

THE RISE OF WOMEN IN CHINA AND THE ONE CHILD POLICY

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ABSTRACT AND INTRODUCTION

The implementation of China's One Child Policy in 1979 began as a "temporary" measure to alleviate the pressures that the rapidly growing population placed on the country. At the time, the government was having trouble supporting the needs of its citizens and therefore set out to limit its expansion (Kane 1999:992). However, like many other social policies, the effects that the plan may on future generations are at the time largely unknown. In fact, only in the last decade has the long term effects of the One Child Policy been seen. What has been discovered is that in thirty years, China has experienced a clear transformation in its demographics and in its traditional, patrilineal culture. This paper will attempt to explore how the One Child Policy has affected Chinese women, and whether or not the argument that women, typically from urban regions, have become "empowered" is a plausible statement.

Prior to the instillation of the One Child Policy, it was reported that the average family in China had 5.8 children per couple (Macartney 2008). This relatively large size was a response to the traditional beliefs of Chinese leader, Mao Zedong, who said that "Of all things in the world, people are most precious" (Kane 1999:992). However, the rapid population growth put considerable strain on the country's resources as both the government and environment could not support the expanding needs of the people. As a result, Mao Zedong started employing different methods, such as contraceptive and abortion services, and the promotion of later marriages, in his fourth four year plan in 1970 (Kane 1999:992). This "later, longer, fewer" campaign dropped the growth rate from 2.8% in the 1950s to 1.8% in the 1970s (Kane 1999:992). By 1980, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was hoping for the growth rate to drop to 1% and by 2000 to zero percent (Kane 1999:992). However, in 1975, the government realized that the demography of China consisted of mostly young individuals who, even with small families, would still result in population growth (Kane 1999: 992). By 1982, China would have 1 billion people in it (Kane 1999:992). Therefore, Deng Xiaoping, the successor of Mao Zedong, implemented the One Child Policy in hopes that rather than having zero percent growth rate in 2000, that the population of China would just be around 1.2 billion people (Kane 1999:992).

Beginning in the 1980s, as the title of this policy suggests, families in China were encouraged to have only one offspring in hopes of slowing down growth in the country. The government used various methods to promote this idea through the use of both incentives and sanctions. Not only were families given financial, housing or schooling packages for having single children, but also social pressure and employment limitations were placed on parents (Kane 1999:992). For example, those connected to the government would face little promotional prospects in their jobs if the One Child Policy was not followed (Kane 1999:992). Similarly, coercive control was used in which women were forced to undergo abortions or sterilization to prevent the birth of additional children. However, this is not to say that this plan applied universally. In fact, there were many exceptions. For one, this policy did not apply to minorities in China, who were allowed to have two children in order to preserve their culture (Shao Ling Interview). In rural areas, if the first child was a girl, then couples were allowed to try for another child in hopes of conceiving a boy (Christina Zhang Interview). This flexibility continues even today depending on the social needs. In modern times, parents who are each themselves single children are allowed to produce two offspring (Shi Li Ge Interview). Similarly, in the case of a national disaster, such as the 2008

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earthquake in Chengdu, parents of children who died, were severely injured, or were disabled were given the opportunity to receive a certificate allowing them to have another child (MSNBC 2008).

Overall, since 1979, the government believes that it has been successful in its endeavor to control the population as a result of the One Child Policy. This is because the People's Republic was reported to have about 1.27 billion people in 2000, only several million above its original goal. However, sociologists and Chinese experts believe otherwise. Wang Feng, the director of the Brookings-Tsinghua Center for Public Health, points out that the fertility rate of Chinese families was already falling prior to the installation of the policy, so population growth would have slowed down (The Economist 2011). He states that in 1950, families were reported to average about 5.8 children were family (The Economist 2011). However, in only thirty years, this declined to about 2.3 children, a rate just above replacement level (The Economist 2011). Therefore, given time, it could be argued that fertility would have steadily decreased on its own preventing the addition of millions to the population. Similarly, at the time the One Child Policy was implemented in 1979, China had just opened its shores to foreign powers to experiment with market capitalism under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping (Fishman 2005). Under this reform, the government not only began allowing foreign investments into the country but also enabling entrepreneurs to start their own businesses. This allowed for Chinese citizens to utilize their creative capacities to maximize their profit margins and greatly improve their livelihoods, especially in urban areas. Naturally then, more time would be spent on expanding business and less time on raising a family. Moreover, during this period, China also embraced export-oriented industrialization in which it began producing goods for Western multinational corporations. By abandoning isolation and embracing this form of development, the Communist Party enabled the nation to grow economically at an exponential rate. Through its development, social change within China occurred which allowed for better services and decreased mortality rates. Therefore, like other developing countries at the time, such as Taiwan, fertility would have decreased on its own without the need for government control.

However, since the implementation of the One Child Policy, China demographics and culture has been distorted (Fong 2002: 1100). As most families were no longer allowed to have more than one child, there was a reported increase in female infanticide, especially in rural China (BBC 2000). This is because in traditional, Chinese families, male offspring were favored over females as they were able to not only help their parents work but also carry on the family name. As a result of many years of selectivity and its continuation in some regions, currently men outnumber women about 115 to 100, respectively (The Economist 2011). Similarly, due to the One Child Policy, Chinese families are also experiencing the "4-2-1 problem" in which four grandparents and two parents must rely on a single child for familial care (Jackson and Howe 2004: 3). This creates a lot of pressure for the younger generation who must struggle to survive in a society where there is a growing gap between consumer prices and income. In fact, during some of my interviews, this worry was expressed by different Chinese students. One of their main points was how expensive housing is, especially in urban areas like Beijing. Although these cities serve as the center of employment opportunities for China's citizens, a 100 meter squared home can cost about 3-4,000,000 Renminbi (Morgan Chai and Shi Ye Ge Interview). This is a daunting figure for any recent graduate and it is no wonder why most urban dwellers rent their housing (Morgan Chai Interview). Moreover, being a single child also brings about various personality issues as a result of being the sole offspring of a pair of parents. Not only do children grow up lonely, despite the presence of relatives, but also as many interviewees noted, selfish (Christina Zhang Interview). This characteristic as I found is often associated with children born during the 1980s or "Ba Ling Hou" generation in Chinese society (Christina Zhang Interview). Although they themselves do not think of themselves as "selfish," they are indisputably given the very best growing up (Christina Zhang Interview). Not only do they receive their parent's undivided attention but also the opportunity to attend various preparatory activities that will enable them to attend China's highest ranking schools (Christina Zhang Interview). However, in many cases, once these children leave their homes for such things like studies abroad, as in the case of Christina Zhang's boyfriend, getting them to come back is often hard (Christina Zhang Interview). Therefore, these "little emperors" as they have been called, result in, for many families, the demise in "filial piety" in which multigenerational families in China are becoming less of a norm (Jackson and Howe 2004: 17).

Yet despite these negative side effects of the policy, its existence alongside the rapid development of urban China has undeniably given more opportunities to women across the country. Typically, in a

traditional society, women are usually deemed the “caretakers” in a family, playing both the role of a wife and a mother. This was especially true in China in which females were believed to be less valuable and less important than their male counterparts. In fact, women in traditional China were expected to be submissive entities, subservient throughout their life to their father, husband, and sons. However, all this changed with the advent of development in the People’s Republic which gave women, especially those in urban areas, more choices and rights. After 1978, China experienced a period of rapid industrialization due to the Communist Party’s economic reform policy. This brought about a variety of ways for women to break out of their subservient cycle, most notably through paid labor. Like many of its Asian neighbors, China embraced an export-oriented method of production.(Brandt and Rawski 2008: 574). The construction of the factories for which foreign goods were made gave way to a plethora of jobs for both men and women throughout China. However, because of the traditional nature of Chinese women, believed to be subservient and hardworking, they were often the first group of people to be hired (Fröbel et al. 1980: 257). This is because not only could they be exploited through their cheap labor, but also forced to work long hours with little complaint. Yet despite the debasing conditions that many women were left to work in, their ability to earn a wage enabled many to live on their own. Therefore, it also allowed females to unsettle traditional Chinese beliefs and break away from their dependence on their male counterparts. In this way, women were able to lift their own socioeconomic status and become more important in society (Jian Xiang Interview). Today, women in China are able to obtain “any job they want” whether it be a doctor, manager, or teacher (Jian Xiang Interview).

Similarly, the rise of progressive ideas as a result of both the policies of the CCP and modernization also enabled many women to become educated and gain independence through learned knowledge. Literacy not only allowed women to move to urban centers throughout China to find better employment opportunities, but also as a result, gain more freedom. This type of empowerment was only fueled by the existence of the One Child Policy because, as mentioned before, it allowed for parents to focus their attention and support on their single offspring. For many women, this enabled them to receive the best opportunities that their parents could afford. Christina Zhang, a Chinese student at the Beijing Language and Culture University (BLCU), talked about this during our interview. She commented that many children are placed in different extracurricular activities to cultivate skills that would enable them to gain an entrance into some of the more well known high schools in their respective areas (Christina Zhang Interview). Christina, herself, had a private tutor who taught her how to draw and as a result she went to the best secondary school in her hometown, Qinhuandao (Christina Zhang Interview). Although parents can get overprotective and at times stifling, as in the case of BLCU student, Shi Yi Ge, their intentions were for the best. During our conversation, she told me of two instances that depicted this parent-child relationship. Originally from Xin Jiang, Shi Yi Ge described how her parents used to call her every hour during her summer holiday as a child to ensure that she was okay at home alone (Shi Yi Ge Interview). Although overbearing, their attention and care is what, later in life, pushed her to attend college. It was her parents who wanted her to study in Beijing, although initially she did not want to (Shi Yi Ge Interview). However, during our interview, she commented that she is actually very happy with the decision and that it was the correct choice in the long run (Shi Yi Ge Interview).

Through these stories, it can be seen that in many ways, the culture of China has changed enough over the last couple of decades to allow women to become more prominent figures in Chinese society. Although this is not entirely true throughout the country, especially in rural regions, in urban areas the traditional belief that boys are more important than girls is no longer predominant. During my interviews, I asked each of my participants whether it was better to be a boy or girl in modern Chinese society. To my surprise, the unanimous answer amongst the male and female students was that being “a girl” was more advantageous. This is because although women are able to share many of the same opportunities with men, they do not have to experience the same pressures and burdens. As noted before, the One Child Policy has skewed the demographic makeup of the People’s Republic in the last thirty years. Today, the population of males now outnumbered that of females creating different problems as a result of a loss of balance (Jian Xiang Interview). Not only are men having more trouble finding a wife but also they are having difficulty meeting the current trend of desires of their prospective mates. As Jenny Zhang, the Assistant Resident Director for the Global Alliance Program in Beijing told me, “women are becoming more and more realistic,” especially as the economic disparity between income and consumer prices in

China grows larger. Today, women expect that their future husband is equipped with “a house and car” prior to getting married (Shi Yi Ge Interview). Although this is not a universal desire among females, according to Jian Xiang, it is a definitive thought that crosses many women’s minds (Jian Xiang Interview). Similarly, another responsibility that many male single children face is the fact that they are still viewed as the “center of the Chinese family” (Jenny Zhang Interview). Although this is not true for all families, as women now serve as the main source of income, it is for the most part, still prevalent throughout China. This means that not only do their children and wife depend on them but also their parents, especially in their old age. However, as a result, while men are working hard to support this burden, their wife is the one left at home managing and controlling the money (Jian Xiang Interview). In a way, this gives the female figure a considerable amount of power because they are able to delegate how the family income is spent. Even, Jian Xiang noted, with a chuckle, that a growing number of men are actually scared of their wife in China (Jian Xiang Interview).

Moreover, it might be also argued that it is better to be an urban woman in the People’s Republic because they are experiencing what some call the “glass floor” (Fong 2002: 1104). As China is rapidly industrializing, factories provide an ample amount of employment opportunities for women. This means that despite ones ascribed social position, even the most “non-elite” women have the chance to improve their livelihoods (Fong 2002: 1102). Similarly, as more females today are being educated at the universities, now outnumbering men, they again face another chance to move up the socioeconomic ladder. This is because an education enables them to gain the skills they need to obtain a more prominent job position. However, by moving to urban areas to seek an education, women also improve their likelihood of marrying up (Fong 2002: 1102). This can be depicted by the fact that it is now a social norm that urban women expect to marry a man with a house and a car, two items that represent social security. What makes it even more likely that women will be able to achieve a better status through marriage is that due to the current demographic distortion, women can afford to be picky. However, Chinese men in today’s society are not so fortunate. As low paid jobs are less available to them, as they are more expensive labor than women, they must work hard and be educated to ensure their position in society. Although they can obtain higher paying jobs, men also run a higher risk of being unemployed and in the extreme sense, falling into poverty (Fong 2002: 1102). Even in marriage, males do not enjoy the likelihood of being able to marry a female at a higher socioeconomic standing because she herself is looking to marry at either the same level or higher. Therefore, unless a man is equipped with a house and a car, his chances for marriage and a type of social security are significantly diminished.

Overall, looking at the change in urban women’s roles since the implementation of the One Child Policy in 1978, there has definitely been an improvement in not only their economic opportunities but also social standing. As Vanessa Fong, author of the article, “China’s One-Child Policy and the Empowerment of Urban Daughters” argues, females have been able to transcend gender norms as a result of being a “singleton daughter with no brothers” (Fong 2002: 1098). Not only have they proven themselves to their traditional parents as worthy investments since many women today attend universities, but also through employment they have shown that they are able to support their family monetarily (Fong 2002: 1098). However, one must question whether it was actually the policy itself that gave way to these improvements or was it a different force, such as modernization. To me, I definitely think that the rise of women was due to a combination of factors including industrialization, the expansion of education, and the installation of the One Child Policy. As mentioned before, the rapid modernization of China’s urban centers and the ability to be women to be educated has given females the ability to earn a wage and rise above their ascribed station. This is because by being exposed to other ideas and interacting with other women, as sociological theory depicts, they are able to develop a progressive nature that allows of greater independence (Inkeles 1969: 134). For example, females in China are getting married at later ages because they want to work and experience freedom (Christina Zhang Interview). From my interviews, many of my participants quoted that the average age to get married is anywhere from 26 to 30-years-old. However, I do not think that women’s roles in China would have evolved as fast in the last thirty years, if not for the implementation of the One Child Policy. Unlike other countries that also experienced a rise in female power due to modernization, the traditional culture of China is deeply steeped in Confucian thought. Therefore, even if given the ability to be gain an education and work, having to compete with brothers for a parent’s time and money, would be difficult, if not

impossible. However, as a single daughter, they do not have to compete with siblings for resources and parental favor. Instead, they receive only the very best.

Yet, even though women have seen a rise in their status, one must question if they are still hindered by the presence of traditional Chinese culture and to what extent have women in China really been “empowered” in the last thirty years. After looking through articles and completing several interviews, I believe that although Chinese females have risen in socioeconomic standing, they are still very much limited by the country’s traditional norms. This is because even with the plethora of employment opportunities that are open to women today, they still experience discrimination during interviews and what experts call a “glass ceiling” (Fong 2002: 1102). What this means is that despite the belief that “women can have any job,” in actuality when looking for employment, it is not true. In China, men are still viewed as the more capable and more important contributors to society. As Jenny stated, companies in China will openly advertise that they only want male applicants depending on the position that needs to be filled (Jenny Zhang Interview). Even when women try to apply for a job, during interviews, managers will question them about their personal life, such as whether they have a boyfriend, if they will get married, and if they will have children (Shao Ling Interview). Shao Ling explained to me that this was because businesses do not want to pay for three or four months of maternity leave because it is costly to the company. This makes it hard for female post-graduates, who are about 26 or 27-years-old to find a job (Shao Ling Interview). Similarly, because women must still take on the role of the “caretaker” in the household, the burdens of being a mother, wife, and employee, limits their job potential. Therefore, even though the advantages that females are given throughout their youth help to push the boundaries of the “glass ceiling,” they, unlike men, can only go so far.

Overall, the implementation of China’s One Child Policy in 1979 was a contributing factor to the empowerment of Chinese women. Not only did it allow for parents to focus their attention on their daughter but also give them opportunities once only enjoyed by sons. Although females now have the ability to be educated and employed, the traditional Confucian belief in patrilineality and filial piety is still very much prevalent in modern times. Therefore, while women, typically from urban areas, enjoy more freedom and a higher social status, how much they can do, what is expected of them, and how far they can rise in society is still limited by Chinese culture.

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