stood up to the officials, because he wanted a grandson to carry on the family name. Eventually, my parents were allowed to have a second child, but they had to wait for five years and pay a substantial fine.

Growing up, my brother and I were surrounded by children from one-child families. I remember feeling a sense of shame because I had a younger brother.

I felt like our family did something wrong for having two children. At the time, I didn't question where this sense of shame and guilt came from.

A year and a half ago, I had my own first child. It was the best thing that ever happened in my life. Becoming a mother gave me a totally new perspective on my own childhood, and it brought back my memories of early life in China.

For the past three decades, everyone in my family had to apply for a permission from the government to have a child.

And I wondered what it was like for people who lived under the one-child policy. So I decided to make a documentary about it.

One of the people I interviewed was the midwife who delivered all of the babies born in my village, including myself. She was 84 years old when I interviewed her.

I asked her, "Do you remember how many babies you delivered throughout your career?" She didn't have a number for deliveries. She said she had performed 60,000 forced abortions and sterilizations.

Sometimes, she said, a late-term fetus would survive an abortion, and she would kill the baby after delivering it. She remembered how her hands would tremble as she did the work. Her story shocked me.

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When I set out to make the film, I expected it would be a simple story of perpetrators and victims. People who carried out the policy and people who are living with the consequences. But that wasn't what I saw.

As I was finishing my interview with the midwife, I noticed an area in her house that was decorated with elaborate homemade flags. And each flag has a picture of a baby on it. These were flags that were sent by families whom she helped treat their infertility problems.

She explained that she had had enough of performing abortions and sterilizations — that the only work she did now was to help families have babies.

She said she was full of guilt for carrying out the one-child policy, and she hoped that by helping families have babies, she could counteract what she did in the past.

It became clear to me she, too, was a victim of the policy. Every voice was telling her that what she did was right and necessary for China's survival. And she did what she thought was right for her country.

I know how strong that message was. It was everywhere around myself when I grew up. It was printed on matches, playing cards, textbooks, posters.

The propaganda praising the one-child policy was everywhere around us.

[Anyone who refuses to sterilize will be arrested.]

And so were the threats against disobeying it. The message seeped into our minds so much so that I grew up feeling embarrassed for having a younger brother.

With each person I filmed, I saw how their minds and hearts can be influenced by the propaganda, and how their willingness to make sacrifices for the greater good can be twisted into something very dark and tragic.

China is not the only place where this happens. There is no country on earth where propaganda isn't present. And in societies that are supposed to be more open and free than China, it can be even harder to recognize what propaganda looks like.

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It hides in plain sight as news reports, TV commercials, political campaigning and in our social media feeds. It works to change our minds without our knowledge.



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Every society is vulnerable to accepting propaganda as truth, and no society where propaganda replaces the truth can be truly free.

Thank you.

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