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## FAMILY PLANNING AND THE VALUE OF CHILDREN IN CHINA

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### **Basic Theoretical Concerns**

China is the only country in the world with such a far-reaching family planning policy. Now in existence for over 20 years, the policy has been shown to be successful in controlling population growth. But other consequences that may also influence the future of the country remain unclear. One of these consequences concerns the value of children. People are motivated to bear and rear children to satisfy their economic, social, and emotional needs (Hoffman, 1988; Trommsdorff, Zheng, & Tardif, 2002). The process of modernization and the trend towards smaller families is apparent in many countries in the world (Rosenberg & Jing, 1996), but the one-child policy in China prompts us to ask several specific questions. For example, how can people adjust their desire for more offspring to a policy that allows only one child per couple? How are parenting and child development affected by so many children growing up without siblings? How does the social-ecological environment influence the existence of an increasing proportion of one-child families in the population and vice versa? These questions not only concern the problems of one-child families per se, but also the whole society. The birth control policies in China have provided a unique chance to look into these questions.

We should also study the applied aspects. Strategic decisions (e.g., the one-child policy) are made under certain historical and political conditions. While solving some problems, they may bring about new problems. In China, while the birth control policies have been successful in controlling population growth, the potentially problematic consequences have never been adequately studied. Of course, simply reducing the size of the population is not sufficient to improve a society. The only-child family structure could influence one's value of children, expectations of offspring, and child-rearing behavior. Conversely, these values and behaviors may affect the economic development, culture, education, social justice, and social welfare of a country. So, it is important for researchers to understand the policies from a contextual point of view, to predict their long-term effects, and to propose efficient ways of solving potentially ensuing problems.

This paper presents some background information concerning the demographic situation in China, related psychological studies, and a recent preliminary investigation on the parent-child (i.e., young adult child in one-child families) relationship and parent-child communications patterns. The data will serve as the basis for further exploration and prediction of the psychological consequences of the family planning and birth control policies in China and their influence on the future development of the society.

## Demographic Situation

### *What Is the One-Child Family Policy?*

The family planning policies in China are more complex than just a simple one-child-per-family rule. According to these policies, urban families may usually only have one child. Some families are allowed to have a second child: e.g., if the first child is handicapped, if both parents are only children themselves, if the first child in a rural family is a girl. In addition, some national minorities are allowed to have more than one child per family in order to increase or maintain their population size. The policies also require that siblings be born at least four years apart.

### ***How Do these Policies Influence Population Growth?***

These family planning policies have successfully controlled the rapid growth of China's population in the last two decades. There has been a significant decrease in the birth rate. A comparison of the data from the past three national censuses shows that the population increased by 12.45% from 1980 to 1990 (reaching 1,133,680,000) and by 11.66% from 1990 to 2000 (reaching 1,265,830,000) (Yu, 2001). The number of daily newborns decreased from an average of 42,979 in 1981-1990 to an average of 30,171 in 1991-2000. The population of China is currently about 1.3 billion.

As compared to the annual population growth rate of other countries, China is about average, i.e., 1.07%; France: 0.34%; Germany: -0.07%; India: 1.76%; Indonesia: 1.56%; Japan: 0.21%; Korea Rep.: 0.87%; Poland: 0.06%; and Turkey: 1.48% [NBS (National Bureau of Statistics of the People's Republic of China), 2001]. The average population growth rate in industrialized countries is -0.25%, while that of the developing countries is 1.75% (Yu, 2001).

### ***How Many Children Are There on Average in Chinese Families?***

For reasons stated above, on average, there is more than one child per family in China: there are approximately 2.3. For comparison, in the United States, there are roughly 1.7 children per family.

The one-child family policy has been strictly enforced in Chinese cities since the late 1970s. Thus, among urban families with a child under the age of 18, about 60-70% have an only child. In one of our recent studies of urban middle school students, we found that the percentage of pupils registered in Beijing who are only children has increased dramatically in the last 20 years: While 39% of those born in 1982 had at least one sibling, only 30% of the children born in 1986 and less than 24% of those born after 1987 had any siblings (Gao, Shi, Tang, Zheng et al., 2002).

In the rural areas of China, where about 63.91% of the Chinese population lives (NBS, 2001), the situation is different: On average, these mothers have their first child at the age of about 22 (as compared to about 60% the marriage age after 23 in urban areas). Table 1 shows a breakdown of the number of children in rural families in a southern province (Shi, 2001).

Table 1

*Number of Children per Family by Mother's Age in Southern Rural Areas (In %)*

Age of Mother	Number of Children per Family			
	1 child	2 children	3 children	4 or more children
Under 30	76.92	19.23	3.85	0
31-40	47.73	45.45	6.82	0
41-50	10.17	52.54	25.42	11.86
51-60	7.41	44.44	33.33	14.81

There are different reasons for rural parents to decide to have more children even when they already have a son. The following are unpublished data from interviews with two couples conducted in an ongoing study. Two families chose to have a second child without the permission of the local government. In the first family, the father used to be a schoolmaster at a rural middle school. Because he had a second child (a daughter), he lost his job. He and his wife did not expect to be supported by their children when they were old. But they believed that their first son should have a sibling, and the children would be able to help each other when either of them had a problem in the future. The other couple was ready to be fined a large sum of money for having their second son. The reason was simple: They would need more children to take care of them when they get old.

As shown in Table 2, were it not under the control of the one-child family policy, most urban families in China would also prefer to have more than one child, as is the case in the other countries studied (Zheng & Shi, 2000).

It should also be noted that, with the progress of urbanization in China, a fairly large proportion – over 15% – of the rural population (the so-called “floating population”) migrates to and works in cities. About half of the 20- to 45-year-old men and women, as well as their children under age 15, do not live in the rural places where they are officially registered. So, the number of 2-children families may have been underestimated, as they could not be included in the study (Shi, 2001).

Table 2

*The Desired Number of Children in the Family*

Country	One child	Two children	Three or more
Israel	0	12%	88%
Korea	0	28%	72%
Indonesia	3%	25%	72%
Japan	0	37%	63%
Germany	17%	56%	37%
Turkey	11%	52%	37%
China	29%	65%	6%

Nevertheless, as the percentage of one-child families is increasing, there has been some concern about the special results of the social policies of family planning and their psychological effects on parenting behaviors, the changes in value of children, child development, and the future of the country. Influenced by theoretical and political concerns at different periods of time, the foci of Chinese psychological studies concerning the one-child effects have also changed.

### Studies on Only Children

#### *How Have the Main Questions in Psychological Studies on Only Children Changed?*

Psychologists began to study questions concerning only children in the 1970's with a strong educational concern (Zhang, 1988). Most studies were conducted with basic questions concerning the advantages and disadvantages of only children with respect to physical growth, mental health, and personality (e.g., Lin, Fan, & Wan, 1993; Tao, Qiu, Li, & Tseng, 1996), cognitive development (e.g., Ji, Jing, & Jiao, 1993; Jiao, Jing, & Ji, 1992; Jiao, Ji, & Jing, 1996; Mao, 1984; Zha, 1985), moral development (e.g., Chen, 1985; Huang, 1992), and combined aspects (Falbo, 1987; Falbo & Poston, 1993; Falbo, Poston, Ji, Jiao, et al., 1993; Zhang, 1997).

Starting in the mid 1980s, researchers began to pay attention to the phenomenon of the "spoiled only child" (or: "little emperor"). Some re-

lated social problems started to draw attention towards the future of the society. For example, would human relationships and social values be changed with the growing proportion of only children in the population? What would be the consequences for families with 4 grandparents, 2 parents, and 1 child? However, most studies found few differences between only children and non-only children with respect to cognitive development, social and emotional development, or personality: such differences were more related to the parents' education level, the urban family environment, social environment, investment in child rearing, or value of son/daughter (Tsui & Rich, 2002; Zhang, 1997). At the same time, a methodological problem was often found in sampling, as there could hardly be enough comparable sub-samples of urban non-only and rural only children.

In the 1990s, studies turned to the value of children (e.g., Lin, Wan, Jing, & Hoffman, 1995). A significant difference was found between urban and rural samples in the basic economic needs of having children. For instance, most urban parents reported no preference for a boy or a girl, and they expected their child to have more success in his/her career and to give less support to his/her parents. In contrast, most rural parents reported needing to have a boy, and they expected their child to have more wealth and give more support to the family in the future. As the social security system has not reached most villages, old people must live on their savings and financial support from their children. Among the total population in China, there are 6.95% of people who are over 65 years old (NSB, 2001). After the age of 65, there should be 11.2 years for men and 14.2 years for women to live on with the supports from children and/or social insurance. Researchers started to realize that, rather than simply detecting the advantages or disadvantages of being or having an only child, studies should be broader and go deeper to explore the social context and its universal/specific influences on the development of children and the changes in the parents' value of children.

### ***What Can the Recent Intergenerational VOC Study in China Tell Us?***

The data from three separate VOC studies conducted in 1970, 1990, and 2000 demonstrate changes in the mothers' value of children. The 1970 data are from the first international VOC study, in which the Chinese data were collected in Taiwan (Hoffman & Hoffman, 1973). The 1990 samples

were urban and rural samples from Beijing area (Lin, Wan, Jing, & Hoffman, 1995) and the 2000 sample was an urban sample from Beijing (Zheng, 2001). All respondents were mothers of a child between the ages of 2-5. They answered the same VOC questions. The columns indicate the percentage of people who rated the item as an important need of having children. Over 95% of the mothers in the two investigations in Beijing had only one child.

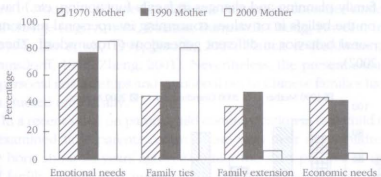


Figure 1. Reports from mothers in 3 VOC studies.

The value of children patterns demonstrated amazing similarities between the 1970 Taiwan group and the 1990 Beijing group in emotional needs, family ties, family extension, and economic needs. This demonstrates the similarities concerning value of children in this culture among people from different places and under different social systems. The differences between the two Beijing groups show a dramatic change in the economic and social values of children, which may be related to the social reforms in China since 1990. While the emotional needs remained stable, the need to have a child to enhance the marriage or "family ties" became more important. Those changes may have partially resulted from the changes in the functions of family and the value of children in the development of the society and partially from the inclusion of rural samples in the 1990 investigation. These hypotheses should be investigated in future studies.

Figure 2 shows that societal development influences people of all generations. It was the first time that a group of grandmothers (i.e., the biological mothers of the younger mothers) was included in an interna-



tional VOC research project.<sup>1</sup> This generation is about the same age as the original respondents in the 1970's (currently). For the grandmothers, the importance of the economic and the family-extension value of children also decreased. Moreover, the comparisons between the 1990 young mother group and the 2000 grandmother group showed that "time" might have a stronger influence on value of children than "age." So, these may be taken as reasons to predict that the social-ecological factors (e.g., social reform, cultural traditions, development of the economy, practice of special policies of family planning and changes in family functioning, etc.) have an impact on the beliefs in or values concerning interpersonal relationships and personal behavior in different generations (Trommsdorff, Zheng, & Tardif, 2002).

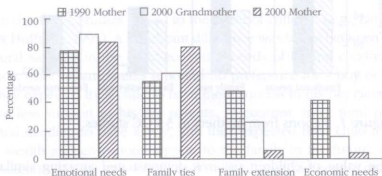


Figure 2. VOC reports from different generations.

### Parents and Children in One-Child Families

Although most research projects concerning the value of children and the one-child family focus on the development of young children, school education, and family environment, it would also be interesting to study what happens when the only child becomes a young adult and leaves home and the parents are left in an "empty nest." For example, what are the practical needs of parents and children when children from one-child families start living on their own? How does the change in basic family structure and family functioning influence the relationship and communication between family members? What are the general situations in

modern nuclear families and specific problems in families that have only one child?

The past twenty years have seen rapid development in mainland China. The quick developments in the economy, the political system, and social life are challenging the traditional lifestyles and values of this culture with thousands of years' history of civilization. The changes in social structures and traditional values should gradually reshape family functions and intergenerational relationships in various ways. This has been discussed in studies conducted in different cultures or countries undergoing social change (e.g., Arnold, Bulatao, Buripakdi, Chung, Fawcett, Iritani et al., 1975; Lin et al., 1995; Nauck, 2001; Nauck & Kohlmann, 1999; Trommsdorff, 1995; Zheng, 2001). Nevertheless, the present situation of interpersonal relationships and emotional ties in Chinese families has never been studied empirically.

In a recent study on parent-child communication in one-child family,<sup>2</sup> we examined how parents communicate with their only children who were born about 20 years ago (i.e., under the strict practice of the one-child family policy) and are currently attending university (or working) away from their parents' home, in a different city. It was hypothesized that the only children have closer emotional ties with their parents, more financial support from their families, and more difficulties at the beginning of their "dormitory life" with schoolmates, hence more frequent communication with their parents to satisfy the emotional needs of both parents and children.

### **Method**

The investigation was conducted by a questionnaire survey. The total of 346 respondents included 240 Chinese students and some of their parents, 20 young workers and a group of 50 foreign students. The Chinese students were selected for the comparisons between 120 only children (OC) and 120 non-only children (NOC), first-year students (i.e., those who had 2 months' experience living on campus) and second-year students (120:120), male and female (120:120), and different places (i.e., 80:80:80). The students were attending universities in Beijing, Xi'an, and Kunming; their parents lived in other places. They usually only returned home during semester breaks. The young workers had graduated from university and lived on their own income for over a year. The foreign students were

from various Asian and European countries and had been studying Chinese language in Beijing for over eight months. They filled out an English-language version of the questionnaire.<sup>3</sup>

The questionnaire consisted of 12 parts with a total of 116 items concerning personal and family information, method and frequency of communication between parents and children, adaptation to campus life and university studies, developmental milestones, the parent-child relationship, the value of children and family, and basic values of life.

## Results<sup>4</sup>

### *Means and Frequency of Communication*

As shown in Figure 3, the telephone was the most commonly used means of communication. Significant differences were found in the frequency of telephone communication (i.e., daily or several times a week) between the OC group and the NOC group ( $\chi^2 = 24.83, p < .001$ ), and also between the parents of the OC (POC) and the parents of the NOC (PNOC) ( $\chi^2 = 10.96, p < .01$ ). There were higher percentages of more frequent telephone communication among the only children and their parents. In addition, the same difference could also be found between the parent groups in their expectations of daily/weekly phone calls ( $\chi^2 = 35.31, p < .001$ ). Over 80% of the OC and 75% of their parents expected to have frequent telephone contact. At the same time, 62% of the NOC and only 55% of their parents expected to have frequent telephone contact. On the whole, both children and their parents hoped that they would be able to use the videophone (i.e., 67.9% and 61.5%) or e-mail (i.e., 47.6% and 27.3%) to have frequent long-distance contact.

The same trends could be seen in the young workers' group and the international students, while more young workers (i.e., over 40%) reported frequent use of mobile phone. Female students made and expected more frequent contact with their parents than their male counterparts did. The international students had more e-mail contact (i.e., 56.8%) with their parents. Most Chinese students claimed that economic reasons did not influence their use of a standard telephone to communicate with their parents. A remarkable difference was found between urban and rural students, and between parents who were peasants and those who worked

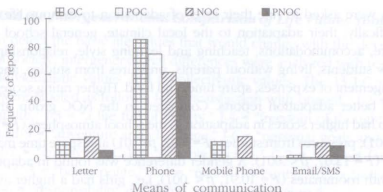


Figure 3. Actual communication

in professional lines of work: The average frequency of communication, students' expenses at school, and family income were all significantly lower in the rural than in the urban group.

#### ***What are the Reasons for Frequent Calls between Students and Parents?***

Eleven reasons were listed in the questionnaire and the respondents were asked to rate the importance of each reason for calling their parents. The top two reasons for both parents and students were: "I want them/him/her to know that I am (we are) safe and sound" and "I would like to know about the important events at home (school)." There was a significant difference between the OC and NOC groups with respect to the latter item [ $K(1, 239) = 6.24, p < .01$ ]: the only children were more concerned about important events at home. Parents also gave the reason "I would offer advice when my child has problems with studies" a high rating; children's average rating on this item was significantly lower. For both the OC and NOC group, the third highest rating was for the reason "I hope that my parents don't feel lonely during my absence." Parents also often called to ask if their children needed more money; this was the least important reason for students to call.

#### ***How Did the New Students Adapt to Campus Life and University Studies?***

Most of the Chinese students had not left their parents' home until they started their university studies. Thus, on a 4-point scale, the respon-

dents were asked to rate their level of adaptation to campus life, more specifically, their adaptation to the local climate, general school atmosphere, accommodations, teaching and learning style, relationship with fellow students, living without parents, pressures from studies, and their management of expenses, spare time, and food. Higher rating scores indicated better adaptation reports. Compared to the NOC group, the OC group had higher scores in adaptation to the school atmosphere ( $F = 11.06$ ,  $p < .001$ ), pressures from studies ( $F = 5.82$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and spare time management ( $F = 12.07$ ,  $p < .001$ ). A gender difference was found in adapting to life with roommates ( $F = 10.91$ ,  $p < .001$ ), i.e., girls had a higher average score.

The fact that the OC group reported better adaptation contradicts the hypothesis that the only children would have more difficulty adapting to campus life. A possible reason was that children without siblings start living on their own earlier than do those with siblings. Another reason might be the fact that many of the non-only children were the younger siblings in their families and maybe therefore more dependent on their parents and/or older brothers/sisters. The frequency of communication by telephone was positively correlated with adaptation to relationship with fellow students ( $r = .15$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and negatively correlated with adaptation to general atmosphere ( $r = .14$ ,  $p < .05$ ). One's level of adaptation to campus life may be largely determined by personality factors and one's acquired level of independence.

### ***How Did Communication Correlate with Parent-Child Relationship?***

The respondents also rated mutual understanding with their parents (i.e., with father and mother, respectively), mutual trust, attachment, mutual respect, and emotional dependence on 4-point scales. Significant correlations were found between actual and expected parent-child communication with mutual understanding for both the OC and NOC groups ( $r$ 's = .22-.41,  $p < .01$ ). Communication did not significantly correlate with mutual trust, mutual respect, or emotional dependence. The expected frequency of communication was significantly correlated with attachment for both the OC and NOC groups ( $r$ 's = .21-.27,  $p < .01$ ). At the same time, only the ratings of the NOC students had a moderately significant correlation with the frequency of their actual communication with their mothers ( $r = .27$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

### What Did the Intergenerational Comparison of Life Values Show?

To detect the basic life values that would change with the development of society, intergenerational differences were analyzed with respect to 7 individualistic values and 6 collectivistic values. The 13 I-C value scales were labeled as follows: I-1 = "satisfaction with oneself," I-2 = "an exciting life," I-3 = "a life full of variety," I-4 = "freedom of thought and speech," I-5 = "adventure and challenge," I-6 = "personal goals and pursuits," I-7 = "creativity," C-1 = "a stable society," C-2 = "respect for the elderly," C-3 = "being polite," C-4 = "national security," C-5 = "self-control," C-6 = "responsibility and duty", as shown in Figure 4.

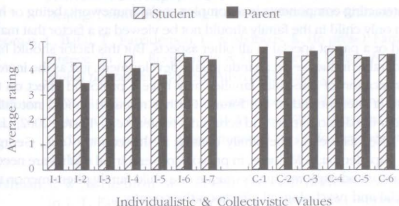


Figure 4. Life values of students and parents.

The parents had significantly higher scores in the collectivistic values C-1 ( $t = 4.47$ ,  $p < .001$ ), C-2 ( $t = 2.74$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and C-3 ( $t = 2.43$ ,  $p < .05$ ). The students had significantly higher scores in the individualistic values I-1 ( $t = 6.42$ ,  $p < .001$ ), I-2 ( $t = 5.18$ ,  $p < .001$ ), I-3 ( $t = 4.57$ ,  $p < .001$ ), I-4 ( $t = 4.41$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and I-5 ( $t = 3.80$ ,  $p < .001$ ). All other differences were non-significant.

### A Short Summary of the Study and the Concluding Remarks

Empirical evidence has shown more universal aspects between parent-child communication and relationships, rather than specific attachment or emotional ties between only children and their parents. Without siblings, a child can receive all the financial resources that parents invest

in their offspring. At the same time, he/she will also bear the full responsibility for his/her family and parents, thus caring more about the events at home than non-only children do. Beyond the main interest of this research, it is necessary to consider the difficulties one-child families will have in the near future, as a high proportion of Chinese families will be one-child families and the social security system inadequate to support them.

Returning to the theoretical concerns about the special family planning policies and their social and psychological consequences, we assume that social change influences family structure and economy, interpersonal relationships, life values, value of children, socialization of the younger generation, and other social and psychological aspects of life. As one of the interacting components in a complex social framework, being or having an only child in the family should not be viewed as a factor that makes a child or a parent special in all other aspects. But this factor should have considerable influence on an individual's development, just as the increasing proportion of one-child families may have a profound effect on this society at present and in the future. Further research should not fail to consider the demographic and economic context (e.g., Foster, 2002; Liang & Li, 2003) as well as the family context in this country (e.g., Georgas, Bafiti, Papademou, & Mylonas, in press). More empirical studies are needed to monitor and explore China's unique one-child family phenomenon and its social and psychological effects on the country.

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### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Funded by the German Science Foundation, the project "Value of Children and Intergenerational Relations" is being carried out in 14 countries, including China. Principal investigators are B. Nauck & G. Trommsdorff (Germany).
- <sup>2</sup> The study on the communication patterns in the one-child families was funded by the Human Interface Laboratory, Motorola, Beijing.
- <sup>3</sup> The foreign students were investigated in Beijing by Dominika Cie'ikowska and Katolina Jedrzejewska from Warsaw School of Social Psychology.
- <sup>4</sup> The data are from the unpublished project report "The change in basic family structures in mainland China and its influence on the relationship and communication between family members" (G. Zheng & Y. Liu, 2002), which was presented in Intergenerational Relations and Value of Children in Changing Societies at the 16<sup>th</sup> Congress of IACCP, Yogyakarta, with the permission of the Human Interface Laboratory, Motorola, Beijing.

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