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Li Tianbing: My imaginary siblings

Growing up in China with its strict one-child policy, Li Tianbing never fully knew the meaning of the words 'brother' and 'sister'. By Jon Henley

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Li Tianbing: 'I feel like I have won a prize, being able to have a second child.' Photograph: Felix Clay for the Guardian

The only memento Li Tianbing has of his childhood is five photographs. Tattered now, black and white, slightly out of focus. He's lucky, he says, to have even those: cameras weren't plentiful in Guilin, southern China, when he was a small boy in the 1970s, a three-day, four-night train journey from Beijing. He saw one only rarely, when his father – a soldier in the People's Army propaganda unit – managed to borrow one. As Li's dad could come home for only one or two days each month, and as he didn't often manage to borrow a camera, five photos is what there are.

But stacked against the walls in his studio, a cavernous former garage in a grimy Paris suburb, are some of the works those photographs inspired: huge, compelling canvases that have made Li one of the most critically acclaimed Chinese-born artists of his generation.

Rendered in the stark, monochrome detail of an old photograph, some splashed blue, red or green, others clutching unnaturally bright toys, books or bags, are children. Staring wide-eyed, deadpan they appear detached, waif-like. And above all – though each picture may contain several children – they seem alone.

These paintings are part of a semi-biographical series that has occupied Li for the best part of five years. They are an artist's attempt to recapture and reimagine what he can of his own childhood, and to explore the human consequences of perhaps the most controversial and far-reaching social policy China has decreed: the one-child rule. "My generation," says Li, serving green tea in a porcelain cup the size of a large thimble, "is unique, in China and in the world. We were the first not to fully know the meaning of the words 'brother' and 'sister'."

The one-child policy was introduced in 1979, when Li was five years old, and is expected to continue for at least another decade. Li's father, in the army, and mother, a high-school literature teacher, were both part of the state apparatus, so did not dare contravene it. "My mother was studying when I was born, so they waited to have their second child," Li says. "By the time they were ready, it was too late."

The policy formally restricts married couples living in urban areas to having only one child, and is reported to have prevented as many as 400m births. For Li, it mainly meant a lonely childhood. "I had just one toy," he says, "a wooden pistol. When I lost it, my father was upset. I read what I could, but it was difficult to get books. I spent a lot of time dreaming, imagining, but always on my own. Or with imaginary friends. That's why I started painting, I think, because I was bored. I painted everywhere. In the neighbourhood, they used to say to my mother: 'If you can't find your son, follow the graffiti!'"

It wasn't, though, necessarily a sad childhood: "Sadness is something you feel for other people. Children adapt very easily. They have their reality and that's it; they don't look beyond. And they usually find some way to amuse themselves. For me, that was art. Art was my lifeline."

And he was good at it; his paintings, in traditional Chinese ink-on-paper, were selected by the authorities for exhibition abroad, in Japan and Europe. When he was 10, his mother gave him a book by a celebrated Chinese artist, Xu Beihong, who studied in Paris in the early 20th century and returned to Beijing to found the city's Academy of Fine Arts.

Li dreamed of studying in Paris too, but it seemed "a surreal idea. China in the mid-80s was like North Korea now. You couldn't get out." Barely a decade later, though, he did: after spending four years studying international relations and languages in Beijing and refusing a government job back in Guilin welcoming foreign visitors, Li applied to study art in France.

Li spent barely six months studying art theory at the University of Paris XIII before being accepted into the prestigious École des Beaux-Arts, from where he graduated in 2002 with the highest possible honours. Then for a while, he says, he was "a bit lost. I didn't really have a direction. I tried lots of different styles."

In 2006, he began working on a self-portrait from his childhood. Like his five photographs, it was in black and white, and Li was all alone. "Slowly," he says, "I began to add other children. The brothers and sisters and friends I never had. My invented friends."

Looking back now, it's clear he was searching for his roots. "Perhaps because I was very far from home. And because my memories were fading; all I had were those photographs. And because not just the memories, but also the real, concrete world of my childhood in China was disappearing, being rubbed out by the unbelievable pace of construction."

But Li's paintings of children were not just a recreation of his own childhood identity, but an exploration of what was happening in China. The one-child policy, he says, has had unimagined consequences. "There are the hidden children," he says.

"They can't go to school, because they don't officially exist. In the big cities, there's a market. Children can be bought and sold. They disappear."

Li still finds it surprising in France, he says, "when a child goes missing, and it's in the newspapers and a poster goes up, and stays for months! In China, nothing like that happens."

Fines and punishments for having a second child are harsh: "You will be denied promotion. You may have a 20% pay cut. Your apartment can be taken away from you, your benefits cut. In the private sector, the fines can go up to six years of salary."

The longer-term economic consequences, Li says, are dramatic. "Traditionally, the Chinese have at least two children to provide for them in old age. But by 2030 in China – the third generation of the one-child policy – every young couple will have 12 old people to provide for. The whole thing will just explode."

Emotionally, too, it's difficult, even in families that manage to obey the rule. "I can't talk about it with my parents," says Li. "They know my work is about this, they see it; I've taken them to exhibitions of my paintings in Shanghai, Hong Kong. But we can't address the topic. It's really very sensitive, very painful, for lots of people."

Li, though, is fortunate. He has a son of 18 months with his partner, a sculptor – and a second child on the way. "Having just one child changed everything for me already," he says. "My son resembles me – he's like a living model, he's in constant movement. Compared to those five frozen, out-of-focus photos of my own childhood … It's miraculous."

Being able to choose to have a second is, he says, a huge privilege. "My parents couldn't choose. In China, that choice is not open. There are a few exemptions, like if both parents are themselves only children. But for most people, the possibility is just not there. I feel like I have won a prize, being able to have a second child."

Of late, a whole industry has grown up, particularly in the US, to cater for Chinese couples who want a second child. "People can go abroad, have their baby, and come back to China with American papers for their child," Li says. "That's OK; the rule doesn't apply to foreigners. The baby is American; it doesn't count. But that's obviously only for the rich."

He considers himself fortunate, too, to be able to spend time with his son. "When I think of my father, he never had that choice either. He saw me so rarely. I see it now, whenever I visit. I feel his emotion. It's in the little things he does: he makes my bed. He's compensating for the lack of time together, before."

Indeed the whole notion of family, as lived and understood in the west, means something rather different in China. "For so long now," says Li, "the collectivity has been more important than the family, than the needs of parents and children.

"It's completely normal for parents to live miles apart most of the time, as mine did; to see each other one or two days a month, for 20 years. Lots of my friends at school were in that

same situation. My grandfather was an architect; he was sent to a faraway town to build bridges for 30 years. When he came back, he was retired."

Still, he would have loved a brother or sister. "You always regret what you've never had," he says. "As a child, of course it would have been lovely. But now my father is not well; I am thousands of miles away. In our culture, it is important to look after one's parents when they are elderly. I can't, and there's no other child to do it."

But having children of his own – a family with whom he actually lives – is, gradually, starting to influence his work. His sad, wide-eyed childhood self may still take centre-stage in many paintings, but the imaginary children are starting to look happier, less lost. There is the occasional smile. And other themes are emerging: modern issues in China like galloping commercialisation, the increasing difficulty of finding factory workers.

"Increasingly now, I think I'm using the children more as a symbol, as a medium to explore and talk about what else is happening in China today," he says. "My work is perhaps less, now, about the one-child policy. But it will always be there. An artist must, after all, speak of his own experience."