

ONE-CHILD FAMILIES IN URBAN DALIAN: A CASE STUDY OF THE  
CONSEQUENCES OF CURRENT FAMILY PLANNING  
PRACTICES IN CHINA

by

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Title: ONE-CHILD FAMILIES IN URBAN DALIAN: A CASE STUDY OF THE  
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CHINA

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Implemented as one of the basic national policies of China since 1978, the one-child policy has brought both advantages and disadvantages to one-child families in urban China. This thesis explores the various consequences of current family planning practices in urban Dalian. It explains the ways in which the implementation of the policy has influenced urban one-child families' everyday life and how parents and single children handle the policy. Urban parents have accepted the state requirement for limited births and have adopted new child-rearing practices to raise their "only hope" in the changing socioeconomic context. Single children receive comprehensive parental attention and support and are widely considered as spoiled "little emperors/empresses". But at the same

time they experience great pressure to perform with academic excellence in order to be capable to excel in the competition of the global market economy. Gender norms are in transition. Urban single daughters are empowered by the benefits brought by low fertility produced by the policy. As the first generation of single children grows up, their families are now confronted with the crucial issue of the “four-two-one” (four grandparents, two parents, one child) problem, which impacts the future of the one-child policy.

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for my parents



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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The implications of the one-child policy in China have had a strong impact on many coming-of-age young adults and their families. I initiated this thesis based on my own experience as a member of the post-1980s generation of single children.<sup>1</sup> I was born the only daughter and only child into my family in 1983 in urban Dalian. The children I grew up around were all the only children in their families. From primary school through high school, none of my classmates were from more- than-one-child families. As little boys and girls, we all took it for granted that every family had only one child. I remember very well that a rural girl was transferred to my class in my third year of high school. She had a younger brother and that really surprised us. However, she seldom talked about her brother and always tried to get rid of the topic. After graduating, I asked her for the reason, she just replied: “I don’t know. You guys are all single children. I felt embarrassed of having a sibling. It was just bad to be different from others.” Based on that conversation, I began to pay more attention to the social news when I entered university. I have noticed that single children are a major focus of Chinese society. The characteristics of the post-1980s generation, the rearing-practices adopted by one-child parents, and related topics are very popular in newspapers and magazines. My interest in the one-child

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<sup>1</sup> The post-1980s generation refers to children and young adults who were born in the 1980s through the early 1990s under the one-child policy. By 2009, single children of the post-1980s generation born in 1980 became 29 years old, and the youngest born in 1990 reached 19 years old of age.

policy under which my generation was born and raised has continued to grow and has inspired me to write this thesis.

### Background: China's One Child Policy

China's central government formulated the one-child policy in the late 1970s when Deng Xiaoping initiated the "reform and opening" (*gai ge kai fang*) policies to concentrate China's development on economic progress and to promote industrialization and modernization. To achieve the goal of developing China into an industrialized and wealthy nation, the central government decided to control and potentially reduce China's large population to build social resources so that the country could focus on economic development which would eventually benefit all citizens. In 1978, the one-child policy was implemented as a basic national policy in both urban and rural areas of China. Under the policy, every family can only have one child. Associated with this policy, the central government also called upon its people to promote the capability of the first generation of single children. "Fewer births, more quality births" (*you sheng you yu*) became the preferred fertility attitude that the government tried to propagate throughout China. Since the one-child policy is closely linked with socioeconomic development, China's situation during and after the 1990s also will be explored to better understand the one-child policy implications. The socioeconomic situation in China changed in the 1990s. China entered the global market and accelerated the speed of constructing a modernized society. To focus on economic development, the one-child policy was maintained as the basic national policy above other policy changes.

The one-child policy has been controversial since its implementation. It has brought both advantages and disadvantages to contemporary Chinese society. For example, Susan Greenhalgh traces the origins of China's one-child policy to Maoist militarism and post-Mao Zedong military-to-civilian conversion.<sup>2</sup> Based on the research of the leading missile scientists, China's population problem needed to be solved and the solution was the one-child policy. Greenhalgh's research shows "how during 1978-80 the resources of defense science and the self-confidence of the elite scientist [Song Jian] enabled him boldly and arbitrarily to modify the work of the Club of Rome and use that Sinified cybernetics of population to redefine the nation's population problem, create a radical one-child-for-all solution to it, and persuade China's leaders that his 'scientific' solution was the only way out."<sup>3</sup> Providing insight into the way Chinese elite missile scientists shaped policy-making, Susan Greenhalgh argues that the policy making around population control reflects the dangers of the supreme self-confidence exhibited by some Chinese elite scientists that would subsequently cause troubling social and political consequences. Other criticism of the one-child policy's development and implementation focuses on consequent violations of basic human rights. However, many studies emphasize the advantages brought by the one-child policy to China. For instance, the one-child policy has controlled the expansion of the population in China.<sup>4</sup> Another

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<sup>2</sup> Susan Greenhalgh, *Just One Child : Science and Policy in Deng's China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008). Susan Greenhalgh, "Missile, Science, Population Science: The Origins of China's One-Child Policy," *China Quarterly* 182 (June 2005): 253-276.

<sup>3</sup> Susan Greenhalgh, "Missile, Science, Population Science: The Origins of China's One-Child Policy," *China Quarterly* 182 (June 2005): 253-276.

<sup>4</sup> Therese Hesketh, Lu Li, and Xing Zhu Wei, "The Effect of China's One-Child Family Policy after 25 Years," *New England Journal of Medicine* 353 (September 15, 2005): 1171-1176.

important advantage is that urban single daughters have also been empowered by the policy.

There are big differences in the implementation of the one-child policy in rural and urban areas due to the different economic structures, different levels of the economic development, and different approaches to change in traditional attitudes to fertility. The policy has been more acceptable and more easily carried out in urban China than in rural areas.<sup>5</sup> Due to the various circumstances determining practices in different places, I limited the scope of the research for this thesis to urban China, specifically urban Dalian, to explore and examine various circumstances of one-child families.

### Dalian: A Young Port City

Dalian is the second largest city in Liaoning Province, after the provincial capital Shenyang. Dalian's harbor was built by Russia in 1899, and the previously small fishing village began to develop into a port city. In 1905 after the Russo-Japanese War of 1904, Dalian was colonized by Japan as a result of the war. Then Dalian was transferred to the Soviet Union in 1945 and was returned to China in 1954. Colonized by Japan and the Soviet Union, Dalian developed into a center of heavy industry in northeastern China, attracting migrants from throughout northeastern China and Shandong Province and from the nearby countryside.<sup>6</sup> From the late 1970s, Dalian closely followed the central government's policy of "reform and opening" to development its heavy industry. In the

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example: Cecilia Nathansen Milwertz, *Accepting Population Control: Urban Chinese Women and the One-Child Family Policy* (Richmond: Curzon, 1997). Elisabeth Croll, Delia Davin, and Penny Kane, *China's One-Child Family Policy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985).

<sup>6</sup> Vanessa L. Fong, *Only Hope: Coming of Age Under China's One-Child Policy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 10.

early 1990s, as the central government began to dismantle the formerly centralized, planned economy, Western-style management techniques were established to replace the radical egalitarianism of the era of Mao Zedong.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, “foreign investment and an export-oriented economy have led to explosive economic growth and exponential rises in urban standards for living.”<sup>8</sup> Since the completion of the port, Dalian has well utilized its favorable geographic position and convenient transportation advantages to attract foreign investment and engage in globalization. Titled “Northern Hong Kong,” Dalian has ranked as the second most populous urban area in Liaoning Province since 1999.

I choose urban Dalian as my research location mainly for two reasons. First of all, urban Dalian is the city where the one-child policy has been well implemented despite the constantly changing socioeconomic context. Dalian’s local government focused substantial efforts on propagating and implementing the one-child policy.<sup>9</sup> Urban Dalian parents’ various circumstances in accepting the policy and addressing the policy provide a representative case study for understanding the consequences of the one-child policy in urban China. Furthermore, the one-child families in urban Dalian have immediately experienced rapid changes in socioeconomic conditions that have greatly influenced their child-rearing practices and other family strategies. The majority of the one-child families have developed their own insights into and personal attitude towards the one-child-family life and the one-child policy. Secondly, Dalian is my hometown where I have lived for

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<sup>7</sup> Maurice Meisner, *The Deng Xiaoping Era: An Inquiry into the Fate of Chinese Socialism* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1996).

<sup>8</sup> Gordon White, *Riding the Tiger: The Politics of Economic Reform in Post-Mao China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993).

<sup>9</sup> For more details, see Dalian Population Website. <http://www.dlrk.dl.gov.cn/> (accessed 2005)



nearly 24 years. There is no other Chinese city I am more acquainted with than Dalian. So, Dalian was my first choice for conducting my research based on its own socioeconomic and demographic characteristics and my personal familiarity with the city and its population.

### Methodological Consideration

Based on my personal experience with Dalian and as the only daughter of a single-child family, I focused on the one-child policy by developing and conducting interviews with a number of one-child parents and single children of the post-1980s generation. The informants for my thesis included three types of persons. First of all, schoolmates and friends are the major source of interviewees for my thesis. All of them are from one-child families in urban Dalian. Most of them are from the 1980s generation. The interviews with them were in some instances quite informal. Some of their insights about their one-child-family life and the one-child policy came from our daily conversations and communications. Secondly, I conducted more formal and focused research from June to August in 2008 in urban Dalian by interviewing urban Dalian one-child parents. The questions asked of each one-child parent interviewee were as follows: (1) What do you think about the one-child policy?; (2) What are your strategies of raising your only child? Do you have specific plans or child-rearing practices?; (3) The public often critiques that one-child parents over-indulge in investing in their only children. What is your opinion about it this statement?; (4) What expectations do you have concerning your child?; and (5) Do you worry about your elderly life? About what

aspects do you worry the most?

In addition to the interviews, I also spent a couple of hours a day visiting one-child families to observe their daily life. The observation process is not directly reflected in my thesis. However, the experience enlightened me and helped further develop my ideas for the thesis. Furthermore, I also used some other research methods to conduct my collection of examples. For example, I collected various blogs and discussions from online forums concerning the topic of the one-child policy. During the process of reviewing these Internet resources, sometimes I took part in the discussions which further developed my thought and evaluation processes.

My own position as a single-child was also helpful to me in conducting the research and developing this project. As I mentioned previously, I was born a single daughter in urban Dalian and have lived for 24 years in that city. My life as a single daughter gives me a lot of insight into the one-child family and life of the post-1980s generation. In my thesis, I also use my own experiences to explore the consequences of the one-child policy influencing one-child families in urban Dalian.

### About the Study

Previous studies of China's one-child policy have been focused mostly on the demographic effects of the policy.<sup>10</sup> In my thesis, I pay more attention to the personal impacts through an ethnographic study of the consequences of the one-child policy in

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<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Judith Banister, *China's Changing Population* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987). Griffith Feeney and Yuan Jianhua, "Below Replacement Fertility in China? A Close Look at Recent Evidence," *Population Studies* 48 (1994, no.3): 297-322. Li Jiali, "China's One-Child Policy: How and How Well Has It Worked? A Case Study of Hebei Province, 1979-88," *Population and Development Review* 21 (1995, no.3): 563-585.

urban Dalian. I focus on various circumstances of how the one-child policy influences Dalian's one-child families' everyday life and how the one-child families address the birth limited policy, from both the parents' and the single children's perspectives. Besides, focusing on one-child mothers' multiple roles and their empowered daughters in urban Dalian, I pay special attention to the gender norms that have been changed by the one-child policy. I try to provide answers the following questions: How do one-child parents in urban Dalian accept the one-child policy? How do they adjust their child-rearing practices in response to the national birth-limited policy? From the single children's perspective, how does the one-child policy affect the aging population care system of contemporary China?

Chapter II explores one-child parents' philosophy in living with the one-child policy. After analyzing the reasons for urban Dalian parents' ability to accept the one-child policy, I examine how parents have adjusted their child-rearing practices compared to traditional practices. To raise their only children, one-child parents invest a lot of time and financial resources to raise "the perfect" one child. On one hand, they try their best to give their only children good material lives. On the other hand, one-child parents expect to raise only perfect children and thus put a lot of time and attention to helping their children gain good academic achievements. In light of the heavy investments in their children, I pay attention to the multiple roles of urban one-child mothers and examine how the policy influences their family and social lives. Furthermore, as the socioeconomic conditions change and globalization becomes more prominent, foresighted urban parents have begun to adopt Western child-rearing practices, and some

parents send their children to study abroad to increase their competitive ability in the current and future global job market.

Chapter III focuses on the first generation of single children growing up under the one-child policy. The one-child policy has provided both advantages and disadvantages for the post-1980s generation of single children. By exploring their school life and family life, I find that through receiving good parental care and a heavy investment from their parents, a majority of the post-1980s generation live a good material life. However, they also experience extremely stressful school lives as they compete to enter the better schools of higher education. Compared to previous multiple-children families, urban single daughters, in particular, are experiencing increased advantages from the one-child policy. They are empowered in both families and the society to be more independent and build their careers. Furthermore, in this chapter I also pay attention to other distinctive characteristics of the post-1980s generation and the social discourses of this generation.

Chapter IV focuses on the crucial social issue of caring for an aging population. Examining the social context, I explore several issues confronted by the post-1980s generation in caring for their elderly parents and grandparents. Lacking the support from social pensions and the health care system, the only children often feel stress under the one-child family structure in which the only child is faced with caring for two parents and four grandparents (“four-two-one problem”). Furthermore, in addition to the lacking availability of financial resources, children’s heartfelt desire to fulfill their filial duty often conflicts with the fact that only children usually live separately from their parents. In those cases, one-child parents in urban Dalian face the challenges and uncertainties of

living their elderly lives without guarantees, for health and wealth. They have to rely on their own material resources and emotional stability to lead a meaningful life in an advanced age.

CHAPTER II  
FAMILY PLANNING AND NEW PARENTING PHILOSOPHY

One-Child Family: Fertility Norms

Acceptance and Child-Rearing Practice Adjustment

*Urban Parents: Accepting Birth Control*

Shortly after implementation of the one-child policy in 1978, the state had thoroughly succeeded in assuming authority over the family decisions in the city districts of urban China.<sup>11</sup> Various evidence including statistics and cultural analysis prove that urban families more easily accept and practice the one-child policy than rural parents.<sup>12</sup> Although various fertility preferences are expressed by individuals, the new fertility norms have been widely accepted by urban parents. The acceptance has also occurred in urban Dalian. Among the city districts, nearly all the families have only one child since the one-child policy implementation.

Many factors should be considered when we ask why the urban couples accept the family planning limited to one child. The real circumstances are complex, including social, political, and cultural factors. In the following part, I will try to generalize several crucial factors that influence the acceptance of fertility control in urban Dalian.

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<sup>11</sup> Cecilia Nathansen Milwertz, *Accepting Population Control: Urban Chinese Women and the One-Child Family Policy*. (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 1997): 6.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example: Cecilia Nathansen Milwertz, *Accepting Population Control: Urban Chinese Women and the One-Child Family Policy* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 1997). Elisabeth Croll, Delia Davin, and Penny Kane, *China's One-Child Family Policy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985).

First of all, associated with the progress of legislation of the one-child policy, the propaganda of the Chinese government has made great efforts to promote the acceptance of the fertility norms among city districts. On one hand, the government has included the one-child policy in many forms of legislation. For example, in 1978, family planning was added to the Constitution of China with the statement “the state advocates and encourages birth planning” (Article 5). In the revised 1982 Constitution birth planning was again featured with a stronger statement: “The state promotes birth planning in order to achieve compatibility between population and socioeconomic development” (Chapter I, Article 25).<sup>13</sup> Then, in the 1980 revision of the Marriage Law, couples were required to take responsibility in fulfilling the duty of practicing birth planning. The legislation makes it compulsory for Chinese families to accept the one-child policy. In other words, whatever they think of it, they are legislatively required to practice the policy.

On the other hand, the government has also successfully propagated the new fertility norm as a way to support national development. Popular slogans during the early period of the policy implementation could be seen almost anywhere. For example, “the production increases while the population decreases” (*sheng chan gao shang qu ren kou jiang xia lai*); “give birth to fewer children and plant more trees if you want to be rich” (*yao zhi fu shao sheng hai zi duo zhong shu*); “late marriage, late child-rearing; fewer births, quality births” (*wan hun wan yu shao sheng you sheng*). Supporting the campaign, each city has a family planning service office focused on publicity and education; and every resident's committee has a member responsible for propagating birth control

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<sup>13</sup> The translation of these citations of the Constitution refers to: Cecilia Nathansen Milwertz, *Accepting Population Control: Urban Chinese Women and the One-Child Family Policy* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 1997): 5.

education. As a result, many urban couples formulate the opinion that to have only one child is a practical way to help construct the country. Mrs. Wang, a 24-year-old girl's mother, told me:

As the saying goes, the coin has always two sides. It is obvious that the one-child policy has both advantages and disadvantages. However, from the perspective of our nation, the population has been already very large, and the trend will be larger and larger if no measure is taken. If the number of the population exceeds the tolerance of the natural environment, how can the nation develop in the future? So I believe that we have only one child in our family is a benefit advantage for our nation.<sup>14</sup>

In my interviews, I noticed that a number of my parental interviewees shared this opinion and they accepted the one-child policy because they want to support their country to develop industrialization and modernization. Many of them were highly educated with college degrees as the vanguards of contributing to building a new China, these young parents believe that the development of the country has much to do with population control. To respond to the call of their motherland, they accepted the one-child policy that seemed a promising means of contributing to economic progress. Actually, not all citizens have such a so called high-level social consciousness, a number of Dalian citizens refuse the one-child policy from the bottom of their hearts mainly due to tradition. However, since China is a group-oriented or collective society, Chinese people are encouraged and expected to accept that collective interests are always a priority over individual interests. As a result, when family planning was implemented, they accepted this policy and took the appropriate action. 49-year-old father of a son, Mr. Liu, who complains about the birth planning, responded, "Nonetheless [although I disagree with birth planning], it is

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<sup>14</sup> Mrs. Wang, interview conducted in July 2008 in Dalian.



the national policy. What else could I do other than obeying it?"

Secondly, in the changes of the socioeconomic context, women have been given more opportunities to promote their social status and to enter the workforce after the foundation of the People's Republic of China. Hill Gates observes that urban Chinese women who own substantial capital in a household business are likely to use it to lower their own fertility.<sup>15</sup> Some urban Chinese women have begun to have their own careers and are becoming more economically independent. They have much more freedom in choosing their fertility planning. As they need to put much energy into their jobs, most of the 'petty-capitalist' women prefer to support the one-child policy.<sup>16</sup> In Dalian, a port city that has experienced many advantages in developing modernization and industrialization after the implementation of the "reform and opening" policy, a number of aggressive urban Dalian women have strived for their own careers and have achieved respectable success.

Given their success, they are encouraged to negotiate over the fertility planning. In fact, before the implementation of the one-child policy, some women had already developed an opinion in support of lowering fertility. Fifty-six-year-old Mrs. Zhu, who manages her own bookstore, gave her opinion on birth planning and the one-child policy:

My mother was a typical housewife who gave birth to six children. She was doubtlessly a great mother. However, as I see it, she played only the role of mother during most of her life. I do not want to be 'another her'. It makes me feel that I have to be nothing but a child-bearing machine. I am not saying that I do not want to be a mother. I just want more time to do what I am interested in. So when I

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<sup>15</sup> Hill Gates, "Cultural Support for Birth Limitation among Urban Capital-owning Women," in *Chinese Families in the Post-Mao Era*. ed. Davis Deborah, and Stevan Harrell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993): 251-274.

<sup>16</sup> Hill Gates, "Cultural Support for Birth Limitation among Urban Capital-owning Women," in *Chinese Families in the Post-Mao Era*. ed. Davis Deborah, and Stevan Harrell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993): 251-274.

learned about the one-child policy, I accepted it with little hesitation. There have always been many controversies about the policy. From my perspective, it gives some new opportunities for women to somehow escape from the traditional roles. Now I have my career, and my only daughter is studying in the United Kingdom. I am happy with my life.

In general, some urban women are willing to accept the one-child policy due to their socioeconomic conditions. Since women play an extremely significant role in accepting the family planning and managing the consequences of the one-child policy, I will give a further analysis on the multiple roles of women in the following part of this chapter.

Economic incentives and other forms of rewards also encourage urban parents to accept and practice fertility control. To consolidate the one-child policy, the government also formulates a series of policies to encourage married couples to have only one child. In Dalian, a certain amount of bonus is claimed to be given to the family with only one child and necessary assistance is claimed to be granted to the parents with only child when they retire in line with local conditions. With the economic incentives, urban parents prefer to accept birth planning rather than refuse it. In fact, the measures of economic incentives are practiced in many areas throughout the country. In Shaanxi Province, one-child families can enjoy a host of material benefits, including their children's priority in admission to kindergarten and school and other benefits.<sup>17</sup> The local government of Dalian also honors married couples who have volunteered to have one child with a "One-Child Certificate (*du sheng zi nü fu mu guang rong zheng*).” According to the statistics of the Dalian Commission for Population and Family Planning, in 1994, a total of 612,700 couples were granted the "Certificate of Glory of Parents Having One

<sup>17</sup> See, for more details, Susan Greenhalgh, "The Peasantization of the One-Child Policy in Shaanxi," in *Chinese Families in the Post-Mao Era*, ed. Davis, Deborah, and Stevan Harrell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993): 238.

Child” throughout Dalian, accounting for 73.21 percent of the total of all one-child couples.<sup>18</sup>

*Adjusting Child-Rearing Practice: Cultivating the Perfect One Child*

Accepting the one-child policy, the one-child parents adjust their child-rearing practices. In general, urban parents practice their child rearing in two categories of objectives. First of all, they take care of children’s physical conditions and provide them with the daily necessities, school supplies, entertainment and other opportunities related to maintain their children’s material life. Besides, in terms of family-based education, parents supervise and tutor the children with their after-class study; parents accompany children with their games and other entertainment especially when children are of a very young age; parents observe and cultivate children’s personal interests and help further develop their interests, for example, parents bring their children to the specific institutions to study art, dance, or calligraphy; parents take care of the children’s psychological health and guide them to develop their own personality; parents help children with socialization (for example, figure 1 and figure 2).

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<sup>18</sup> I collected the data from Dalian Annual of 1994.



**Figure 1.** This father brought his daughter to Dalian Xinghai Square and explains the history of Dalian to his daughter. The paves with the foot prints the father pointing to contained the foot prints of Dalian celebrities who made great efforts to the development of the city. (taken by Bingjiang Hou, May 03, 2007)



**Figure 2.** The girl and her neighbor-the little baby were brought out of home and joined in the people to celebrate the success of 2008 Beijing Olympics

in the weekend. The Chinese flag held in the girl's hand reads: "Go for it! China!" The girl and the little baby were both from the one-child families. (taken by Binjiang Hou, June 2008)

One-child families adopt different child-rearing practices compared to the traditional Chinese families in many aspects. In his work of *Family Dynamics in China: A Life Table Analysis*, Zeng Yi points out that in "the People's Republic of China, [is] a typical non-western society in which the family, based on marriage, blood, or adoption, is still the fundamental unit of social organization and will remain so for the foreseeable future."<sup>19</sup> After the implementation of the one-child policy, family size and family type have been greatly changed in urban China in particular. The family size has become much smaller. The family type shifted greatly from three-generation families (including one-person families) to nuclear families (including one-person families). According to Zeng Yi's research, the proportions of nuclear families and three-generation families are 81.1% and 18.9% respectively with reference to the 1982 census.<sup>20</sup> The different family sizes and family types result in different child-rearing practices. In nuclear families, since parents and children live separately from their elder family members, their child-rearing practices are not restricted to the traditional values and traditional patterns of behavior. Consequently, as a development of modern Chinese society, one-child families share more scientific child-rearing practices which rely on scientific development, medical equipment and medical progress not only in costume, cuisine, shelter, transportation, consuming, and entertainment, but also in the means of educating their children. For

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<sup>19</sup> Zeng Yi, *Family Dynamics in China: A Life Table Analysis* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991): xix.

<sup>20</sup> Zeng, Yi. *Family Dynamics in China: A Life Table Analysis* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991): 133-134.

example, traditional child-rearing practices were mainly handed down by word of mouth from the elder mothers to the younger mothers while in contemporary Dalian, the new mothers learn the child-rearing practices from modern transmission channels such as TV programs, speech given by the professions, and relative manuals and books. Second, traditional child-rearing practices mainly based on ancestors' experience which came from the practices in real life while the modern ones are general based on scientific research. Furthermore, traditional child-rearing practices are basically individual behaviors while in contemporary Dalian developing scientific child-rearing practices is becoming a popular topic. Factories produce specialized products to support the child-rearing practices, for example, baby buggies and baby eating utensils. Mass media such as television station and broadcasting station produce program to teach parents the scientific child-rearing practices and western child-rearing practices. Nowadays, the specialized training institutions to train qualified mothers become more and more popular. Urban mothers are eager to learn more scientific methods to better rear their children. In urban Dalian, the Dalian Commission for Population and Family Planning plays a significant role in promoting modern and scientific child-rearing practices in the society. Every community center has family planning social workers to propagate scientific methods of child-rearing practices such as scientific diet for babies and children throughout the neighborhood and educate pregnant women and new mothers with health education after giving birth for babies. In my research, many Dalian women prefer to use the scientific rearing practices they have learned from the community center and child-rearing books. A mother told me: "Since I can have only one child, I cannot bear

any mistake in rearing him. Contemporary child-rearing practices are based on scientific theories and research, which I believe are more reliable. The traditional ones just rely on experience, which makes me feel unsafe.”

In addition, the roles of parents have changed in one-child families. In traditional Chinese families, parents had absolute authority. They were the managers of their children. Filial piety was the first virtue and doctrine children had to learn. As a result, in traditional families, there was a strict hierarchy between parents and children. Children have to obey their parents without speaking out their thought. In contemporary one-child families, the strict hierarchy does not exist any longer between parents and the only child. According to my interviews, urban Dalian children can speak whatever they think in their families. They also quarrel with their parents occasionally, which could hardly happen in feudal families. Li Lulu (not her actual name), 19-year-old single daughter of her family, often told me that she quarreled with her parents. She said: “I often quarrel with my parents about many things. Yesterday they didn’t allow me to go out after 20:00pm in the evening, I quarreled with them. A week ago my father said that I spent too much time reading scientific fictions, I quarreled with him.” Besides taking responsibility of child rearing, parents take the role of “friends” and “siblings” with their children. In urban Dalian, many parents share the experience of playing games with their children. Moreover, the traditional role of parents being the educators has also changed in one-child families. Parents are still educators; however, they take this responsibility much more specifically. Mrs. Wang recalled her experience when her daughter was in primary school:

Every night I sat beside her to supervise her to do the homework. After she finished it, I went over her work with it and corrected it for her. A quiz about her daily studies is our routine. Thus I can check her level of progress. Every weekend, I escorted her to the 'Olympic Math' class. By doing so, I could also learn what my child learned. If she did not quite get the knowledge in class, I could teach her at home.<sup>21</sup>

One-child parents actively take part in children's studies. Many of them learn together with their children, and then teach and supervise their children. In the frequent and various interactions between parents and children, the strict hierarchy between the elders and the young is not very obvious any more.

One-child parents' strategies for cultivating a perfect child reveal imbalance in several aspects. First, there is the intense imbalance between low fertility and heavy parental investment. Since the urban economic situation and urban people's living condition have been improved over the years, and the number of the children has greatly decreased, parents' pressure in rearing children was supposed to be reduced or alleviated. However, the social reality has not followed this path. One-child parents bear a heavy burden in rearing their only child to become a successful member of society. Although China's economy has maintained growth in recent years, a large number of urban families live just an ordinary life and are only making ends meet. Since all of the parents want to give their children the best material life, they may face the problem of limited funds and limited energy. The average per capita wage in Dalian is about \$220 per month. However, the wages are not compatible with the rapidly increasing level of consumption, and the increases in expenses involved. The costs for children to get to high school and college are increasing constantly. Parents have to deposit savings into an education fund in

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<sup>21</sup> Mrs Wang is the 24-year-old girl mother who also appeared in *Urban Parents: Accepting Birth Control*: 11.



addition to their regular savings in the family budget. To this point in China's history, a large number of families admit that they can in reality only afford one child. Their economic situation would not allow them to have more than one child.<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, the reality that they have only one child drives them to increase their investment to rear the "perfect one child". The desire for parents to give all the best stuff to their single children and educate them to become the best able persons for the future society drives or even forces parents to put much investment into child rearing: financially, physically, and psychologically. This desire sometimes becomes a burden on their shoulders. One mother expressed:

Only rearing one child has already made me feel overly stressed. In the society, I am busy with my work. In the family, I am even busier with my son. All parents exhaust their bag of tricks in their attempts to cultivate their children to become the top of the peers. I can not bear that my child falls behind. However, I do not bear with another child. One is enough.

Second, one-child parents provide a high quality of material life for the single children and focus less on their spiritual development. In his famous report of *Zhongguo de "Xiao Huangdi,"* Han Yi argues two main issues occurring with a large number of single children: over-nutrition and mal-education.<sup>23</sup> Many single children are served with too much elaborate food which exceeds the degree at which they can absorb and digest what they are offered. Besides, some parents do spoil their children. They cannot bear to refuse their children snacks, drinks, and high-calorie-foods. Many observers warn that Chinese children are growing too fat. As a result, parents with good intentions for raising

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<sup>22</sup> Cecilia Nathansen Milwertz, *Accepting Population Control: Urban Chinese Women and the One-Child Family Policy* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 1997): 124.

<sup>23</sup> Han Yi 韩逸. *Zhongguo de "Xiao Huangdi"* 中国的“小皇帝” (*Chinese Little Emperors*) (China, 1986).

their children very healthily are creating situations that will harm their children eventually. Referring to education, Han Yi employs the term “mal-education” to argue that one-child parents do not engage enough to cultivate the single children’s characteristics and traditional virtues while they put too much energy into improving their children’s school performance. Among my interviewees, some parents observed that their children perform outstandingly in their studies but behave egoistically and rudely at home or even in public. One woman whose son is a freshman at the Dalian University of Technology, the best university in Dalian, told me that she washes her son’s clothes every weekend because her son has never washed clothes himself. However, the woman believes that there is nothing wrong with her son. “He should spend all his time studying,” she responded, “That’s why he can enter the best university.”

Referring to the “perfect child,” many parents seem to have a very ambiguous definition. However, there are some points with which most of the parents agree. First, the children must have a healthy body and a smart brain. Second, a perfect child means an outstanding student who performs very well in his or her studies at a measurable level and consequently will be competitive in the future job market. In their child-rearing practices, one-child parents try their best to give their children a rich material world in their life and do very well in promoting their children’s academic performance. However, on the other hand, many of them take less care of or even neglect the molding of their children’s personality. Since the parents of the first generation of single children have siblings, they themselves lack the experience of being single when they grew up. Furthermore, many parents see the goals of the national policy simply in an instrumental

perspective, so they invest too much energy into children's achievement in school and exams and observe their growth of personality and mentality with less rigor. As a result, many parents feel that it is difficult to understand their children's perceptions and way of thinking. The lack of constant communication leaves many parents with the concern: "I do not know what my son is thinking!" When they find children sometimes behave disobediently, some parents cannot think of other strategies than simply spanking their children to force them to realize their mistakes. Especially during children's adolescence, the gap of mutual understanding between parents and children grows increasingly and threatens the harmony between family members.

In general, urban Dalian one-child parents have shifted their child-rearing practices under the national policy and the new socioeconomic conditions. Their child-rearing practices have been adjusted to fit the new family type and the national policy, and in the meantime contain many contradictions and potential threats. Vanessa L. Fong examines this issue in a broader context. She points out that China's government propagated the one-child policy in order to produce a generation of citizens with First World levels of living standards. However, Dalian parents try their best to provide their children with a First World material life, while they fail to promote their children with First World cultural models.<sup>24</sup> Parents are alarmed by the poor fit between their single children' Developed World cultural models and their Developing World families and society.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Vanessa L. Fong, *Only Hope: Coming of Age Under China's One-Child Policy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004): 178.

<sup>25</sup> Vanessa L. Fong, *Only Hope: Coming of Age Under China's One-Child Policy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004): 178.

## Multiple Roles of One-Child Mothers

### *A One-Child Mother's Day*

Mrs. Yu Guihua is a 50-year-old urban Dalian woman who has a son aged 25.<sup>26</sup> She had worked as an officer in a state-owned enterprise for almost 20 years. Three years ago, her son graduated from Dalian Marine University and got a well paid job in a foreign trade company. Then Mrs. Yu quit her job with the state-owned enterprise and started a small beauty parlor. She recalled her memory of her everyday life when her son was in middle school and high school, the hardest time for Chinese students as they prepare themselves to be admitted to the universities:

My day started at five-thirty in the morning. After preparing breakfast for the whole family, I called my son to get up at six o'clock. Sending him to take a wash and have his meal, I tidied up his bed and sometimes checked his school bag to make sure that he didn't forget anything important, for example, homework and textbooks. After saying goodbye to my son, I had to rush to prepare my own stuff and leave the house before seven-twenty. At eight o'clock, my work started. My job was not difficult but very trivial. It needed me to use much patience and be very careful. At five o'clock in the afternoon, I ended my work in the office and took the bus home. However, I continued working with my housework: cooking the dinner for the family, washing the clothes of the whole family, and keeping our house clean. Sometimes my husband helped me with some housework. But most of the housework was still done by me. I understood him. His work was more onerous with more pressure. After dinner, I accompanied and supervised my son's homework. I didn't watch TV very often. For one reason our apartment was very small at that time. I didn't want to interrupt my son in his studies. Moreover, I gave my energy to my son's studies most of the evenings. When it was about eleven o'clock, I sent him to go to sleep. Then I took a wash and went to bed. That was my everyday life.

On the weekends, I often bought the daily necessities for the next week. Sometimes the family visited my parents or my parents-in-law and got together with other relatives. When my son was in middle school, I accompanied him to his math and English tutorials. But when he was in high school, I didn't do it anymore because he had school on Saturdays and only got Sunday for taking a rest.

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<sup>26</sup> Yu Guihua, interview conducted in August 2008.

“After my son entered the university, the burden of my routine seemed lighter because he lived in the school dormitory and just lived at home during the weekends. My routines have been my own job and housework since then. And I have more free time for myself.” Mrs. Yu added, “[Although he has a good job now,] I still worry about him, for example, whether he can take care of himself while he lives separately from us [my husband and me], and his future marriage.”

Mrs. Yu’s portrait of her everyday life is representative for the majority of urban Dalian one-child mothers. From her narrative, we can generalize that one-child mothers play multiple roles in their family life as well as their social life: they are mothers, wives, social and industrial workers such as employers and employees.<sup>27</sup> What do urban Dalian women feel about the multiple duties in their lives? Does the one-child policy somehow influence women’s roles? Does the one-child policy actually lighten the burden for the one-child mothers or simplify the life of them? In this section, I will try to answer these questions based on interviews and research done in urban Dalian. I will also analyze how several social work efforts focused on Chinese women and the one-child policy influence women’s lives.

### *Multiple Roles of One-Child Mothers*

As is true for Mrs. Yu Guihua, the majority of urban Dalian women play multiple roles. In their families, they are wives and mothers. When going out and entering the society, they are members of social and work environments in ways similar to men.

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<sup>27</sup> Urban women also play the role of daughters in their family life, which also traditionally requires certain practices. Since extended family relationships are not part of my research subject, I do not refer to it here.

Being wives, urban women take responsibility for looking after their homes. One of the major home-based duties is doing housework. In contemporary Chinese society, although it is claimed by many husbands that housework is shared by couples, it is still, in reality, considered the obligation of wives. Mr. Li, Yu Guihua's husband, told me: "I often help my wife with her housework." During my research, I noticed that the majority of husbands use the term "help" in illustrating their duties in housework. One man explained: "The traditional opinion of 'the woman looks after the house while the man goes out to work' is still prevailing in contemporary Chinese society. Although the majority of [urban] women have gone out of the home to do their jobs, it is still widely accepted that it is women's duty to look after their houses." Related to and in agreement with men's perspective, many women who are dominant by the traditional values share the opinion that it is their responsibility to do most of the housework. It is not only their duties as wives but also a practical way to support their husbands' ability to concentrate on their careers and raise their whole families. One woman responded: "My husband's income is higher than mine and is the major source of my family. He works very hard everyday and I don't want to bother him with the housework after he is off work coming back home. Besides, men should focus on their careers. I am willing to render support in any ways to help him in promoting his work."

As Melwertz argued, women assume responsibility for the bulk of practical domestic chores to provide harmony in the family, sacrificing their time and interest for the sake of their husbands' jobs and their children's education.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Cecilia Nathansen Milwertz, *Accepting Population Control: Urban Chinese Women and the One-Child Family Policy* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 1997): 170.

In a previous section, I discussed one-child parents' child-rearing practices. In fact, according to my research, most of the child-rearing practices are undertaken and practiced by women in urban Dalian. A large number of women also consider it to be their greatest responsibility to raise their children. As Yu Guihua said, "After I gave birth to my son, individually and socially, I felt like it was my biggest responsibility to rear him well. All in all, I am a mother. I must take the duties of the role." Besides taking care of their children's material life, urban women also play a role as educators of their children. Compared to men, women are much closer to their children physically and psychologically, they spend much more time with their children than one-child fathers in their families.<sup>29</sup> Consequently, they are granted important roles as educators and often start children's education when they are babies. The education provided by mothers not only refers to intellectual enlightenment such as teaching children to talk, to recognize characters, and to write, but also includes children's moral development. In fact, it is tradition that women are educators in Chinese society. In her work of *Chinese Views of Childhood*, Anne Behnke Kinney closely examines the role of mothers portrayed in classic works and notices that mothers from the Han Dynasty practiced as educators in many ways and aspects including fetal instruction, intellectual enlightenment, and moral development.<sup>30</sup> In contemporary China, it is still women's duty to educate their children

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<sup>29</sup> An important social phenomenon should not be neglected here. Due to busy jobs, there are also many one-child mothers who leave their babies or little children to the children's grandparents for several months or even for a longer time. This is also one of the various consequences of the one-child policy. In the one-child family, the only child is usually cared for two parents and four grandparents. When the parents are too busy with their paid jobs to take care of the children, they probably turn to their parents for help. The majority of grandparents are willing to have their grandsons and granddaughters around them. As a result, some children do be raised by their grandparents for sometime during their childhood. This kind of practice is supported by the one-child policy under which small families are produced.

<sup>30</sup> Anne Behnke Kinney, *Chinese Views of Childhood* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1995): 26-27.

in family-based education. Since women play such important roles in rearing children, they are judged about their qualities on mothers in both their families and by society. This judgment of their competence is one of the reasons why urban Dalian women invest so much energy and financial resources in their children. The thought of being a good mother greatly drives them to adopt the family strategy of cultivating a perfect only-child in response to the one-child policy. Yu Guihua responded:

When I talk with my friends who are also mothers, the most popular topic is always our kids: Whose son gets the first place in the exam, whose daughter begins to learn to dance, and even whose kid looks the cutest. All of us try to raise the best child. All of us are eager to be the best mothers. In fact, we are competing with each other in terms of our kids. It sounds naïve. However, it gives a feeling of pride when you are praised as a good mother. For me, it is even the biggest praise in being a woman.

When shifting the workplace from home to society, women are now directly participating in social construction. The majority of women who participated in my interviews had jobs for pay outside their homes. However, they had various opinions about their social roles of being workers or employees compared with their family roles of being wives and mothers. Some women insisted that having jobs was necessary for them. Yu Guihua said: “It is my interest [to open up a beauty parlor]. You know, the time is changing. Women can have interests and dreams. If we are capable to do it, we do it. In fact, I feel a great sense of accomplishment when I can manage my career. It makes me become younger again. I need it.” Mrs Xia, who is an English teacher in a middle school and the mother of a 20-year-old girl, talked about her opinion of women’s roles:

It is widely claimed that women are holding half the sky (*fu nü neng ding ban bian tian*) in contemporary China. As I interpret it, it is not just a popular slogan. It should be practiced in the real life setting. How could women hold half the sky? Sitting at home and only looking after the families is far away from enough. Women should be independent at the first step. Being independent means we can support



ourselves financially and emotionally on our own... The way to achieve independence is to have our job in the society. Women should play the roles in society, which can keep them with the development of the time and avoid being eliminated. I believe women should have their own jobs.

In my interviews, most of the women who had jobs tended to equate their social role with self-determination. Many of them saw the big opportunities of being self-determined as directly connected to their being able to enter the workforce and thus the society.

On the other side, a large number of women did not respond positively to the idea of having jobs outside the home. Instead, they complained about the heavy burden of having the dual roles. "It is too difficult to manage taking care of my family while doing well in my job at the same time. Of course I can do what I want to do now, however, either family issues or my job can use all of my energy. Sometimes I just feel exhausted," one woman confessed. Yu Guihua also admitted that it was after her son was in the university that she could regain her energy and began to think of having her own career. Since each family is restricted to have one child, the one-child policy was supposed to liberate women from the burden of raising several children. However, during my research, I found out that many one-child mothers felt a great pressure in rearing their only child. On one hand, as I mentioned previously, being a good mother is one of the most important aspects how families judge whether a woman is a good mother and wife. The same perspective is taken by society, too. So the women are driven to cultivate a perfect child without considering any cost. On the other hand, since the family can have just one child, any mistake in child-rearing practices must be prohibited to ensure the perfect only child. With only one opportunity to prove themselves in their domestic role as mothers,

women may feel very pressured in rearing an only-child. They do not only hold up half of the sky since the slogan pertains only for their role as productive members of the workforce. Their contribution is in fact much higher in their lives, the role as mother or the role in the family.

When it comes to the question of what role women consider as most important, I find that the majority of women chose to fulfill the role of being mothers prior to other social roles. Many of them think that good women should be “virtuous wives and good mothers (*xian qi liang mu*)” more than being good social workers or employees.



**Figure 3.** The mother called off a work day to escort her son the College Entrance Examination. (taken by Binjiang Hou, June 2006)

### *Judgment of Women: Virtuous Wives and Good Mothers*

In the traditional patriarchy system, women were submissive with little

self-determination in feudal China.<sup>31</sup> They were required to and cultivated obeying three obediences and four virtues (*san cong si de*).<sup>32</sup> In the perspectives from the family and the society, women considered their first obligation to bear children, especially sons, to continue the family line for their husbands' families. Besides, women were forbidden to go outside of the home to take up paid work. As a result, ideal women were those who practiced as "good mothers and virtuous wives (*xian qi liang mu*).” To be good mothers, women had to give birth to boys to continue the family line, and then practice proper child-rearing practices to take good care of the children. To be virtuous wives, they had to be obedient to their husbands and manage their households efficiently. When women entered social life and the workforce in the beginning of Republican times, this was considered a great transformation that changed women's roles and promoted women's social status. Since the People's Republic of China was founded, the government has taken a series of measures to promote women's social status and to change women's roles, including providing them opportunities for education and encouraging them to participated in society by entering the workplace. In contemporary China, the majority of urban women fulfill the basic roles of being wives, mothers, and social industrial workers. According to my research, although women serve in these various functions, the judgment about women has not been changed a lot. The “virtuous wife and good mother” is still the popular and prevailing norm for

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<sup>31</sup> See, for example, Maria Jaschok and Suzanne Miers, *Women and Chinese Patriarchy: Submission, Servitude, and Escape* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1994).

<sup>32</sup> The three obediences (*san cong*) refer to obeying her father before marriage, her husband when married, and her sons in widowhood; and the four virtues (*si de*) refer to morality, proper speech, modest manner, and diligent work of women in feudal Chinese society.

women to practice. But the interpretation of a “virtuous wife and good mother” has experienced shift compared to the traditional one. A 49-year-old mother who considered herself qualified as a “virtuous wife and good mother,” gave the following interpretation of the concept:

From my perspective, a ‘virtuous wife and good mother’ should take good care of the whole family. She should be able to keep the whole family’s harmony and living comfortably. Besides, she should support her husband with his career and take the responsibility to raise her kid healthy and educate her kid well. These goals are similar to traditional values. However, women nowadays have more self-determination in many ways. We no longer need to obey the so called three obediences and four virtues. In my own case, I manage my family strategy independently. When facing some crucial decisions, I will discuss them with my husband. He truly respects my suggestions. To this degree, I think today’s women are different from the traditional women in the family roles because today’s women are no longer submissive to their husbands. In general, they are equal with their husbands. The virtuous wife in today’s society doesn’t mean a submissive wife any more, but means a wife with a strong ability to well look after her home and the equality with husband in making decisions about family plans and strategies.

In recent years, there have been a lot of thoughts and debates on whether women should stay at home to take care of their child and family or keep their paid work in addition to their role as care-giver for the family. For example, in his work *Family Revolution*, Chen Gong brings forward this question.<sup>33</sup> He tries to provide an answer through concentrating on the topics of the development of the women’s liberation movement in China, the changes in family values, and the changes within the socioeconomic context since the foundation of the People’s Republic of China. The author argues that within the rapid changes of the socioeconomic context, people’s opinions of family values keep changing too. Since the outside

<sup>33</sup> Chen Gong 陈功, *Jiating Geming* 家庭革命 (Family Revolution) (Beijing: Zhongguo she hui ke xue chu ban she, 2000).

world is inspiring and the standard of living is improving, it is good for women to go outside of the home and to experience the variety of the possibilities of developing their own world view offered by society. However, it is also good for women who would like to focus on looking after their families to be able to do so without a paid job. The various opinions result in various choices made by women. From my perspective, I agree with Chen Gong that there is no universal answer. Different women make decisions depending on their different living circumstances and by their own standards. In realistic life setting, a large number of the one-child mothers have limited self-determination. The social class plays an important role in restricting women's choices. For example, a woman from a poor family has no choice but to get a paid job to support her family. However, although hard, Dalian urban women seem positive and active in addressing their multiple roles. In my interviews, more than half of the women expressed that they are trying their best to make a good balance between taking care of their families and pursuing their own careers.

#### Foresighted Parents: Raising a Globalized Child in Urban Dalian

In this chapter, I will address the issue of post-1980s children who are being raised with new aims and new methods adopted by their parents in urban Dalian. Looking into the new trends of child-rearing practice and family based education in recent years, I will examine how parents of one-child families and the post-1980s generation perceive and cope with China's rapidly changing social conditions. Based on several academic sources

and interviews of several parent couples, I will argue that both the context of globalization and the one-child policy greatly influence child-rearing practices and family strategies.

### *Harvard Girl Liu Yiting*

In 1999, Liu Yiting, an eighteen-year-old high school senior from Chengdu, was admitted by four reputable American colleges and universities, Harvard University and Columbia University included. After careful consideration, Liu Yiting accepted Harvard's offer and became the first Chinese student to be accepted as a full-fellowship undergraduate at Harvard. In August 2000, her parents, Zhang Xinwu and Liu Weihua published *Hafo Nūhai Liu Yiting*<sup>34</sup> which gives a comprehensive account of how they raised and educated their daughter as a highly qualified child. As soon as this book came out, it gained much attention from the public. By January 2007, it had been estimated to be sold nearly two million copies.<sup>35</sup> The surprising sales suggest that many parents in the cities were very eager to learn from the educational mode of *Raising a "Harvard Girl"*. What is more significant is that since Liu Yiting was born in 1981, the year in which the one-child policy was largely implemented, Liu Weihua's success with her daughter is seen as "an outstanding example of the first generation of mothers who responded to the

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<sup>34</sup> Liu Weihua 刘卫华 and Zhang Xinwu 张新武, *Hafo Nūhai Liu yiting* 哈佛女孩刘亦婷 (*Harvard Girl Liu Yiting*) (Beijing: Zuoja Chubanshe, 2000).

<sup>35</sup> I collected the estimated copies sold from: Zhang Shougang 张守刚, "Liu Yiting Moshi Zao Zhiyi" 刘亦婷模式遭质疑 (Model of Liu Yiting is Questioned), *Qianjiang Wanbao* 钱江晚报 (*Qianjiang Evening News*), November 19<sup>th</sup>, 2004, Education section.

state's call to lower the quantity and raise the quality of the new generation."<sup>36</sup>

As Liu Yiting's mother Liu Weihua claimed in the first page of her book, Liu Yiting's success was the outcome of detailed education plans. As soon as she conceived Liu Yiting, she was determined to raise her daughter "scientifically". What was her definition of "scientific"? Besides her practice of so called "education for quality," one clue that might lead to an answer lies in the book that Liu Weihua highly recommended: *Zaoqi Jiaoyu he Tiancai*, which introduced the famous story of the education of German wunderkind Karl Witte.<sup>37</sup> As Liu Weihua claims in the first chapter of her book, Karl Witte's father's views of child-rearing practices and family-based education guided her in raising her "Harvard daughter". Throughout her book, citations of Karl Witte's work were often introduced while she narrates her own child-rearing practices.

Besides the influence of western views of child-rearing practices, Liu Weihua focused on the training of Liu Yiting's time management and self-discipline to raise her child with high quality (*suzhi*). High quality, from Liu Weihua's perspective, contained the extraordinary study ability as well as excellence of all-rounded development. One point to manifest these extraordinary abilities was to be faster than the ordinary. Liu Weihua paid much attention to speed. According to Liu Weihua, she began to train her daughter's language ability when Liu Yiting was only fifteen days old. When Liu Yiting was one year old, Liu Weihua began to teach her daughter the first English sentence. At

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<sup>36</sup> T. E. Woronov, "Chinese Children, American Education: Globalizing Child Raring in Contemporary China," in *Generations and Globalization: Youth, Age, and Family in the New World Economy*, ed. Jennifer Cole and Deborah Durham (Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2007): 38.

<sup>37</sup> Kimura, Kyūichi, *Zaoqi Jiaoyu he Tiancai* 早期教育和天才 (*Early Education and the Genius*), (Hebei: Hebei ren min chu ban she, 1998).

the same time, Liu Weihua often compared her daughter to other children in their neighborhood to examine how fast Liu Yiting acquired different abilities. As Liu Weihua was devoted to stimulating and developing the various abilities and potential of her daughter, Liu Yiting acquired extraordinary knowledge and study skills when she was only three year old. She was even able to enter primary school at three years old, because of her acquired knowledge. As Woronov concluded, “speed is of the utmost importance” for Liu Weihua to educate her daughter.<sup>38</sup>

Although Liu Weihua claimed that she also emphasized on fostering her daughter’s other abilities such as social abilities, she was truly most devoted to her daughter’s school work. She established detailed study plans for Liu Yiting at every stage, from her primary school to her entering Harvard. Liu Yiting’s interests and favorites, such as food and sports, were instrumental for her mother’s training plans.<sup>39</sup> For example, Liu Weihua used Yiting’s favorite sport rope-skipping to teach her daughter to be persistent and self-discipline. She required Yiting to jump rope for an increasing number everyday so that little Yiting could learn perseverance. Liu Weihua also required her daughter to do so until Yiting was able to win the rope-skipping contest of her elementary school. In general, Liu Weihua is like the designer of her child’s life to regulate and control Liu Yiting’s time, activities and even her interests. The energy and effort devoted by Liu Weihua are as much as, or even more than the effort contributes from her daughter. T.E.

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<sup>38</sup> T. E. Woronov, “Chinese Children, American Education: Globalizing Child Raring in Contemporary China,” in *Generations and Globalization: Youth, Age, and Family in the New World Economy*, ed. Jennifer Cole and Deborah Durham (Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2007): 37.

<sup>39</sup> T. E. Woronov, “Chinese Children, American Education: Globalizing Child Raring in Contemporary China,” in *Generations and Globalization: Youth, Age, and Family in the New World Economy*, ed. Jennifer Cole and Deborah Durham (Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2007): 39.



Woronov considers Liu Weihua's rearing-child practice as a model for contemporary China's globalization: "the family as factory, and the parent as manager, rationally producing high-quality children."<sup>40</sup>

### *Class of Family and Heavy Parental Investments*

Liu Yiting's case is just a starting point of educational practices with new contents for the post-1980s generation. After Liu, more and more adolescents have gone out of the national gate and entered the Western world by applying to foreign universities with the encouragement and support of their parents. The popularity of this trend is astounding when considering how much students struggle with the various college entrance exams: GRE, GMAT, TOFEL, IELTS and IMT. Textbooks and guide-books for these exams, as well, are always among the best sellers in big book stores. It is estimated that the number of Chinese students studying abroad exceeded 200,000 in 2008, while the number in 2003 was less than 130,000.<sup>41</sup> Families of urban Dalian also associate with this trend. Famous overseas service companies in Dalian, such as Dalian Xinquan Science and Education Consulting Co. Ltd, are attended by nearly hundreds of parents per workday. Lectures on studying overseas given in Dalian University of Technology, Dalian Maritime University and other best universities of Dalian always attract parents accompanying their children to take part in.

<sup>40</sup> T. E. Woronov, "Chinese Children, American Education: Globalizing Child Raring in Contemporary China," in *Generations and Globalization: Youth, Age, and Family in the New World Economy*, ed. Jennifer Cole and Deborah Durham (Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2007): 39.

<sup>41</sup> The Data is collected from: "Yuji 08nian Zhongguo Chuguo Liuxue Renshu Youwang Tupo 20wan" 预计 08 年中国出国留学人数有望突破 20 万 (The Number of Chinese Studying Abroad Is Expected to Exceed 200,000), *Qingdao News Online*, March 6<sup>th</sup>, 2008, [http://www.qingdaonews.com/content/2008-03/06/content\\_7820395.htm](http://www.qingdaonews.com/content/2008-03/06/content_7820395.htm) (accessed March 6th, 2008)

However, not every parental couple holds the idea of sending their children to study abroad. According to my interview, most of those parents who are eager to plan their children's future across China's border are white-collars. They themselves received a high qualified education and are occupying good positions in the job market. Among my informants who have family plans of raising a "Harvard child", there are professors, journalists, engineers, managers and government officers. In other words, they represent the middle and the high social class of urban Dalian. On one hand, families of middle and high social class may afford the heavy financial investment of studying abroad strategies. On the other hand, well-educated parents of middle and the high social class have the greater opportunities to perceive and experience the rapid social changes brought by globalization in urban Dalian. The genuine self experiences enlighten and ensure them to prepare the family strategies. In contrast to the middle and high-class families, few parents who are ordinary workers and of lower social status I interviewed with want to send their children abroad. After all, the expensive tuition and living expenses seem like an impossible mission for them to afford. Furthermore, many of the low-class parents do not embrace the idea of transnational space. From their perspective, finding a well paid job in Dalian is good enough for their children. Working in cities bigger than Dalian is the better future they can imagine for their children. In short, the ideal trajectory of their children's future is still within the space of China. In conclusion, I argue that different family strategies prepared for children's future reflect class differences in contemporary urban Dalian. Those who are planning to send their children abroad and are able to so represent the middle and high class of urban Dalian.

Although studying abroad is the ideal future for their children to have, middle-class and high-class parents also admit that this ambitious plan needs their heavy investment, in both financial and laboring aspects. In terms of financial investment, early preparation including exam tutoring fee, exam fee, and interest training fee should be considered. Educational investment regarding school work tutoring in particular after school is always ultimate in family strategies. Besides, as many parents interpret the quality required by foreign universities, they generously throw money on training their children with musical instruments, painting, dancing, and other art forms to help them specialize with any one of it. Furthermore, since scholarship of foreign universities is extremely competitive to gain, many families deposit this financial disbursement from deliberate family plans. Some of them even employ their money deposited for their old age after retirement. One mother who has already sent her daughter to the US told me that it was no more worth than investing in children's education, because children's bright future probably meant parents could be more benefit from it during their aging period. This mother portrayed her future with a beautiful image in the US: she will live with her daughter in the big house. They will have world famous cars and enjoy the best commodities. In fact, many parents hold this opinion that they can go to the developed Western world one day in the future by training their children as the vanguard. The other form of investment is the investment of parental attention and time. As Liu Weihua does, many parents establish their plans of raising children from a very early time. Although there are various definitions of "capability (*suzhi*)" by different parents, they all set their child-rearing aim as raising a child with high quality. Furthermore, the specific methods of child rearing are

also different; however, most of the parents believe that having a plan is the necessary and useful to raise their children. As a result, the mode of firstly planning and then implementing is set down stably. In contemporary urban Dalian, this mode posits child-rearing practices as “a form of labor that has to be planned, managed, rationalized, and performed according to the appropriate models, so as to achieve the desired high-quality results.”<sup>42</sup> Parents who are the most industrious workers contribute their time, energy and wisdom to the new form of labor. However, their earning is really invisible at present and totally relies on their children.

#### *Varied Social Conditions: China under Globalization*

In contemporary urban Dalian, one category of the most popular books is instructions regarding child-rearing practices. Among this category, Western views of how to raise children draw much attention from Chinese parents. A number of translated versions of Western works such as *Jiating Jiaoyu zai Meiguo*<sup>43</sup> and *The Education of Karl Witte: Or, the Training of the Child*<sup>44</sup> are available at many bookstores in urban Dalian. Together with family strategies of preparing children studying abroad, these newly emerging phenomena suggest two strategies of child development practiced by parents in urban Dalian. First, they begin to embrace the notion of Western views of educational

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<sup>42</sup> T. E. Woronov, “Chinese Children, American Education: Globalizing Child Raring in Contemporary China,” in *Generations and Globalization: Youth, Age, and Family in the New World Economy*, ed. Jennifer Cole and Deborah Durham (Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2007): 39.

<sup>43</sup> Huang Quanyu 黄全愈, *Jiating Jiaoyu zai Meiguo* 家庭教育在美国 (*Family education in America*) (Guangzhou: Guang dong jiao yu chu ban she, 2001).

<sup>44</sup> Karl Heinrich Gottfried Witte, *The Education of Karl Witte: Or, The Training of the Child* (New York: Arno Press, 1975).

methods and learn from Western ways of child-rearing practices. Secondly, Chinese parents are becoming more and more aware that a new future is possible for their children; one that is different from the past, and for which they must prepare their children.

One of the first questions to ask is why Chinese parents pay so much attention to Western child-rearing practices. Why do urban parents such as Liu Weihua set their models of child development in Western views? Why do more and more parents want to send their children to study in other countries? What kind of future do they imagine they are preparing their children for? To answer these questions, the social context in contemporary China needs to be understood. In late 1978, Deng Xiaoping's widely-ranging economic reform policy, known as the "reform and opening" policy, was initiated in China. From then on, China focused all its strength on promoting the Four Modernizations.<sup>45</sup> After twenty years' progress, China has rapidly changed its socioeconomic conditions. Accelerating its steps toward economic progress and modernization, the Chinese government has placed its concentration on how China's role should be defined in global economics. In November 1999, China was approved as a member of the World Trade Organization. This remarkable event highlighted China's determination to connect itself to the world economy and its participation in a competitive global economy.

From the perspective of urban parents, the changes in social conditions and the larger social context have made them believe that they have to rethink their views of child development and make some changes of child-rearing practices to ensure their children

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<sup>45</sup> The Four Modernizations refer to the modernization of agriculture, industry, science and technology, and national defense.

can be qualified in the job market of a society changing with each passing day. As China plays a more and more important role in the global market, urban parents are aware that their children must be well-educated and to be successful at the global level. Within the notion of the new economic system that is defined by global capitalism, parents look to Western countries where capitalism was born. As a father once told me, “Western developed countries invented capitalism and modernization. They educate the most outstanding students of ability for this kind of economic system. So where else could I send my son to study if I hope his survival within the global game started by the West?”

All in all, as Ong points out, one effect of globalization in contemporary China is that the nation-state is no longer the only container for “imagined communities”.<sup>46</sup> Parents look across the Chinese boarder to the West and imagine a future for their children within the world arena.

### *New Orientation of Upward Mobility*

When parents were asked their motivation to send their children to study abroad during our interviews, many of them quoted a famous Chinese saying: man struggles upwards while water flows downwards (*ren wang gaochu zou, shui wang dichu liu*). This quotation suggests parents’ notion of the importance of upward mobility for their children

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<sup>46</sup> Aihwa Ong, “Chinese Modernities: Narratives of Nation and of Capitalism,” in *Ungrounded Empires: The Cultural Politics of Modern Chinese Transnationalism*, ed Aihwa Ong and Donald M. Noimi (New York: Routledge, 1997): 171-202. Furthermore, I employed the term “imagined communities” from Benedict R. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

to acquire.<sup>47</sup> The aim to raise children with upward mobility has a long tradition in the history of China. Upward mobility has been closely linked with educational achievement throughout China's history. In imperial China, succeeding in the imperial examination was the only way for lower class people to squeeze in official career and gain high social status. Consequently, once they won the examination after ten years of sweat and sweat, they possessed fame and wealth, and brought prestige and honor to their families and clansmen. On the other hand, winning the exam also means that they could go out and ascend into the wider space of more capitals and more resources, for example, the imperial capital and other big cities. This phenomenon has also come into existence in contemporary China. Since the College Entrance Examination was recovered in 1977, entering college has even been considered as the single-plank bridge for young generations to cross to get into a bright future. To have a college degree means potentially good jobs and high social status. In today's so-called information society which rely on high technology and rapid information transmission, a dazzling paper qualification is one of the most direct and powerful knocking bricks to the success of job market. Therefore, the post-1980s generation's parents require their children almost nothing but high scores in their exams in reality. Upward mobility, which is considered the crucial quality from parents to compel their children to possess, is understood as visible and onefold educational achievement. Furthermore, the best colleges of China are commonly established in big cities, for example, Beijing, Shanghai, capital cities of provinces and more developed seaside cities such as Dalian. That means, if the child is able to enter a

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<sup>47</sup> T. E. Woronov, "Chinese Children, American Education: Globalizing Child Rearing in Contemporary China," in *Generations and Globalization: Youth, Age, and Family in the New World Economy*, ed. Jennifer Cole and Deborah Durham (Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2007): 34-36.

good university, he has a great opportunity to enter the higher hierarchical space. To this extent, upward social mobility can also be interpreted as spatial mobility.

In the new era of globalization, the spatial mobility has not been limited within China's most famous and flourishing cities. For parents in urban Dalian, upward mobility for their children is increasingly defined as movement outside of China's borders and into places associated with global wealth and power.<sup>48</sup> To enable their children to win in the global job market, urban Dalian parents adopt some western child-rearing practices to raise their only child.

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<sup>48</sup> Liu Xin. "Space, Mobility, and Flexibility: Chineses Villagers and Scholars Negotiate Power at Home and Aroad," in *Ungrounded Empires: The Cultural Politics of Modern Chinese Transnationalism*, ed Aihwa Ong and Donald M. Noimi (New York: Routledge, 1997): 91-114.



## CHAPTER III

### GROWING UP AS SINGLE CHILDREN

#### “Little Emperor” under Pressure

The post-1980s generation, which refers to children who were born in the 1980s through the early 1990s under the one-child policy, has attracted social attention as the first generation of single children to be born in China. By 2009, single children of the post-1980s generation born in 1980 became 29 years old, and the youngest born in 1990 reached 19 years old. Born under the one-child policy, the post-1980s generation has undergone different experiences from previous generations in both the public and the family within a rapidly changing socioeconomic context. On one hand, the one-child policy greatly improves the generation of urban single children’s living standards in their families along with creating significant structural changes. On the other hand, the children of this generation are entrusted with the specific mission of becoming the main power in constructing China’s modernization, which puts great competitive pressure and a concentration on discipline training on their shoulders. In this chapter, based on my fieldwork in urban Dalian with a number of young adults of post-1980s generation and examining several social scholarly articles concerned with this generation, I will address the issues about the first generation of single children in urban China, including the stressful public education and the issue of the “spoiled little emperor.” Furthermore, I will

summarize several main characteristics of the post-1980s generation.

*“Quality” Generation: School Life of Stress*

As the first generation of single children produced by the one-child policy, the destiny of the post-1980s generation has been closely linked with China’s socioeconomic progress. As direct means of connecting children with the state, public education plays an extremely significant role as the post-1980s generation grows up. Xiaolu Cheng, a girl born in 1982, is now pursuing her doctorate degree at a university in the United States. When she recalled her school life in China’s nine-year compulsory education and in the University of Nanjing, she focused especially on two things that gave her the most impressive memories. One memory was the great pressure placed on students to achieve good academic performance, and the other was “to be ready for becoming the generation will successfully employ modernization in our country.” Implementing a series of “opening and reform” policies with the “Four Modernizations” program in late 1970s, China’s government concentrated all of its effort on socialist modernization. Unlike Western countries producing low fertility as a *result* of the process of modernization, China’s government has used imposed low fertility through the one-child policy as a *means* to accelerate modernization.<sup>49</sup> When initiating the policy of limited births, the central government was also concerned about raising a generation of “high-quality” citizens to develop modernization. As Woronov T. E. argues: “Key to China’s transformation from poverty, backwardness, and Maoist-era revolutionary excess is thus a

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<sup>49</sup> Vanessa L Fong, *Only Hope: Coming of Age Under China's One-Child Policy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004): 3.

new regime of biopolitics that posits lowering the size, but raising the quality, of the population.”<sup>50</sup> To achieve the aim of a high-quality and well-educated population among the generation of single children, China’s government initiated and implemented a set of educational reform policies called “Education for Quality” (*suzhi jiaoyu*) in the late 1990s to transform the traditional score-based education to the so-called quality-based education. Premier Zhu Rongji stated the urgent need for education reform as follows:

Education is the essential foundation for economic development and social progress, and is the most important route to raising the quality [*suzhi*] of our people and their creative abilities. It is also the most reliable guarantee of how to increase our nation’s strength in the global community, and our competitiveness in the twenty-first century... In order to rapidly carry out our nation’s modernization, radically strengthen our ability to compete internationally, greet the new century’s opportunities and challenges, we have to put great effort into education... to foster high-quality workers and all kinds of professionals who are well suited to meet the requirements of the modernizing economy.<sup>51</sup>

As a result, the generation of single children who were in primary, middle, and high school during and after 1990s have experienced an education reform that has required them to develop a well-rounded capability (*quanmian fazhan*), including good academic performance, good physical standards, moral fitness, and a patriotic spirit. In reality, due to the direct pressure of entering the higher levels of education, physical and moral fitness are more a formalism of public education.<sup>52</sup> Compared with academic education,

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<sup>50</sup> T. E. Woronov, “Chinese Children, American Education: Globalizing Child Rearing in Contemporary China,” in *Generations and Globalization: Youth, Age, and Family in the New World Economy*, ed. Jennifer Cole and Deborah Durham (Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2007): 34.

<sup>51</sup> Ministry of Education 1999, 24. See the translation in T. E. Woronov, “Chinese Children, American Education: Globalizing Child Rearing in Contemporary China,” in *Generations and Globalization: Youth, Age, and Family in the New World Economy*, ed. Jennifer Cole and Deborah Durham (Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2007): 36.

<sup>52</sup> In Chinese public education, patriotism education overlaps with moral education to some degree. Being patriotic is one of the criteria used to make judgments about possessing high morals. Here I distinguish moral fitness from patriotism. Moral fitness in this work refers to individual psychological well-being in general.

schools and teachers often put less energy and support into developing physical and moral fitness. As a result, academic performance and education in patriotism have been considered the most important in public education. Academic performance has always been the keyword for schools, teachers, parents, and post-1980s students. Although the educational reform requires the students developing all-rounded capability, however, in the real life setting the standard for judging all of them seems only to be test scores. The best students in the class are always the ones who can get the highest scores on exams. Relatively, teachers' achievement is closely associated with their students' academic performance. Prestigious schools can ensure more of their students perform well on the college entrance examinations and enter top-ranking schools of higher education. The dominant opinion within Chinese society is that achieving a good academic performance is the only way to enter universities for the majority students. Gaining that entry equates means to gaining the golden brick to knock down the door in the job market of the future. Within the context of discipline training as the only means to future success, a large number of post-1980s children feel extreme levels of stress to win the battle of exams. To this point, the so-called quality-based education has not fundamentally changed the utilitarian phenomena in education. Contrary to the intent of the goals of Zhu Rongji's Education for Quality initiative, students who might take time to develop their all-around quality in school increasingly spend any spare time working with their textbooks when they are at home to help ensure high scores. Zhang Chao, born in 1984, felt depressed when he was in high school:

I was in Dalian No.24 High School which is the best high school in urban Dalian.

Many students have a great ability to concentrate on study. They always study hard and do well in exams. I am just average in my grade. To keep up with others, I often stayed up very late in the night, finishing writing innumerable text papers and reading lots of books. Before I passed the exam and entered Dalian University of Technology, I felt a big pressure and the fear of failing in the exam every single day. [Today,] I kind of feel like it was worth it to work so hard. Thanks to that, I am now working in a company with a stable job. However, I don't want to experience that any more.

Zhang Chao's experiences and thoughts may be typical among the post-1980s generation single children in public education. As Cheng Xiaolu responded:

The Chinese college entrance exam is like all of the students squeezing across a narrow foot bridge. For us post-1980s, winning in the exam means a bright future, or even the only way to a bright future. No one can simply neglect this point. Everyone is geared up to get a place in the best universities. But the fact is that the quota removes university access far away for many students. What is worse, we only have one formal chance in a whole year. It is definitely for us to face the pressure and fear of being eliminated.

Besides the pressure of succeeding in the job market of the future, peer pressure and parental pressure also affect the post-1980s generation. In most Dalian primary and middle schools, students' scores are made available to everyone in class after exams are taken and scored. A rank-based listing of students' grades is publicized in each class or grade. Students feel the unusually high level of peer pressure directly. For the average-scoring or lower-average scoring students, the rank embarrasses and hurts them. Furthermore, home visits (*jiafang*) and parent meetings held at the school are utilized as a means to communicate students' academic performance between parents and teachers. Students' scores are attributed to their parents in time. Parents then adjust the home lives and require the students to engage in additional homework at home to urge their children to catch up with others in class. Zhang Chao added,

Every time after the parents' meeting, I became very nervous [before I entered

university]. I was afraid that my teacher would say something bad about me to my mother, like ‘your son doesn’t listen to the teacher carefully during lessons,’ or ‘Zhang Chao doesn’t focus on his studies. He always talks to others during self study time.’ My parents would get angry with me. As a result, I would be deprived of the opportunities to watch TV or hang out with my friends during vacations. Instead, I had to study at home, all the time.

Another main function of public education in contemporary China relates to patriotism education which is mainly concentrated on China’s national policy and the central government’s propaganda. As Xiaolu Cheng referred to the “successful actors of social modernization,” many post-1980s interviewees mentioned this point. They were required to be the “new” people with ideals, morality, knowledge, and discipline (*siyou xinren*) able to develop modernization in China and construct an integrated progress for Chinese society. When the post-1980s generation entered primary school, they were taught to be patriotic. The majority of the post-1980s interviewees can still recite the first rule of the Student Regulations, which to “love the country, love the people, and love our Communist Party.” In most primary, middle, and high schools in urban China, all the students are gathered on the playground to take part in the Raising the National Flag Ceremony every Monday morning. After the ceremony, a school officer often holds a talk about the government’s current directions and policies. Students who engage in being progressive are the ones who show love and passion for their country and who demonstrate full-hearted support of the governments’ directions and policies. In reality, many students compete to take part in activities offered by the Young Pioneers and Communist Youth League which are the groups training and grooming future members for the Communist Party of China. Students who earn the title of the “Outstanding Member of Youth League” may have additional points added to their final scores for the

college entrance exam.

*Family Life of the Post-1980s: Lonely Little Emperor*

In general, despite the pressures from academic studying, family life of the post-1980s generation features two characteristics: loneliness and a state of being “spoiled”. First of all, compared to the large families of previous generations in Chinese society, the post-1980s generation in urban China experiences unprecedented loneliness within their family life. Vanessa L. Fong argues that what matters most is not the single status *per se* of the post-1980s generation, but rather the fact that they are single children in a society used to large families.<sup>53</sup> The abrupt changes in family size and structure resulted in a large number of one-child families in urban China unprepared to realistically face the issue of a lonely child. Although one-child parents pay great attention to their children and make a heavy parental investment of time and energy for their children, since they grew up with at least one sibling, it is difficult for them to really understand their children’s feelings and loneliness. And, because a large number of parents have to go to work to support the whole family, it is not possible for them to spend all their time with their children. For example, when summer and winter vacations come, the children are left home alone or are sent to their grandparents’ home. Because of the large gaps in age and experience, the children are being cared for materially by their aging relatives but their relationships involve few communication at a spiritual or psychological level.

Although the post-1980s children have friends, they have been forced to spend

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<sup>53</sup> Vanessa L. Fong, *Only Hope: Coming of Age Under China's One-Child Policy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004): 2.

more time with their textbooks than playing with peers after school due to the heavy studying assignments. Xiaocui Zhang, a girl born in 1983 explained, “School time was usually off at about 17:40 pm [when I was in middle school]. But school work didn’t end. I still had to spend 3 or 4 hours to finish homework, review, and preview the courses. When I finally ended the everyday routine, it was about 10 at night. How could I play with my friends outside then?” Even at school, a compact timetable of lessons leaves little time for friends to talk with or play together. Especially in middle school and high school, students even use ten minute breaks between lessons to do more studying. Furthermore, the pressure for getting in higher level or quality schools makes the atmosphere between students more competitive. Xiaolu Cheng told me:

Sometimes I just felt kind of depressed when I was sitting in the classroom. Everyone seemed to be afraid to be caught up or exceeded in their academic performance. The popular topics among all of us were always who got a high score in a current exam or who fell back in the grade ranking. Sometimes I wanted to talk about interesting anecdotes or international news to others, but many of them thought it was a waste of time. That really disappointed me. I was among people, but I felt lonely.

There has been a long controversy over the issue of the “spoiled” generation in contemporary Chinese society. Children of the post-1980s generation are often accused of being the “spoiled” generation. The phenomenon of spoiling children mainly includes two points. The first concern is that the one-child family gives the child a rich or even luxurious material life. In urban Dalian, the one-child family is also nicknamed the “one mouth, six pockets” family, which refers to an only child that is raised by six people, meaning the two parents, the two maternal grandparents, and the two paternal grandparents. Six pockets of money may easily expand their little emperors’ and little



empresses' appetites.<sup>54</sup> Besides the great improvement in living standards compared to previous generations, spoiled children are also criticized as defiant and disrespectful which is the result of their parents' compliance to their children's every desire and request. Although not every parent treats their child like this, fond indulgence does exist in a number of one-child families and has become a noticeable social issue. However, from some parents' perspective, it is reasonable for them to take such good care of their children or even spoil them. These parents find their reasons in the great changes of the socioeconomic conditions. Hua Liu (not her actual name), mother of a 22-year-old son, offered a representative opinion:

My generation experienced extreme bitterness and hardness when we were young. We experienced the natural disasters of three years, the Great Leap Forward, and the unforgettable Cultural Revolution. I can still remember the striking feeling of being hungry. Sometimes I set the clock ahead for two or three hours only with the wish to have lunch sooner. I never want my son to taste the extreme hardness I have tasted. So I always try my best to give him the best material life. If this is a kind of indulgence, I accept it. However, I don't think I am wrong at this behavior.

When I asked post-1980s children whether they think they are spoiled, different voices were audible. Many of the interviews did not agree with the opinion that they are spoiled by their families. Many of them mentioned that their parents spanked them when they were younger. When they were asked for the reasons of the spankings, the number one reason was that their parents did not believe they were studying hard enough or that they were getting bad scores on exams. The other main reason was that they were not compliant or docile (*tinghua*). Hui Liu questioned, "My father always wants me to be docile. But the point is what he thinks is right is not always actually right. If I believe he

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<sup>54</sup> In the previous sub-chapter of "*One-Child Family: Fertility Norms Acceptance and Child-Rearing Practice Adjustment*," I have portrayed how one-child parents try their best to give their only children a sufficient material life.

is wrong and refuse his requirement, he might simply get angry and blame me as disobedient. He even spanked me several times until I was about 14-years-old.” When referring to living standards, most post-1980s interviewees admit that their parents try their best to let them live a comfortable and rich material life. But some interviewees believed that their parents used material rewards as a means to stimulate their academic performance. If they did not achieve at a satisfactory level, the objects they desired would become out of reach.

During my fieldwork, the one phenomenon that most impressed me was that a large number of children among the post-1980s generation preferred self-entertainment such as watching television, net-surfing and playing web games. On the one hand, the popularity of new technology and electronic products to some degree reflects the loneliness of the post-1980s generation. Under certain circumstances, they only have the television and a computer to play with. On the other hand, web-surfing and online games have become an exit for a number of the post-1980s generation to escape from the real world. Lower-average-scoring student Feng Lin is an excellent game player in a popular Chinese online game called *Tianlong Babu*. In real life, he is considered an average student due to his poor academic performance. But in the world of the Internet, he is a heroic knight-errant receiving many other players’ compliments and respect. “When I am playing the online game, I am very confident, smart, and brave. Every participant in the game knows me. But when I am sitting in the classroom, it seems like I have totally lost my intelligence and confidence.” Furthermore, increasingly urban single children have engaged in making friends online. Although online friendships to some extent help cure

the loneliness of urban single children, the public expresses concerns that online friends might prevent the generation from developing real social skills and hamper their abilities when they enter society and the work environment.

*“Me Generation”: Characteristics of the Post-1980s Generation*

The post-1980s generation experiences both advantages and disadvantages from the one-child policy and the rapidly changing socioeconomic conditions as they and their families are molding their general characteristics as they mature. As Chandler Clay and others argue, the key to understanding the post-1980s generation is to recognize that everything truly is different for post-1980s children.<sup>55</sup> Compared to previous generations growing up with siblings, one of the most distinctive characteristics is that they are self-centered. From one perspective they are the shining stars receiving sufficient care and resources in their families who give them a strong sense of self-determination and self-confidence. From another point of view they are developing a self-centered character that gives them a bad name for being unable to accept critique and tolerate differing opinions. A professor at Dalian University of Technology once complained about his research assistant, a girl born in 1983, “She is very smart and competent in the position. However, she isn’t able to listen to others. Every time I try to give her some advice about her research or life, she responds with immediate questions or simply refuses to listen.” The journal *Fortune* published a cover story about China’s only children on October 4, 2004. In the article, the authors called China’s only children -- which account for more

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<sup>55</sup> Chandler Clay, Joan Levinstein, Zhang Dahong, and Zhang Dan. “Little Emperors,” in *Fortune* 150 (October 4, 2004, Issue 7): 138-150.

than the million of the post-1980s generation, the “Me Generation.”<sup>56</sup> The name “Me Generation” is the best portraiture of the self-centeredness of the post-1980s generation.

Having access to a wide variety of resources while living in the atmosphere of globalization and modernization, the post-1980s generation is open-minded and is eager to try new things. For example, they are crazy for Hollywood movies and Japanese cartoons. They are astute consumers who pay close attention to worldwide fashion and the newest products and latest styles. They learn different foreign languages and study foreign cultures, and may dream of traveling the whole world in the future. However, without any experience of having a rough time, the post-1980s generation shows less perseverance and patience since almost everything is relatively easy for them to achieve. The mother of a 21-year-old daughter told me:

When Xiaoling [her daughter’s first name] was about 13 years old, she told me that she wanted to learn ballet. I was very happy that she had an interest. So I took her to learn ballet. Not more than a month later, my daughter said to me that the training was so painful and difficult that she couldn’t stick to it any more. Similar situations happened when she asked me to sign her up for guitar lessons. This time she explained that the basic training was too boring. I got angry but could do nothing with her. How can I force her if she doesn’t have the impetus to continue?

Many perceived characteristics of the post-1980s generation are closely associated with their status of being raised as an “only” child. They are often thought to be selfish and are accused of being indifferent to others. The post-1980s generation often says it is their time to boost individuality. They are proud of being different from others. Other crucial social issues concerning the post-1980s generation are their poor habits and their lack of ability to self-governing in contrast to previous generations. Paul Mooney

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<sup>56</sup> Chandler Clay, Joan Levinstein, Zhang Dahong, and Zhang Dan. “Little Emperors,” in *Fortune* 150 (October 4, 2004, Issue 7): 138-150.

published his article titled “Campus Life Proves Difficult for China’s ‘Little Emperors’” to examine the issue concerning urban post-1980s students’ poor self-governance or self-management when they leave their parents and become independently responsible on college campuses.<sup>57</sup>

Various opinions and discussion about the post-1980s generation are expressed in public settings and publications. For example, Xiaosheng Yang, editor of a prominent literary journal, portrayed the post-1980s generation as “self-centered, narrow-minded, and incapable of accepting criticism.”<sup>58</sup> Jie Shen, a sociologist at China’s Academy of Social Sciences, has a different opinion about the post-1980s generation. He thinks that the first generation of single children is trying to find their way:

If you judge Chinese kids today by the standards of yesterday, then sure, they come up short. They don’t like to suffer. They aren’t used to eating bitterness. But so what? Is that the main thing China needs right now—more people who are good at being miserable? These kids have other skills. They’re creative and opinionated, and have the courage to do new things. Shouldn’t that be grounds for hope?<sup>59</sup>

### Empowered Urban Single Daughters

Previous studies attribute a high correlation between low fertility and the empowerment of mothers in both developed and developing countries.<sup>60</sup> In the early

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<sup>57</sup> Paul Mooney, “Campus Life Proves Difficult for China’s ‘Little Emperors,’” in *Chronicle of Higher Education* 52 (November 25, 2005, Issue 14): p. A46-A49.

<sup>58</sup> See, for more details about the interview, Chandler Clay, Joan Levinstein, Zhang Dahong, and Zhang Dan. “Little Emperors,” in *Fortune* 150 (October 4, 2004, Issue 7): 138-150.

<sup>59</sup> See, for more details about the interview, in Chandler Clay, Joan Levinstein, Zhang Dahong, and Zhang Dan. “Little Emperors,” in *Fortune* 150 (October 4, 2004, Issue 7): 138-150.

<sup>60</sup> See, for example, Sousan Abadian, “Women’s Autonomy and Its Impact on Fertility,” in *World Development*. 24(12) Dec. 1996: 1793-1809. Kingsley Davis, “Wives and Work: The Sex Role Revolution and Its Consequences,” in *Population and Development Review* 10(3): 397-418. Zeba A Sathar, *Women’s Status and Fertility in Pakistan: Recent Evidence* (New York: United Nations), 1993.

twenty-first century, increasing research also focuses on the correlation between low fertility rates and daughters' empowerment. For example, Vanessa L. Fong conducted her research on the relationship between urban single children and the one-child policy in Dalian and suggested that more attention should be paid to how low fertility affects daughters.<sup>61</sup> In this chapter, I will focus on how the consequences of the one-child policy influence urban Dalian daughters. I argue that urban daughters are empowered by the benefits brought by the one-child policy. I also explore the changing attitude toward gender norms adopted by urban daughters in Dalian.

### *Changing Opinion about Preferring Sons*

Low fertility produced by the one-child policy is closely related to changes in the traditional preference for sons in urban China, which in turn have greatly influenced urban daughters' empowerment. In feudal China, the gender system was based on distinctions between a superior sphere dominated by men and a subordinate domestic sphere associated with women.<sup>62</sup> Within this social context, daughters were belittled in their biological families where raising sons to provide for aging parents (*yang er fang lao*) was dominant. Since daughters were eventually married to another family and belonged to their husbands' family kinship, they had to fulfill their filial duties to their parents-in-law instead of their biological parents. Daughters were seen as contributing little to their biological families except for the betrothal gifts which usually consist of

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<sup>61</sup> Vanessa L Fong, "RESEARCH ARTICLES - China's One-Child Policy and the Empowerment of Urban Daughters," in *American Anthropologist*. 104, (2002, no. 4): 1098-1190.

<sup>62</sup> Vanessa L Fong, "RESEARCH ARTICLES - China's One-Child Policy and the Empowerment of Urban Daughters," in *American Anthropologist* 104 (2002, no. 4): 1099. Also see Michelle Z. Rosaldo, and Louise Lamphere, *Woman, Culture, and Society* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1974).

money, jewelry, and other possessions given by the bridegroom's family. As a result, daughters received less parental investment and parental care than sons in feudal families. In Chinese social history during the era of Mao Zedong, the gender system began to undergo a transformation. However, although women's social status and situation had been improved, parents during the Mao period were still affected by and practiced the traditional preference for sons. Daughters had to compete with their male siblings to gain their parents' investment of time and attention during child rearing. In fact, parents were more likely to invest in their sons while neglecting their daughters when they had very limited funds and energy. Furthermore, with the social development in its beginning stages, opportunities for education and jobs were not great enough to accommodate both sons and daughters. Consequently, many daughters lost opportunities to receive an education or to enter the work market. The lack of education also blocked women in promoting their social status.<sup>63</sup>

Parental attitudes towards the gender of a child really changed in urban China after the implementation of the one-child policy. Parents' opinions about their preference for male or female children now vary among individual parents, and increasingly, urban parents prefer having daughters rather than sons. Mrs. Wang, a mother of a 20-year-old girl said:

I wanted a daughter when I was pregnant. As the saying goes, daughters are mothers' little padded jacket (*nü er shì ma ma de xiao mian ao*). Girls are more docile and more intimate. My elder sister gave birth to a boy. It was great. But the boy was really naughty. My sister ran out of energy in raising her son. In contrast, my daughter is really considerate and sweet. She hasn't caused me worry about her very often.

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<sup>63</sup> For more details about women's education opportunities in traditional and contemporary China see, Esther S. Lee Yao, *Chinese Women, Past & Present* (Mesquite: Ide House, 1983).

Besides parents' preferences, research indicates that in a modern economy children cannot contribute much to family income even though they are raised and educated with a high investment of time and money from their parents.<sup>64</sup> Although caring for elderly population is a crucial issue in contemporary China, some wealthy parents no longer depend on their children's income when they begin retirement. The situation in contemporary Dalian is reflective of this change. A large number of urban Dalian parents raise their children without any specific expectation about their own benefits and only wish their children to have a happy future. They wish for their children to spend time with them instead of giving them money and gifts. Usually these parents are of middle or upper social classes who have well-paid jobs and pension, and do not worry about the financial resources after they retire. As Mrs. Wang indicated:

I don't want my daughter to earn big money for us. Her father and I both have jobs to support our lives. We also have endowment insurance and pensions when we retire. We don't depend on our daughter's financial support. We wish her a happy life in the future and want her to spend more time with us rather than give us money.

A number of parents who expect to be supported by their children when they are getting old also think that there is no difference whether they have sons or daughters. Fong attributes this attitude of gender equality to "the legacy of low-fertility mothers."<sup>65</sup> She argues that one-child mothers have experienced the beginning of the transformation of their society's kinship system from a patrilineal, patrilateral, and patrilocal one to a

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<sup>64</sup> Harry T Oshima, "The Industrial and Demographic Transitions in East Asia," in *Population and Development Review* 94 (1983): 583-607.

<sup>65</sup> Vanessa L Fong, "RESEARCH ARTICLES - China's One-Child Policy and the Empowerment of Urban Daughters," in *American Anthropologist*. 104 (no. 4, 2002): 1101-1102.



bilineal, bilateral, and neolocal one. This kind of transformation associated with low fertility enables urban one-child mothers to engage in paid work and provide their own parents with financial support in old age just as sons do. This phenomenon proves that empowered single daughters can support their parents. However, there are, in reality, also parents who still hold the attitude of preferring sons, but since every family can only have one child, one-daughter parents have no choice but to try their best to raise their daughters as their only option. They have to accept their daughters as they had to accept the one-child policy.

The government has also made a lot of effort to promote single daughters' status in families as well as in the society. Popular slogans such as "There is no difference between giving birth to sons and daughters because daughters also continue the family line" (*sheng nan sheng nü yi ge yang nü er ye shi chuan hou ren*) were repeated many times during my interviews with one-child parents, which may indicate the success of the government's propaganda. Specific benefits and some favorable policies have been made for single daughters. For instance, Dalian Lijiajie Community organizes the regular medical examinations for single daughters for free. Single daughters also receive extra points added to their college examination scores in some cities and rural areas.

### *Education, Work Market, and Marriage*

Low fertility and changes in the traditional preference for sons benefit urban daughters who experience good child-rearing practices and sufficient parental investment. Without competing with brothers, most urban Dalian daughters live a comfortable or

even rich material life provided by their parents. A majority of daughters indicate that they receive good care from their parents since they are not competing with any siblings. Besides, parents are not stingy about investing in their daughters so they improve their educational performance and receive support for specific interests such as music and dance.<sup>66</sup>

Besides the parental care and investment of time and money, single daughters benefit from low fertility through equal access to education and the job market just as sons do. In urban Dalian, almost every single girl receives the nine-year compulsory education including six-year primary school education and three-year middle school education. With financial support from their parents, a large number of single daughters enter high school for further education. The number of single daughters entering universities and colleges is increasing in recent years. For example, among the several most famous universities in Dalian, the proportion of men and women of Dalian Marine University is 4:1 in 2005 compared to 6:1 in 1998. The ratio of men and women in Dalian University of Technology has been changed from 6:1 in 2000 to 3:1 in 2007. Dalian University of Foreign Languages, one of most famous liberal educational institutions, had about 14,000 female students in a total of 20,000 students in 2008. Urban single daughters also enjoy more opportunities in the job market. Since ability and performance have become the most important standards for most employers in selecting employees in a modern economy, more and more single girls are able to get well-paid jobs. Although it is still difficult for women to get the most prestigious and best-paid positions such as

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<sup>66</sup> The details about child-rearing practices in one-child families are portrayed in the previous chapter "FAMILY PLANNING AND NEW PARENTING PHILOSOPHY."

CEOs in companies and as high officials in the government, social statistics and documents shows that single girls do a good or even better job in the midlevel job market. According to Fong's research, Dalian single girls had an easier time getting jobs than boys did in the midlevel job market.<sup>67</sup> Among my best female friends who were all born in 1983, one is working for SAP as a consultant, one has the position of assistant accountant in KPMG China, and two others are auditors in Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu China. In some specific career positions such as teachers, secretaries, and nurses, female single children show a much stronger competitive advantage than do males.

Urban single daughters demonstrate a strong desire and ability to compete with sons in both, school and work. Among my interviewees of single daughters, most of them believe that they can do as well as men in their studies and jobs if they work hard enough. As a matter of fact, in general, single girls perform better than boys in primary school and middle school. Miao Rongli, class sponsor of Dalian No.9 Middle School, talked about her students: "Girls usually do better in their studies than boys. After all, girls are more studious than boys. [Female students] usually spend more time studying than playing. Besides, they are more obedient to the teachers." Furthermore, one-daughter parents also encourage their children to pursue achievement in school and in their careers rather than simply hoping their daughters will marry good men and become housewives. Hope from the parents also encourages single daughters to keep trying their best in school and work. Wang Hui, the girl who was born in 1982, said: "I always want to make my parents be proud of me. So I worked hard to get high scores in innumerable exams when I was in

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<sup>67</sup> Vanessa L Fong, "RESEARCH ARTICLES - China's One-Child Policy and the Empowerment of Urban Daughters," in *American Anthropologist* 104 (2002, no. 4): 1104.

school. Now I am working in a company. Every time I receive a promotion that makes my parents happy; it makes me feel that all my efforts are worthwhile.” My best friend Xue Jie, who is the single daughter of her family, got a well-paid job with SAP China.

Once she discussed this topic with me and said:

I know my father prefers sons over daughters. Honestly speaking, I can feel that he is disappointed to have a daughter although he really takes good care of me. I am always doing well in my field. When I was in school, I was always ranking among the top five in my class. Now I am working in a well-paid company. My salary is the highest in my family. As soon as I got the job, I took the responsibility of supporting my family financially. These years my father has become very proud of me. He thinks I am as capable a son would have been. He told me that I am even more capable than some sons of his friends. As a matter of fact, I hold the opinion that I can always be up with the best. Times are changing. Whatever men can do, I can do it, too.

Urban single daughters also enjoy some advantages in the marriage market compared to single sons. In contemporary China, the criteria for young people to choose marriage partners includes love, personal preference, and social factors. Social factors mainly include family background and career success and are more significant for men to achieve in order to win an ideal marriage partner. By contrast, single daughters can remedy the lack of family background or career and educational achievement by having a pretty appearance, good personality, and other virtuous characteristics. Consequently, single sons feel more pressure than do daughters in the marriage market.

Twenty-four-year old single son Xiaolu expressed his opinion:

The traditional Chinese saying goes that ‘First wife, then thrive’ (*xian cheng jia hou li ye*). I feel like it is totally changed in contemporary China. Most of today’s girls are realistic and material. If you don’t have a house or a car, you will be eliminated immediately from the list of potential marriage partners. If you are rich or have a well-paid job, you will have more chances in the marriage market even if you look ugly or have bad personality.

A twenty-six-year-old single young woman, Liu Hui, generally agreed with Xiaolu's statement that single sons have more stress than single daughters although she disapproved of Xiaolu's seemingly arbitrary judgment of single daughters. She added her opinion about single girls in the marriage market:

In general, men are more likely to provide house property for living together after getting married. However, a large number of men of marriageable age have just worked for several years and cannot afford to buy an apartment or a house on their own. In that case, their families have to prepare the money and support their single sons financially. By contrast, the single daughters' parents don't have this kind of stress. Instead, they can use the money to develop their single daughters' all-rounded capability to make them more desirable in the marriage market.

Fong observes that in the marriage market created by the one-child policy, single daughters can gain upward mobility through marriage compared to men who rarely gain upward mobility through marriage in the social context within which women prefer to marry men of higher status while men prefer to marry women of the same status.<sup>68</sup> Single daughters also enjoy some changing attitudes about the criteria for choosing spouses and some changing values of marriage compared to their mothers' generation. For example, in the one-child mothers' generation, women with high educational levels probably experienced difficulty in getting married, because "few men wanted or were willing to marry a woman whose educational level is as high or higher than their own."<sup>69</sup> Similarly, few men were willing to marry women who were more capable than themselves. As a result, so called "strong women" (*nü qiang ren*) were confronted with difficulties in

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<sup>68</sup> Vanessa L Fong, "RESEARCH ARTICLES - China's One-Child Policy and the Empowerment of Urban Daughters," in *American Anthropologist* 104 (2002, no. 4): 1104.

<sup>69</sup> Xu Anqi, "The Changes of Women's Roles and Status and Transformation of Family," in *Proceedings of Asia-Pacific Regional Conference on Future of the Family* (Beijing: China Social Science Documentation Publishing House, 1992): 101-107. Also see, Cecilia Nathansen Milwertz, *Accepting Population Control: Urban Chinese Women and the One-Child Family Policy* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 1997): 167.

entering marriage.<sup>70</sup> Situations have changed a lot for single daughters. “Strong women” and women with high educational levels are preferred by more and more men since they are considered helpful to men’s careers and social relationships in contemporary China. As Liu Hui argued: “Men today are more willing to choose marriage partners who can actually help them with their career development. High educational level or strong performance in the workplace have become new types of capital for single daughters to win in the job market.” Moreover, urban single daughters today enjoy a much more tolerant social atmosphere when they get married. The expression “old maids” (*lao gu niang*) that refers to women who were still single when having passed their marriageable age (usually from 22 to 25 years old) that was used among one-child mothers’ generation is seldom heard or used in the generation of single children. In fact, an increasing number of single daughters are not married by the age of 25-30 in Chinese society today. Although they may face the pressure from their parents and other relatives, they choose when to get married on their own choice.

### *Self-Determination*

During my fieldwork, what impressed me most was the urban Dalian single daughters’ strong sense of self-determination that has partly resulted from the continuing transformation of traditional gender norms such as images and roles of women. These young girls transcend the traditional gender norms both in action and in thought.

In general, the opinion about women’s roles, women’s image, and the judgment of

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<sup>70</sup> See, for example, Cecilia Nathansen Milwertz, *Accepting Population Control: Urban Chinese Women and the One-Child Family Policy* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 1997): 167.

women becomes diverse in single daughters' perspectives. Domestic roles of women have been changed in single daughters' minds. Xue Jie's conclusion may represent a majority of single daughters' thoughts: "From my point of view, both men and women should take responsibilities to look after the home and do housework... Both men and women go out of the home and work to support their families in contemporary Chinese society. It is apparently absurd that only women [are required to] do chores." In contrast, many single sons in my interviews complained that their girlfriends are very lazy with housework. What is worse, "they do not even know how to cook," Xiaolu hollered. Relative to the changing domestic roles, the judgments of women are also transformed. Urban single daughters' judgments of ideal women are not restricted to being virtuous wives and good mothers any more. "When accompanied by modernization, the birth rate transition enables and compels women to devote themselves to work and education rather than motherhood."<sup>71</sup> As the appearance of multiple social values, they have various perspectives the ideal woman. Twenty-five-year-old Wang Moshi from a one-daughter family shared her opinion with me:

Times are changing. Ideal women are not merely virtuous wives and good mothers any more. We girls are striving for being capable, tasteful, and charming. We strive for our piece of sky in our careers. We purchase tasteful things and look for a high quality life. We are devoted in fashion...As I see it, the women who are brave to pursue their dreams are most brilliant. I have read a book about a girl who travels the world by herself. I was very obsessed about this story. I hope I can venture out into the world someday like her...The aim of being virtuous wives and good mothers is not bad, but not cool either. As a matter of fact, my female friends and I all believe that only the incapable girls are content with being mere housewives.

An increasing number of single daughters have begun to rethink marriage and to

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<sup>71</sup> Vanessa L Fong, "RESEARCH ARTICLES - China's One-Child Policy and the Empowerment of Urban Daughters." *American Anthropologist* 104 (2002, no. 4): 1099.

discuss the topic online with others. On Tianya Forum Online, one of the most famous and popular online forums in China, a lot of topics about marriage issues have been discussed. For example, ID glassdoll512 posted a question “What do you guys think of the legal marriageable age?”<sup>72</sup> She stated that age of 23 years old -- which is the late marriage age for women according to law -- should be postponed. Her message drew much attention and aroused discussion online.<sup>73</sup> The topic about staying single versus getting married is the topic attracting the most attention from single daughters. One female net-surfer’s perspective is supported by many single daughters:

In my opinion, happiness does not depend on the status of marriage. Married women do not certainly gain happiness while single women are scarcely happy. Being a ‘golden’ single lady, I can freely enjoy the sweetness being in a relationship. I do not need to struggle against the parents-in-law and lose much energy on the other relatives of the husband. I do not need to worry about husband’s possible affairs and get angry with the trivial things of the child. I can take on my bag and go out of the home if I want to make a trip. I only need to make a call if I want to have dinner with my sister friends. I can take actions immediately when I have a crush on somebody. So, how could you tell that single girls surely feel unhappy in comparison with married women?

An increasing number of single daughters have begun to question the necessity of marriage for women. Some of them hold and exercise the opinion of no marriage for life. One 27-year-old single girl, who did not wish to be named, said:

All in all, I want to be single. I have had three relationships before, none of which made me happy but were cumbersome. I guess I am really used to being alone... The only reason for me to get married is to give birth to children. However, I am afraid of giving birth to babies. I have watched some videos about delivery. The miserable cry and the blood really scared me. If I want a child in the future, I can adopt one. The only problem [for me to keep single for life] comes from my

<sup>72</sup> See, <http://www.tianya.cn/publicforum/content/funinfo/1/1370201.shtml>. Most of IDs appeared in this post are owned by female net-surfers according to their remarks or personal information.

<sup>73</sup> According to Marriage Law of the People’s Republic of China, the legal marriage age for men is 22 years old, and the legal marriage age for women is 20 years old. Legal late marriage age for men is 25 years old, and 23 years old for women.



parents. They are worried about me. However, I should make the decision about my own life by myself... Besides, I have a pretty well-paid job. I believe I can support my parents when they are aging.

The traditional image of women in which women were praised if they were feminine in their appearance, behaviors, and manners is also being challenged nowadays. The most distinctive example is Li Yuchun (Figure 4) who was born in 1984 to a one-child family in Chengdu and is one of the most popular female singers in China.<sup>74</sup> Li Yuchun achieved instant fame and started her singing career when she won the nationwide singing contest Super Girl in 2005. She presents a new image for young women far from the traditional type of girl with a beautiful face and tender characteristics. Li Yuchun wins tens of thousands of female fans by her “handsome” appearance and boyish style of performing and acting. Chinese net-surfers have given her the nickname “Brother Chun” (*chun ge*) to portray her manly appearance and characteristics. Li Yuchun’s success has created a trend of girls opting for a neutral or non-gendered appearance in China. In urban Dalian, more and more short-haired girls are dressing up like boys and loafing about the streets. Eighteen-year-old single daughter Cui Yiming, fan of Li Yuchun, imitates her idol’s dressing style. Her mother often blames her and exclaims she looks like a “tomboy, without any look of being a girl.” However, Cui Yiming considers girls like Li Yuchun equally beautiful compared to more traditional images, they just represent another style: “Girly girls are pretty. But it should not be the excuse to deny the beauty of girls with boyish figures and appearances. Since our society is more liberal than before, multiple values and aesthetics should be tolerated or

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<sup>74</sup> I collected this photo online. The copyright holder of the work had released it into the public domain. The release applies worldwide.

accepted.”

The androgynous appearance of young women seems to embody the new ideal of single daughters: with professional abilities and social positions equal to men. They can make their own choices in all areas of life—even in their outward expression. They seem to indicate that they are the better “sons”: young and talented, independent in spirit and self-representation. They defy the roles society had traditionally reserved for them.



**Figure 4.** Li Yuchun was selected one of the torch bearers for the Beijing Olympic Games and delivered the Olympic torch on June 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2008, in Yueyang, Hunan Province.

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CHAPTER IV  
HEAVY BURDEN OF THE  
ONE-CHILD FAMILIES: RAISING THE AGING POPULATION

As the one-child policy has been implemented for thirty years, children of the post-1980s generation have grown into men and women. By 2009, single children of the post-1980s generation born in 1980 became 29 years old, and the youngest born in 1990 reached 19 years of age and entered into their adulthood. That means a large number of the post-1980s single children are now confronted with the responsibilities of caring for their aging parents and grandparents. In contemporary Chinese society, caring for the aging population is not only an important family planning issue for each family, but also becomes a crucial social issue affecting the whole society. Both social and family factors should be carefully examined to better understand the Chinese aging population care system. For instance, the inadequacy of social pensions and the health-care system are key social factors for the aging population and their families to struggle with.<sup>75</sup> In this chapter, in addition to focusing on the social pension system, I will address this issue based on the family unit. Examining several aspects such as the family size, family structure, cultural model of filial piety, and parental investment and earning in the changing socioeconomic context of modernization, I will try to explore the difficulties the

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<sup>75</sup> See, for example, Fong Mei, "World News: China Pays Families for Loss of Sole Child," in *Wall Street Journal* (Eastern edition) (New York, N.Y.: June 3, 2008): page. A. 14.

one-child families are confronted with when they implement their families' planning for the care of aging relatives. I will also explore how the parents and children respond to the issue of caring for an aging population.

### One-Child Parents: Unguaranteed Old Age

To figure out the issue of caring for the older population, we should first explore the circumstance of the one-child parents and know about what kind of care do they want to receive from their only children. Viviana Zelizer has argued that American children were considered “economically worthless but emotionally priceless” to their parents and families by the end of the twentieth century.<sup>76</sup> To portray the situation of the one-child parents in urban China, the terms should be modified to ‘economically worthy and emotionally priceless’. However, various circumstances prove or imply that it is difficult for one-child parents in urban China to receive both financial and emotional support from their children under the family-support-old-care system.

One of the reasons for urban one-child parents to invest so heavily in their only children is that they have to rely on their “only hope” in their old age. In contemporary China, the socioeconomic context decides that urban one-child parents rely more on their “only hope”<sup>77</sup> in their old age. China’s central government continues to devote all its resources to developing the economy. Consequently, the social pension and the health care system for the older population are not fully or well developed. According to

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<sup>76</sup> Viviana A Rotman Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

<sup>77</sup> I adapted the term “only hope” for the single children from Vanessa L Fong, *Only Hope: Coming of Age Under China's One-Child Policy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).

sampling statistics from 1995, the population above 65 years old was about 82,800,000. It is estimated that the population above age 65 makes up 12.5% to 15.6% of the total population of China. However, among the aging population, less than one third can enjoy a pension, insurance, free medical care, and other forms of subsidy.<sup>78</sup> Especially after one-child parents retire, they have few opportunities to get financial resources on their own.<sup>79</sup>

The majority of one-child parents spend a lot of their financial resources on their children when they are able to earn money leaving little for their elder age. As a result, children become the only salvation for them to be financially supported.

Previous studies provide many descriptions about how Chinese parents calculate their children as a significant investment.<sup>80</sup> For example, “young women seem often to approach their need to become mothers much as many people approach the need to earn a living: start early, work hard, get it over with, and hope the investment of effort will suffice for its purpose.”<sup>81</sup> However, although one-child parents invest heavily in their only children, it does not guarantee financial support from their children when they retire. Although some parents in my interviews claimed that they do not feel the financial stress

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<sup>78</sup> Anonymous, “Chengshi dusheng ziniu jiating yanglao wenti tuchu 城市独生子女家庭养老问题突出 (Urban Single Children Face the Critical Issue of Caring for the Older Generation),” *Hua Shang Bao* 华商报 (*Hua Shang News*) December, 27, 1999, Social section.

<sup>79</sup> Jersey Liang and Gu Shengzu, “Long-Term Care for the Elderly in China,” in *Caring for an Aging World: International Models for Long Term Care, Financing, and Delivery*, ed. Teresa Schwab (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1989): 265-287.

<sup>80</sup> See for more details, Hill Gates, “Cultural Support for Birth Limitation among Urban Capital-owning Women,” in *Chinese Families in the Post-Mao Era*, ed. Deborah Davis and Stevan Harrell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993): 251-274. Susan Greenhalgh, “Sexual Stratification: The Other Side of Growth with Equity,” *Population and Development Review* 11 (1985b): 265-314.

<sup>81</sup> Hill Gates, “Cultural Support for Birth Limitation among Urban Capital-owning Women,” in *Chinese Families in the Post-Mao Era*, ed. Deborah Davis and Harrell Stevan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993): 262.

for their later years due to their wealth, the majority of one-child parents do not feel optimistic about their later years. In urban Dalian, because of the continual price increases, depending on the only child's wage to support two parents and sometimes four grandparents is most likely an impossible mission. If the child gets married, he or she has to manage his/her own family. That means, he or she is not able to provide many financial resources to the parents and the parents-in-law. Mrs. Liu, one-child mother of a 25-year-old son, once worriedly talked with me about this issue:

My son has a job with average wage about 2,500 yuan per month. This is the main financial resource for our family... You know, his father and I did not receive high education and were just ordinary workers before we retired... We have invested most of our money in our son and have not deposited some for us. Now we just have a little retirement pension. It is hard for us to live on our own savings. My son is very filial. He gives me about 1,000 yuan every month... But he will get married and have his own small family in the future. Everything needs money...I do not want to be his burden. But what should we do if we do not rely on our only son?

Another major concern is the emotional care for the elderly in urban China. *Go Back Home Often to Take a Look*, a popular song produced in 1999, voices a large number of urban parents' words from their heart:

Go Back Home Often to take a look,  
Even if just help washing dishes for mother.  
Go Back Home Often to take a look,  
Even if just massage the shoulders for father.  
The elderly do not expect children to contribute much to the family,  
They worry about their children for the whole life only with the wish that the whole family can live together safely and happily.

Compared to living a life without a good material living standard, most parents expect to receive emotional care from their only children -- if only a word about their current circumstances. The rushed pace and heavy pressures of city life force the post-1980s generation to focus more energy on making money than anything else when they reach

adulthood. Consequently, retiring parents are left home alone. After children have their own families, they probably pay more attention to their spouses and children than to their parents. Lonely parents who need emotional care and communication will feel destitute spiritually, which harms the quality of their life as elders. This circumstance will deteriorate further if one-child parents lose their spouses. One of my elder friends once told me:

I felt a little agony and loneliness after my son got married and moved out. His father passed away very early. I have considered my son everything of my life. He is filial. He brings my daughter in-law to visit me every big festival. However, I am left alone at home everyday. I cannot find a person to have a word with. It is painful... [But] I do not want to trouble my son. He is already very busy supporting his own family and managing his job.

Many one-child parents feel the contradictions between their great expectations and their parental love for their children. On one hand, parents have devoted a lot of attention, time, and financial resources to raise their children to be professionally fit in the global market. As their children grow up, parents certainly expect their children to find a well-paid job, have their own careers, and even move up into a higher social class. With these expectations, parents do not bind their children around them. Instead, they encourage children to fly away to the wider outside world. On the other hand, since one-child parents just have the only child, they emotionally want their children to be physically near or to live with them. For instance, my parents have this kind of contradiction. My parents have invested in me a lot with the hope that I can do well in the future job market as well as in life. They helped me to come abroad to learn and gain more knowledge to arm myself. However, every time I talk with my parents via phone or internet, I can feel how much my parents miss me. Sometimes I ask my parents whether

they want me - their only daughter - to go back home to be with and take care of them. My mother always responds: “Well, I don’t know. You are my only daughter. It is of course for me to wish you to stay by my side. But I also expect you to have your sky, not just the little girl around me to ask for candy... I feel it is very contradictory. I don’t have the answer.”

Living separately from their only children, one-child parents also have some trouble taking care of themselves and their daily needs as they get older. Some parents whose physical conditions are not very good may face difficulties doing housework. Some children may hire nurses to take care of their aging parents with poor health conditions. But for most families confronted with stressful financial conditions, they seem only able to hope their parents can take care of themselves as well as possible and not get ill.

#### Cultural Model of Filial Piety

In early twenty-first century Chinese society, family-supported-age care is the main form of caring for the aging population with the social-supported-age-care system only a marginal accessory. The system of heavy reliance on families was generated mainly as a result of the contemporary conditions in China and the traditional cultural model of filial piety. As China’s central government accelerates its modernization, the socioeconomic context decides that one-child parents have to rely more on their only children in their old age.

As one-child parents age, China’s government prefers to promote the cultural



model of filial piety to encourage single children to be the central providers of support to the elder generation so the government can focus its strength and financial resources on promoting economic growth.<sup>82</sup> Supporting the cultural model of filial piety, China's central government has enacted family laws or regulations to require adult children to fulfill their duties to provide economic support to their aging parents. Article 49 of China's 1982 Constitution, Article 15 of the 1980 Marriage Law, and Article 35 of the 1992 Women's Protection Law all contain this kind of requirement.

Throughout Chinese history, filial piety has been a feature at the center of Chinese families. Filial piety, in Confucian thought, is defined as one of the virtues that qualify a person as cultivated: the love and respect for one's parents and ancestors. In imperial China, filial piety played a significant role in shaping Chinese views of childhood as well as family plans for caring for aging parents. Many stories can be found in Chinese sources that advocate filial piety. One of the most famous collections of accounts, *The Twenty-Four Stories of Filial Exemplars*, is a collection of stories depicting how children exercised their filial piety in the past. Serving as a doctrine, filial children have to serve their parents as their central focus, always show obedience to their parents, and live with their parents to take daily care of them. Compared to sons, daughters are considered to belong to their husbands' or future husbands' families and are expected to contribute little to their biological families. Therefore, the dominant opinion in imperial China was to prefer to raise sons for old age (*yang er fang lao*). Furthermore, filial piety, which is considered the very first virtue in Chinese culture, not only emphasizes the fact that

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<sup>82</sup> Vanessa L Fong, *Only Hope: Coming of Age Under China's One-Child Policy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004): 128.

children owe their parents but also serves as a tool for helping emperors consolidate their reign.<sup>83</sup>

In contemporary Chinese society, filial piety is still considered one of the precious virtues. However, filial piety of today's China has been changed a little bit in the changing socioeconomic context. First of all, filial piety emphasizes more emotional support and does not directly serve as a political tool any more. To be filial children still means showing full-hearted love and respect for parents, but children do not have to be fully obedient to their parents. Urban adult children also do not have to live with their parents after they get married or have jobs. Furthermore, single daughters are considered the same as single sons in fulfilling their filial duty to their parents.

In urban Dalian, filial children are generally praised within families and in public. A large number of single children express their wish to repay parents for their full-hearted care and love and try their best to exercise filial behaviors. As Xue Jie once said: "What I own now all comes from my parents."<sup>84</sup> Although I cannot repay them equally, I am trying my best to give them a happy elderly life." However, not all the adult children behave with filial piety. Some spoiled children take their parents' care and love for granted and never think of returning acts of care and love to their parents. Some single children who were spanked when they were little could not understand their parents' intentions and simply hate their parents for spanking them. Furthermore, poor communication between one-child parents and their only children also serves as a deterrent to close relationships between them. Some adult children move out as soon as they are able to do so and

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<sup>83</sup> Anne Behnke Kinney, *Chinese Views of Childhood* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1995).

<sup>84</sup> Xue Jie is the single daughter appeared Chapter III: 62.

seldom connect with parents from then on. One-child parents having unfilial children not only lose financial support and necessary care but also suffer from emotional pain in their elder age.

In conclusion, as the foundation of family-support-old-age care system, the cultural model of filial piety plays a significant role in today's China, greatly influencing people's opinions about caring for the older population. On one hand, filial piety is an emotional bond linked between parents and children while the whole society is immersed in a money-mad atmosphere where human relationships including friendships and family affection are less of a concern. On the other hand, it is also a heavy burden put on the shoulders of the generation of single children. Even if the majority of them objectively hope to take good care of their aging parents, the stress of contemporary urban life makes it difficult for the generation of single children to individually support their families which often represent the "four-two-one" problem.

#### The "Four-Two-One" Problem of the 1980s Generation

The "four-two-one" problem refers to the one-child family in which the only "one" child is available to support "two" parents and "four" grandparents. The one-child policy has produced a large quantity of families with small size and simplified structure; therefore, under this structure, the aging generation could find itself destitute if they lose the only available support provided by their "only hope." Since the only child is the center of aging-care system, in the worst circumstance, if the only child dies or becomes incapacitated, their parents will lose every possible support for their future, emotionally

and financially. The Wenchuan Earthquake is one such striking example. During the intense earthquake, many students lost their lives when they were at school because of the low quality construction in Wenchuan, Sichuan Province on May 12, 2008. Most of the students were the only children from one-child families. According to the news reported by Mei Fong, journalist from the *Wall Street Journal*, the family-planning authorities distributed annual sums of about \$144 to each parent whose sole offspring was killed in the earthquake.<sup>85</sup> However, the compensation merely solved an immediate problem. The future of the one-child parents who lost their children may be hopeless. Losing their only children, parents suffered from emotional hurt and the cold truth that they could rely on nobody in their elderly life. Consequently, the “four-two-one” family model produced by the one-child policy seriously threatens the old caring system that was based on a family unit in urban China.

A large number of adult children of the post-1980s generation feel very worried and stressed about caring for their parents and grandparents in the old age. Their concerns cover many aspects, such as financial pressure, little time spent with parents, and living far away from parents. Fuxing Forum Online conducted research on the question: “Parents of the first generation of single children are facing the issue of being cared for in their elder age. Are you [refers to members of the first generation of single children] worried about this issue?”<sup>86</sup> Of the 677 random participants, 374 (55.24%) persons chose the option “Very worried. Parents do not have pension now. I have no idea of how to take

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<sup>85</sup> Mei Fong, “World News: China Pays Families for Loss of Sole Child,” *Wall Street Journal* (Eastern Edition) (June 3, 2008): pg. A. 14.

<sup>86</sup> For more details, see: <http://fuxing.bbs.cctv.com/viewthread.php?tid=11901565>

good care of them.” Ninety-four (13.88%) participants shared the option “Even if there is no financial problem, I still feel exhausted when confronted with the circumstance of caring for my only child while caring for my elderly parents and grandparents.”<sup>87</sup> Seventy-one (10.49%) participants were worried that their parents’ pensions were not enough for them to live a good material life, and they could not provide sufficient financial support either. Only 17 (2.51%) persons chose the option “Not worried at all.” Many participants expected the central government would establish a series of regulations to improve social care and security system to help solve the difficulties confronting single adult children. Some participants also claimed that one-child families had already sacrificed a lot to help contribute to modernization and such rapid economic development, so the government should take major responsibility to resolve the crucial issue of caring for the aging population.

Those with optimistic perspectives thought that the generation of single children is able to care for the elderly generation are also voiced. For example, Peter Coy from the *Business Week* thinks that “the ‘little emperor’ can save the world’s aging population.”<sup>88</sup> From his perspective, if China’s “little emperors” can compensate for their small numbers with high productivity by receiving good education, they will create sufficient or even greater wealth to support themselves while supporting their elderly population. From my perspective, Coy’s argument is valid when considering the significant role of education.

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<sup>87</sup> According to the statistics conducted by Marry Me Website, Psychological Research Center of Nankai University, and Beijing Zero Consultation Group, the average marriage age for men is 29.1 and the average age for women is 27.1. 1073 couples from 10 cities including Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Zhengzhou, Shenyang and other 5 cities participate in the research.

<sup>88</sup> Peter Coy. “The ‘Little Emperors’ Can Save the World’s Aging Population,” *Business Week* 3644 (August 23, 1999): 140-142.

To improve the generation of single children's quality of social and economic position via appropriate education is indeed a practicable method to improving the future situation of the elder-care system. However, this perspective focuses too much on economic factors and puts little attention on other factors such as emotional comfort for parents. In short, the issue of caring for the elderly population confronting the post-1980s generation of single adult children is crucial, and needs the government's greater investment and attention beyond the efforts affordable for one-child families.

#### Phenomenon of Boomerang Kids

While the majority of adult children among the post-1980s generation try hard to fulfill their filial duty to their parents, some other adult children still ask for their parents' money and care. These single children are called "boomerang kids" in contemporary Chinese society. Boomerang kids (*ken lao zu*) refers to the young adults among the post-1980s generation who still financially depend on their parents for life in contemporary urban China. They are not currently employed, nor are they seeking education or training, and are not able to support themselves independently.<sup>89</sup> While they are supposed to be taking on the responsibilities of caring for their elderly parents, ironically, they are still being supported financially by their parents.

In urban China, several categories of single children are considered boomerang

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<sup>89</sup> In the news report "Dalian Jinnian Shiyelü Kongzhi zai 3.5% 大连今年失业率控制在 3.5% (This year the unemployment rate will be controlled at about 3.5% in Dalian)" published in *Bandao Chenbao* 半岛晨报 (Peninsula Morning Newspaper) on January 15, 2009, the reporter Zhang Xing reports that in 2009 the situation of Dalian's job market is serious. The number of the unemployment is estimated 200,000.

kids.<sup>90</sup> The first type are children who are born into very rich families and do not worry about their parents' or their own material life in the future at all. The second type refers to college and university graduates who are too picky when finding jobs. These young adults prefer to stay at home supported by their parents rather than accept average jobs. The third category refers to low-educated young adults who are only able to find low-paid jobs. Some of them are lazy and afraid of bearing burdens or hardships. They would rather ask for everything from their parents as they did when they were younger. I met a 24-year-old girl once who had been staying at home without any job for one year. She told me that she just graduated from high school and could only find jobs as a waitress. "Jobs like waitress can earn little money. And it is shameful." She said, "I would rather to stay at home and find another promising job." When I asked her parents' response, the girl hesitated for a moment and answered: "My parents felt very disappointed by me. But they can do nothing but continue to support me...I am their only daughter." The other type of boomerang kids refers to the adult children who have jobs but still ask their parents for money to buy apartments, cars, and other expensive properties.

Boomerang adult children make it more difficult to solve the issue of caring aging population in urban China. When referred to the reasons of emerging boomerang adult children, some post-1980s single children criticize that the family-based education fails to educate children with appropriate social abilities and characteristics. A net-surfer argued online in her blog that the phenomenon of boomerang adult children resulted in some

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<sup>90</sup> Chen Ting. "Six phenomena of Boomerang Kids," In *ChinaHRD News* (July 4, 2006) [http://www.chinahrd.net/zhi\\_sk/jt\\_page.asp?articleid=105800](http://www.chinahrd.net/zhi_sk/jt_page.asp?articleid=105800) (accessed July 4, 2006)

parents always considering their children as the center of their life and spoiling their children.<sup>91</sup> A number of single children of the post-1980s generation express that they can understand the situation of some types of boomerang adult children. Xue Jie responded, to some degree, I can understand the situation of adult children who have jobs but still ask for money from their parents. You know, today's prices are increasing crazily. Only depending on their own wage, few of the post-1980s generation can buy apartments for marriage and for their own families. In that case, these young adults have to ask for help from nobody but their only parents. On the other hand, if parents help their children with financial resources, it may probably decrease their own living standards in old age. It's really hard to make a perfect decision. As far as I know, most of the parents do give their money to their children for marriage and other use... Our parents have really sacrificed much to their children. They are great.

In conclusion, urban one-child families are now facing the crucial issue of caring for the aging population. Young adults from the 1980s generation take the heavy burden of caring for their elderly parents and grandparents on their own. This issue is not only resulted in the insufficient social resources but also in the much smaller family structure and size produced by the one-child policy. As a net-surfer once argued online: "In fact, the one-child family is the typical family at risk."<sup>92</sup> To resolve the problem becomes a huge challenge to both of the government and every member of the single-child generation.

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<sup>91</sup> <http://hi.baidu.com/%B4%E7%D0%C4%C7%A7%C0%EF/blog/item/0b85b20e552073e037d122e9.html>.

<sup>92</sup> <http://tieba.baidu.com/f?kz=10757459>.



## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

Implemented in 1978, China's one-child policy has greatly influenced urban families' everyday life and their family strategies. The small size and structure of the one-child family produced by the one-child policy has changed contemporary urban Chinese families in size and in the ways they approach parenting and the aging process of their elders. In general, the one-child policy has brought both advantages and disadvantages to one-child families in urban China. In general, one-child families try their best to handle the national policy. They enjoy some benefits from the smaller families, and at the same time are confronted with many contradictions and potential threats. In short, urban one-child families present various ways of addressing the one-child policy.

Accepting the state requirement of limited births, urban parents have adjusted their child-rearing practices to cultivate their one "perfect" child. They put comprehensive parental attention and heavy parental investment into raising their only child. Giving their single children as rich a material life as they can, one-child parents also put heavy burdens on their children's shoulders. To ensure their children can win in the job market in the future, they put a much heavier parental investment in improving their children's academic performance than any other aspects of education and cultivation. As China

engages in globalization, foresighted urban parents have begun to adopt Western child-rearing practices with the goal of helping their children to fit into the global labor market. Increasingly parents send their children to study abroad to strengthen their competitive capabilities.

Relative to their parents' strategies and child-rearing practices, single children of the post-1980s generation are widely considered spoiled "little emperors/empresses." However, on the other hand, they also feel more stress in competing for entrance to the best schools of higher education and for jobs in the job market in the future than did children from previous generations. As the first generation of single children in Chinese society, the post-1980s generation exhibits some characteristics different from previous generations that are attracting much social attention.

Gender norms have been also changed under the one-child policy. Mothers in the one-child families play multiple roles in both family and social life. On one hand, the one-child policy liberates one-child mothers from the burden of being a birthing machine. Compared to previous generations, one-child mothers have achieved somewhat greater self-determination. For example, the majority one-child mothers have jobs and are able to help in supporting their families financially. On the other hand, rearing the 'only child' does not simplify one-child mothers' parenting duties. Having great expectations for their only children, one-child mothers have to sacrifice a lot of their time and energy in cultivating and educating their children rather than attending to their own desires or dreams for themselves. In short, although beginning to experience changes in gender norms, urban one-child mothers still take their domestic roles more seriously than their

social roles of being workers and employees.

In contrast to their mothers, urban single daughters are empowered by the one-child policy. Without the pressure of competing with male siblings as did previous generations of urban daughters, urban single daughters predominantly receive as much parental care and investment as do single sons. With professional abilities and social positions equal to their male peers, urban single daughters have much stronger self-determination than any other generation in Chinese society. They can make their own choices in all areas of their life. To their parents, empowered single daughters are as good as sons or if professionally successful even better “sons”, because they tend to cater to more to the emotional needs of their parents.

The biggest threat and danger brought by the birth-limiting policy to the one-child families lies in the issue of caring for the aging population. Due to the deficiency of social pensions and the lack of a health care system with general coverage, one-child parents face the problem of wanting financial resources and social supports after retirement. The small family size and structure requires parents to depend on their only children. Compared to previous generations where multiple children assisted in caring for aging relatives, the only children have to care for their two parents and four grandparents by themselves, which puts extreme pressure on the single children of the post-1980s generation. The pressure of demanding lives and time intensive jobs makes it difficult for the 1980s generation to provide sufficient financial support to their parents while supporting their own existence or that of their spouse and child. Since a large number of the post-1980s generation live separately from their parents, they are not able to provide

the timely daily care and emotional support parents would enjoy and often expect. As the post-1980s generation grows into full adulthood by the late 2010s, caring for the aging population will become the most severe difficulty for both individual one-child families and contemporary Chinese society. As a whole, one-child parents are now facing life without guarantees for a materially and emotionally well balanced old age.

### The Future of the One-child Policy

China's central government claimed that the one-child policy was a short-term measure when the one-child policy was implemented in late 1970s, with the goal of moving toward a voluntary small-family culture.<sup>93</sup> After thirty years, the one-child policy continues to be implemented as the basic national policy. As some critical issues produced by the one-child policy, such as caring for the aging population, become more and more crucial, partial adjustments to the one-child policy have been practiced in several localities. For example, in Guangzhou Province, the one-child family whose only child has physical disabilities is allowed to have another child. In the city of Nanjing increasingly two-children families are emerging after the local government adopted a more flexible birth planning policy in 2003.<sup>94</sup> According to the State Commission for Population and Family Planning, the practice of having two children if parents are all single young adults can be implemented as a provincial option; however, the currently dominant national policy is still the one-child policy. Only a very limited number of provinces or cities have declared a new policy of allowing two children. Wider

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<sup>93</sup> Bongaarts J Greenhalgh S, "Fertility Policy in China: Future Options," *Science* 235 (1987): 1167-1172.

<sup>94</sup> Anonymous, "Retrospect of the One-child Policy: How Much Do You Want to Have the Second Child?" *sina.com.cn*. <http://baby.sina.com.cn/zt/20060915.shtml> (accessed November 29, 2007)

implementation of other than the one-child policy is not practiced. In urban Dalian, the practice for couples composed of single young adults being allowed to have two children is not yet implemented or practiced.

Since the various circumstances and the consequences in different areas of China are evolving in different ways, it is difficult to depict or predict the future of the national one-child policy in any simple way. However, some questions should be examined and answered in further studies of the one-child policy to help formulate further decisions. For example, in urban China, do couples both from the generation of single children prefer to have one or more children or one child? Are the single-young-adult-couples able to raise two children financially and culturally? If the national policy remains the one-child policy, how are the social issues of caring for the aging population to be resolved?

The policy adjustment in several cities can be seen as a beneficial and experimental reform. Whether to expand the policy reform to wider urban areas across China needs more careful and deeper research on the experiences of one-child families and on socioeconomic and cultural contexts.

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