When I began investigating the personalities of only children in the early 1970s, I could never have imagined that, some four decades later, philosophers would be advocating the one-child family for all, as a means of saving our planet. Back then both psychologists and economists regarded the one-child family as undesirable. The prevailing view of parents of only children was that they were selfish because they had not done their duty to ensure healthy human development as well as economic growth. Now, Sarah Conly has turned this old perspective upside-down, essentially arguing that anyone who has more than one child is selfish. In her philosophical treatise, One Child: Do we have a right to more? Conly argues that, while we have the right to reproduce, this right is limited by how much our fertility harms people alive now and in the future. Given the threat posed by climate change and our excessive exploitation of Earth’s resources, Conly states that we do not have a right to more than one child. She assumes that if we stabilize or reduce the number of humans living on this planet, and diminish our habit of over-consuming its resources, then we might be able to salvage what is left of our Earth so that future generations can survive. Limiting couples to one child is feasible, says Conly, because many countries already have total fertility rates below the replacement level of 2.1 children per woman. Conly thinks that one child per family can become a reality as long as this limit is applied equally, by the use of such incentives as tax breaks, and by the provision of effective and free contraception for all.

A similar call for one-child families to slow down climate change was made by Bill McKibben in Maybe One (1998) which he wrote as he contemplated having a second child. McKibben went into great detail about one-child families, our consumption of natural resources, and the atmospheric science behind the production of greenhouse gases. He eventually decided that one child was the way to go. Conly does not add much to McKibben’s thesis beyond her declaration that we do not have the right to have more than one child, where McKibben’s own approach was voluntarist.

Demographers and family planning experts understand the difficulty of limiting families to one child. Over the past twenty years in the US, roughly 40 per cent of all pregnancies are believed to have been unintended—a statistic that led Philip Morgan, an expert on fertility, to conclude in a recent lecture that unintended childbearing is an American social norm that is unlikely to disappear. This lax approach to family planning is the antithesis of the Chinese approach, which has insisted on strict planning for more than forty years. Since the 1970s, China has accepted neither unintended pregnancy nor unintended childbearing. This culminated in 1979, when China officially adopted the one-child policy.

Kay Ann Johnson’s book, China’s Hidden Children, describes the consequences of implementing China’s uncompromising programmes, based on interviews with hundreds of families living in rural areas in Central China. Between 1996 and 2002, according to Johnson, China’s one-child policy was not strongly applied to rural areas before the mid-1990s. Up until then, women could hide their over-quota pregnancies by simply not registering their babies with the authorities. These children grew up without hukou (legal documents) and were known as hei haizi, or “black children”. They could not attend school beyond primary levels and were denied access to medical care. As they became young adults, they were denied the right to register their marriages, and were forced to work in different forms of state job. Johnson’s research revealed that these hei haizi were described as introverted, withdrawn, lacking in self-confidence; they frequently repeated the mantra “I should never have been born.”

Although Chinese families have tradition-ally preferred sons, Johnson’s research revealed that many rural families wanted two children, one daughter and one son. From the mid-1990s, the state forced rural mothers to be sterilized after their first birth if the child was a son. If not, after the second child, regardless of its sex, sterilization was required. One strategy to delay sterilization involved leaving a newly born, second daughter at the doorstep of distant relatives, often families who had only one child, a son. This practice became so widespread that the authorities came to regard it as a threat to their ability to control fertility. To close the loophole, officials made obtaining a rural hukou almost impossible for such adopted children, and some families with over-quota children were forced to relinquish them to orphanages. The officials administering these Dickensian orphanages were typically corrupt, with little interest in the children’s welfare. Soon they discovered that they could earn thousands of dollars each time they shipped a child overseas, and this became a profitable business. It is estimated that Chinese orphanages sent 120,000 children, mostly girls, abroad for adoption. Johnson notes that most of these children will never be able to locate their birth families, typically because they had already been identified as “foundlings”, or because their biological families had hidden their existence from officials, so no record exists.

One Child: The story of China’s most radical predictions. China chose to abandon the one-child policy earlier this year.

One discouraging factor is the scarcity of young women in China. The one-child policy exacerbated the long-standing skewed sex ratio in China, and there are now 30–40 million young men who have little chance of marriage because their prospective brides were never born. Popularly described as “bare branches”, these men will also have no children to care for them as they age. Furthermore, Fong notes that some political analysts believe that this over-