

THE SOCIAL IMPACT OF CHINA'S ONE-CHILD POLICY

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As family is important to the socialization of children, it plays an important role in the development of children's intellect and personality. In order to control the country's population, the People's Republic of China has implemented the one child's policy for the last two decade. Today, over 90% of all urban children, and over 60% of rural children have no brothers or sisters. What

is the effect of this historically rare policy? Researchers and citizens from both the East and the West have been concerned with this issue. In China, many news-reports have expressed the worry that single-child families would produce self-centered "little emperors" and "empresses." Theoretically, this concern is both reasonable and probable. However, at this point, such speculations have not

been supported by any substantial evidence in research.

Western scholars Toni Falbo and Denis F. Polit (1986) have noted the three discrete discrepancies between only-children and children with siblings. First, children with siblings often exchange amongst each other their respective academic and social experiences – an advantage that single-children lack. Second, single-children tend to be dominated more by self-seeking instincts, commanding more attention in their individual homes. Third, because parents tend to treat their single-child the way standard parents treat their first-born (with more vigilance and care due to inexperience), single-children will generally be more reliant on their parents and less independent.

The question this article addresses is: does the impact of the three above-listed differences really make China's only-children a selfish and socially-awkward generation?

Falbo and Polit have performed 115 single-children related experiments. They have found that the only-children in China have also exhibited positive attributes. Compared to children with siblings of the same age, Chinese single-children have shown superior overall academic performance. What is more, Chen, Rubin, and Li (1995) have shown that there is actually very little disparity in the intrinsic nature of social skills between only-children and non-only-children. In fact, due to the overwhelming attention they receive at home, some single-children might even appear to be more emotionally secure and confident. Chen, Rubin, and Li also argue that, contrary to conventional beliefs, single children have not been spoiled by their parents (hence generating the nickname “little emperor” and “little empresses”), and they themselves are not a selfish group. According to Chen et al., single-children are actually very well adjusted amongst members of their peers, and have very apt social skills – so much so that they even exhibit elements of superiority (i.e. better leadership skills) in certain areas. Thereby, single-children behave better in school, and demonstrate a higher level of academic excellence.

Other researchers have shown that, despite there being some positive influences in having siblings, such influences are not the decisive factors in child-development. The sheer existence or absence of a sibling does not determine the outcome of a child's social growth. For the single-child, the nature and structure of his or her family system can be the adjusting factor for his or her lack of sibling contact. It could be that parents of only-children tend to demonstrate higher care and caution when raising their children – to the point that such children often adopt a more active and enthusiastic stance toward group-orientated activities. Also, it is often believed that because only-children and their parents often share a higher level of intimacy, their parents will be more attentive to the needs

of their children, they would make a greater effort to maintain good relations and be more supportive toward their children's personal and academic endeavors. Researchers at China's Center for Children Development showed in the 1980's that parents of only-children, on the whole, have a higher level of expectation for their children's career and academic achievements. Mercy and Steelman (1982) have also reported that only-children spend more time with their parents than do non-only children. Lewis and Feiring (1982) have also found that single-children are more inclined to communicate with their parents, often with greater confidence and versatility in their conversations. Such examples would no doubt impact the nature and pattern of a child's development and maturation, for better or worse.

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Yet there is yet to be any proof that such families are widespread in China. There are even those, like Chinese scholar Li Fenhua, who argued that little intrinsic differences exist between the childrearing nature of only-children families and non-only children families. Rather, it is the educational background of the parents that truly impacts the growth of their children. In other words, the most important factors in any child's development are not whether they have a brother or a sister, but whether their

parents have a good education and adopt the right values for the family.

It is unavoidable that only-children will have experience certain things differently from children with siblings. However, Li Fenhua and others believe that because Chinese children enter Kindergarten at a fairly young age, the social interactions they benefit from serve to compensate for their lack of playmates at home. For this reason, Li Fenhua et al disagree with a branch of Japanese scholars who believe that “Chinese single-children lack socialization and networking skills.” Such deficient social characteristics, they argue, might belong to children who have been home-taught, but certainly not to those who began their education at the Kindergarten level.

Of course, we should not overlook the fact that perhaps at this current stage, we lack the facility and the necessary parameters to measure the impact of the Single-Child Policy on China's new generation. For one, many questions still remain speculative due to the sheer age of single-children — who as a cohort are still too young to provide a definitive trend. But no matter what, the author believes that one could never put enough emphasis for



the single child to interact with his or her peers. First and foremost, it is absolutely necessary to utilize education as a means for peer socialization. The Chinese Association for Education, educational establishments, and the Chinese media, ought to reinforce to parents, as well as grandparents the negative consequences of over-indulging their “little emperors” and “empresses,” along with the necessity and positive consequences of peer involvement and interaction. Not only that, but the most effective means is to involve the Chinese society and its very own government. One notable aspect is the Chinese society’s overall impact on children’s growth. Society overall ought to promote more social interactions and community-orientated behavior. Li Fenhua et al have noted that only-children have an especially strong desire to socialize, (they believe it has to do with a lack of company/playing partner at home). Presently, single-children of today are deprived of the same childhood experiences undergone by their mothers and fathers. Furthermore, many single-children often lack a means to channel their stress (as they don’t have a close sibling-confidant), which might lead to long-term problems. The type of pressure placed on only-children by their parents might lead to irrevocable consequences, and only gradual communication and societal modifications (such as increased organized social affairs) might lead to the amelioration of such issues.

This may not be as easy as it seems. For one, a spe-

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cific concern with safety has been raised in a recent PRC People’s Conference. The issue of responsibility and liability is paramount when dealing with the welfare of children, particularly only-children – since any harm to the child would mean a devastating loss to the family. It is because of this issue that schools are often less eager to organize social outings that might otherwise promote peer interactive skills amongst only-children. (What might further exacerbate this matter is individual

parents’ over-emphasis on students’ academic performance, which overshadows parents’ concern for their children’s social capabilities). However, currently, social outings and community outreach for children have been more widespread and appreciated than during the past few years. We ought

to further emphasize and support the importance of such programs and trends – if we are to compensate for the absence of siblings in Chinese society. As previously stated, it is still speculative whether or not single-children are at a disadvantage (or vice-versa) when compared to their non-single children peers. However, it is undeniable that single-children will create a different society for China. And for the betterment of that society, we must first enhance single-children’s opportunities and abilities at social communication, interaction, and development.

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