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# 4 Grandparents, 2 Parents, 1 Daughter: The One Child Policy's Restructuring of Chinese Families and its Positive Impact on Gender Equality

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**4 Grandparents, 2 Parents, 1 Daughter: The One Child Policy's Restructuring  
of Chinese Families and its Positive Impact on Gender Equality**

By

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A senior thesis submitted to fulfill the requirements of  
the Howard H. Baker Jr. Policy Scholars Program,  
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## Introduction

For centuries the patriarchal structure of Chinese society has been nearly absolute. The emphasis placed on filial piety, family structure, and proper gender roles in Chinese society is so strong that the character for “good” is *hao* 好. Individually, the character *nu* 女 means “woman” and pictographically appears to be a pregnant woman. The character *zi* 子 represents a child and generally is associated with male children. Thus, *hao* 好 pictographically defines “good” as a female who is pregnant with a male child. The importance of women bearing sons and the idea of male superiority has been essential in China and has permeated nearly all aspects of society. Historically, patriarchal societal norms were closely intertwined with government and politics and the pro-natalist and patriarchal norms were supported by religion, philosophy, and government policies. Traditional practices coexisted in harmony with state power. The rise of the Cultural Revolution and Mao Zedong altered this complementary relationship, and new policies that conflicted with cultural and societal norms and values were implemented. One of the most extreme examples of this new, conflicting relationship is China’s infamous One Child Policy. The One Child Policy has challenged traditional patriarchal, patrilineal, patrilateral, and patrilocal ideas and practices.

The One Child Policy (OCP) is commonly criticized and denounced by scholars and activists alike, but the OCP had a positive impact on gender equality in China. In this paper I will demonstrate this positive impact. I will begin by discussing the background of the OCP and its implementation and scope. I will then discuss the current literature on the OCP, how current literature focuses nearly solely on human rights, and how human rights differ from gender equality. In the fourth section I will examine the OCP’s impact on family structure in China and

the evolving role of the singleton daughter. The changes in family dynamics and the benefits afforded to singleton daughters, I will argue in the next sections have resulted in increasing gender equality in China, as evidenced by educational attainment and outcomes, the workforce participation and forms of employment held, spousal dynamics in marriage, and roles and participation in religious practices.

## **Background**

After World War II, the world experienced the fastest population growth rate in human history (Feng, Cai, and Gu 116). China was at the forefront of this dramatic increase. In 1949, China had 541.7 million people, which was 22 percent of the world's population (Attané 103). During the height of the Cultural Revolution, Mao Zedong heavily encouraged and rewarded high rates of reproduction, and women generally gave birth to five to six children (Y. Peng 771). During the prior century – marked by rebellions, epidemics, wars, and the collapse of the imperial government and its authority – the population growth rate in China was no more than 0.3 percent per year (Kane and Choi 992). Mao Zedong saw an expansion in the populations as a sign of China's new strength and was often quoted using the traditional Chinese saying “Of all things in the world, people are the most precious.” Beginning in 1953, Mao's government contributed to the health of mothers and children and promoted high rates of reproduction. By 1970, the influx of reproduction combined with the falling death rates resulted in the population growth rate rising to 2.8%, which amounts to approximately 250 million additional people (992).

Soon, extreme population growth in China became a potential threat to the nation's food surplus, economic development, and the government's ability to meet the needs of its people

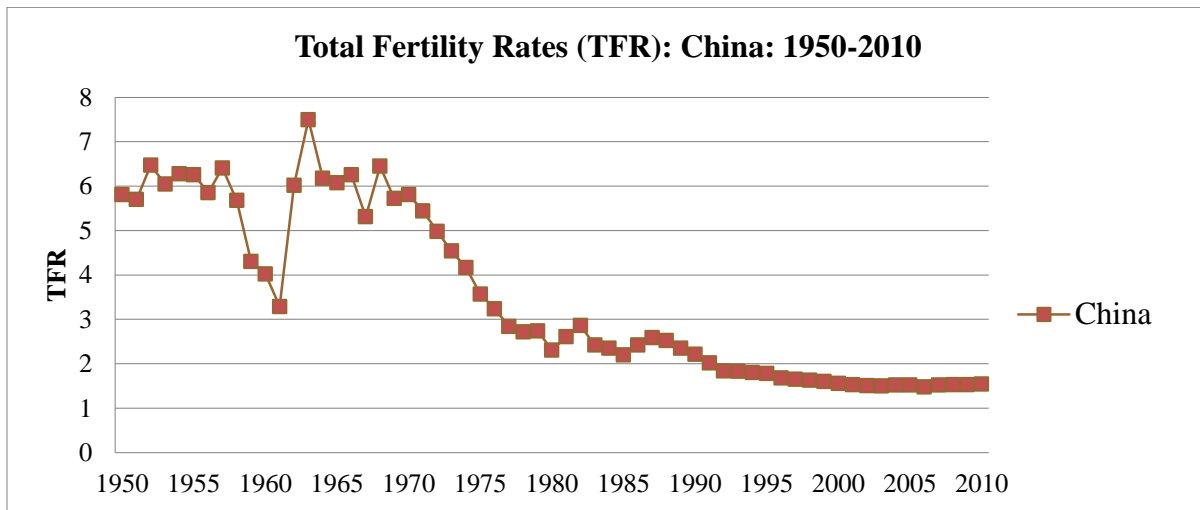
(Settles, at al. 1; Kane and Choi 992). In the 1960s, China established the Birth Planning Commission to lead its efforts on birth control and population planning. But, population growth in the region continued to rapidly increase (Feng, Cai, and Gu 117). In 1970, the commission established target population growth rates, extended contraceptive and abortion services to rural areas, and promoted later marriages, longer intervals between birth, and smaller families. Within five years, China's population growth rate fell to 1.8 percent, and the commission set a population growth rate of 1 percent as the target for 1980 and a 0 percent growth rate as the target for 2000. It was determined by Chinese statisticians that these goals were unachievable through a "later, longer, fewer" campaign since more than half of the current population was under the age of 21, which was the product of the government's former promotion of high rates of reproduction (Kane and Choi 992). In 1979, as a solution to extreme population growth, the policy of *Jihua shengyu zhengce* 计划生育政策 or "family planning policy" began to be implemented. This policy has become popularly known in Western culture as the One Child Policy. By 1982, birth control was announced as "basic state policy" (Feng, Cai, and Gu 118).

"The State advocates the [sic] one couple has only one child. Except for special cases, with approval for second birth, government officials, workers and urban residents can have only one child for each couple. In rural areas, the State also advocates that each couple has only one child. However, with approval, those who have real difficulties can have their second child, several years after the birth of the first. " – announcement by the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee and the State Council's Resolution Concerning the Strengthening of Birth Control and Strictly Controlling Population Growth, 1980. (Settles, et al. 2).

The tenants of the OCP were fairly straightforward. Parents were to only have one child. This was encouraged through a package of financial and other incentives, such as access to health services, schooling, and housing for themselves and for their single child. The government also discouraged larger families through heavy financial levies on additional children, lack of access to government-sponsored employment for those with multiple children, and developing the social norm those families must sacrifice having multiple children for the survival of future generations. The specifics of these measures varied from province to province (Kane and Choi 992).

The OCP policy was extremely successful. Population growth slowed from 11.6 percent in 1979 to 5.9 percent in 2005, which reduced the population by an estimated 250-300 million (Settles, et al. 5). Implementation was especially effective in urban areas where officials could closely monitor the population. By the late 1990s, in urban areas such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Nanjing, 95 percent of preschool-aged children were reported to be only children (5). Implementation of the OCP has proven more challenging in rural areas where populations were more difficult to monitor and there were more religious-based objections as well as a perceived need to have sons to perform farm labor. Despite these obstacles, within nearly every village in rural China a government official with the title of “Women’s Head” works to enforce the OCP (Judd 215). Chart 1 depicts the drastic decline in fertility rates.

Chart 1



(Poston, modified)

As the policy developed, exemptions and exceptions became increasingly prominent. Ethnic minorities, defined as non-Han Chinese groups, were excluded from the policy (Kane and Choi 992). In many rural areas, if a couple's first child is female, they may have one more child to try again for a son. This concession was stated by the government to be based on the fact that sons are more useful to an agriculturally-based family, but it also represents a slight concession to tradition by the government after immense challenges to the policy from rural populations (Li and Cooney 292). Parents can also have additional children if they are willing and able to pay additional, heavy taxes or if their first child is severely disabled. More recently, an exception has been released stating that if both the husband and the wife are only children, then they can have two children (Short and Zhai 376-377). Even with these exceptions, the population growth rate in China has continued to decrease and one-child families continue to be the norm.

This means that the average family structure in China has rapidly shifted from primarily multi-children families to families that consist of four grandparents, two parents, and one child. This drastic change in family structure begs the question, what happens to daughters who are being reared as a single child?

## **Distinguishing Human Rights and Gender Equality**

Since the implementation of the One Child Policy, there has been substantial research on its gendered effects; however, there is a gap in the literature. Specifically, though studies often examine gender, they do so from a human rights perspective, which does not directly address gender equality. Research overwhelmingly demonstrates that the OCP has produced massive human rights violations such as female abandonment and lethal neglect, female infanticide, forced abortions, forced sterilization, and gender-selective abortions. There are also less apparent violations such as the limitation of personal reproductive autonomy. However, all of these issues – despite how egregious they are – are human rights issues and do not thoroughly examine all facets of gender equality. Some may argue that the human rights violations and concerns specifically target gender, and I agree, but there are more gendered impacts of the OCP that should be examined and I will do so purely through a lens of gender equality. Before I delve into an examination of the OCP through this lens, I will clarify the difference between human rights and gender equality to explain how these approaches are unique. While guaranteeing equal rights for women may fall under the purview of human rights, gender equality itself is a different concept.

I will not argue the theory or philosophy behind human rights or from where human rights gain their status. I will instead use the primary, internationally agreed upon politically constructed definition of human rights as declared by the United Nations Office of the Commissioner for Human Rights. The summarization of this codified definition is as follows:



“Human rights are rights inherent to all human beings, whatever our nationality, place of residence, sex, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, language, or any other status.

We are all equally entitled to our human rights without discrimination. These rights are all interrelated, interdependent and indivisible. Universal human rights are often expressed and guaranteed by law, in the forms of treaties, customary international law, general principles and other sources of international law. International human rights law lays down obligations of Governments to act in certain ways or to refrain from certain acts, in order to promote and protect human rights and fundamental freedoms of individuals or groups.”

Continuing with United Nations definitions for consistency, the Entity for the Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women offers a clear, simple explanation of gender equality.

“[Gender equality] refers to the equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities of women and men and girls and boys. Equality does not mean that women and men will become the same but that women’s and men’s rights, responsibilities and opportunities will not depend on whether they are born male or female. Gender equality implies that the interests, needs and priorities of both women and men are taken into consideration, recognizing the diversity of different groups of women and men. Gender equality is not a women’s issue but should concern and fully engage men as well as women. Equality between women and men is seen both as a human rights issue and as a precondition for, and indicator of, sustainable people-centered development. “

In short, human rights are rights that are possessed by humans while gender equality is a measure of not only equal access to and application of those rights for both genders but also

equal responsibilities and opportunities and equal concern for the needs of both genders. Gender equality is often confused as a subset of human rights, but this is not correct. Gender equality is an indicator of gender stratification. This makes gender equality an indicator of a just or an unjust application of human rights. As stated above, gender equality may be viewed as a human rights issue, but it is a different concept. For instance, when there is gender-based subjugation and women are not afforded the same opportunities as men, then this may be a violation of the human rights of the women. However, gender equality is a measurement of the representation of men and women in a particular context. Women can call upon their human rights to justify a need for gender equality, but gender equality itself is not a human right. For example, if a woman is forced to marry a man against her will by being sold into a marriage through a contractual agreement between the males in her family and her spouse, this violates the woman's marriage rights as enumerated in Article 16.2 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states "Marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses." Article 2 of the Declaration states that "Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status." So, the woman's human right to enter marriage only if she freely consents has been violated. Also, using the lens of gender equality critique we can see that since her spouse freely consented and she was not able to, the rights have not only not been applied in the way that both persons are entitled to, but also there is gender stratification. This is compounded by the fact that it was an agreement between her male spouse and the males in her family. Gender equality measures are tools that show how human rights are being applied and if they are being done so in a balanced

manner. There is a guarantee for all humans to be entitled to their human rights, but there is no human right to gender equality.

Research that has been done on the OCP in relation to gender has been focused on human rights, particularly women who desire additional children, women seeking to give birth to a son instead of a daughter, and the plight of unwanted female fetuses and infants (Fong 1101). And, in that research it has been clearly demonstrated that many of the human rights violations are gender-based. This does affect the assessment of gender equality in China under the OCP; however, there is a lack of research on all aspects of gender equality. Current research focuses almost entirely on reproductive issues such as lack of autonomy, selective abortions, forced abortions, female infanticide, and female abandonment. Because current research on the OCP and gender has examined primarily violations of human rights, areas in which human rights have not been violated have not been thoroughly examined. This emphasis on human rights violations with regards to reproductive issues begs the question: What happens to female children who *are* kept and raised as only children? Those are the facets of gender equality that I will discuss in my assessment.

Currently, some research does exist that examines an individual indicator of gender equality and how the OCP has affected that indicator. Papers about the OCP and labor, the OCP and education of daughters, and the OCP and religion have been published. But the literature is limited and lacking. My research will contribute to current scholarship by providing a synthesis of many recognized indicators of gender equality and their relationship with the OCP. Current literature also either focuses on a singular adult experience such as marriage or labor or on a singular childhood experience such as early education or the parent-child relationship. In this paper, I will analyze how childhood experiences within the family translate into adult

experiences. This will track the development of singleton daughters and how the OCP has impacted their lives. Through this, I will demonstrate the positive effect the OCP has had on gender equality in China.

Gender equality can be evaluated by examining gender stratification in society. The term “gender stratification” is used to discuss inequality between the genders in education, employment, and the family and other social institutions (Veeck, Flummy, and Jiang 87). I will discuss each of these components in China in relation to the OCP in the coming sections. First, I will examine Chinese family dynamics and how the family structure has been altered when there is a singleton daughter. I will then show how the changing attitude of the Chinese family to the singleton daughter has positively impacted the daughter’s education. In the next section I will discuss the changing role of the empowered Chinese woman in the workforce. I will then discuss the growing equality of marriage dynamics in China. Finally, to examine religion, I will examine the changing role of women in traditional Chinese ancestor worship.

### **The Changing Family Structure and the Singleton Daughter**

Since the emergence of Confucius teachings in the 6th century BC, China has solidified a social structure based on filial piety and patriarchy. This structure intersected with pre-existing and emerging traditions, but the base structure remained the same highly patriarchal and filial system. For well over a thousand years, family dynamics and gender roles in society were well-defined, and these roles defined a person’s purpose and responsibilities from birth to the afterlife. Because of this, Chinese society and family dynamics have long been based on filial piety and patriarchal, patrilineal, patrilateral, and patrilocal practices.

For centuries “in practice the Chinese legal system was ‘Confucianized legalism’ that intertwined legal codes with moral principles.” (Y. Peng 778). The norms and values of Confucian morality and structure were absorbed by and reflected in Chinese society. The central focus of Confucianism is its emphasis on filial piety. Confucian social order is based on the Five Relationships: ruler to subject, parent to child, husband to wife, elder brother to younger brother, and friend to friend. Within the family, the father is supreme just like the ruler is supreme on a national level and children revere their parents like subjects revere the ruler. According to Confucian teachings, a stable society begins with a stable household and society is modeled on the power dynamic in the family unit.

Because of its focus on male-dominance, having sons was crucial in Confucian traditions. “According to Confucianism, the worst among three grave failures in filial responsibility is to fail to have a son”, and, thus, traditionally the ideal Chinese family was composed of “as many generations of the male line and as many males as possible” (Settles, et al. 11). Mencian Confucianism declared the primary moral obligation of a son to his parents was to have a son of his own to continue the family line, and childbearing and childrearing were the foremost moral responsibilities of a woman (Mann 187). Men’s roles were defined by the Five Relationships, but women’s roles were clarified by the Three Obediences. These stipulate that a woman must “obey her father before marriage, her husband when married, and her son when widowed.” (Judd 166). In this structure women have essentially no connection to the world except through a related male creating a patrilineal dynamic (166).

Since daughters were to leave the natal family and become a part of their marital family, sons were depended upon for the well-being of the family. Sons were not only family laborers, but they also cared for and supported their aging parents. In traditional Chinese culture, having a

son was essential to support the family, continue the family line, care for elderly parents, and tend to the needs and desires of ancestors (Li and Cooney 277-278). For parents, having a son was critical both during their lives and after their deaths for ancestral worship. Because daughters were considered temporary members of their natal family who would not contribute to the family lineage or resources, they were devalued in the patrilineal system (Deutsch 368). In this system, sons were given the attention and resources of their parents since it was they who would support their aging parents and continue the family line.

Despite extreme religious oppression during the Cultural Revolution, the concept of a filial, patriarchal society was ingrained in Chinese culture and survived the Maoist era (Deutsch 368). Popular sayings such as *zhongnan qingnu* 重男轻女, which means “value sons, disregard daughters”, still permeated society and sons were valued to better the family’s circumstances, carry on the family lineage, and care for the parents in their old age. However, the implementation of the OCP has dramatically altered traditional family structure in China. It is important to note before I address daughters specifically, that the OCP has caused a breakdown of traditional Confucian family dynamics.

Families with only one child are popularly referred to as “4-2-1” families. In this structure, there are four grandparents, two parents, and one child and this is now the predominant form of family in China. Many families that fit this model appear to be centered on the singleton child, which directly conflicts with the Confucian ideal of the family being centered on the father. “These children became the objects of the intense attention and doting of two sets of grandparents, who often responded to their beck and call, acting as their “servants”.” (Goossaert and Palmer 238). This – on its face – is a complete inversion of the dynamic prescribed by filial piety. Traditionally, even parents mourning the death of a child was considered a break in this

structure because convention barred seniors from mourning their juniors (238). Because of the emphasis the OCP has placed on the sole offspring, children who would be considered the lowest members of societal hierarchy are now the “little emperors” of their families. And, this phenomenon is affecting both sons and daughters in single child families.

Although the family dynamic has shifted in single child families, filial practices are still prominent even with the OCP in place. A study of senior undergraduates in 2006 indicated that the young people still demonstrated a large level of filial piety. Although massive resources were being invested in the children, they still had concern for their parents’ welfare, included their parents’ wishes in their future plans, desired to produce grandchildren to fulfill their filial obligation, and intended to support their parents in their old age (Deutsch 382). The same study found that the child-centered family dynamic may result in closer emotional ties between the child and the parent and singleton children felt more responsible for their parents’ emotional well-being and were more likely than children with siblings to plan to live in the same cities as their parents. Singleton children seemed to feel stronger filial obligations to their parents since there were no siblings with which to share the duties (382). It is critical to note that this held true for both single sons and single daughters, which is a break from patriarchal practice since traditionally daughters did not have obligations to their own parents.

The OCP directly clashes with patriarchal family structures because families often do not have the option of having a son. However, since the success of one generation in China is viewed as the achievements of the next and children are relied upon to care for their parents in old age, Chinese parents do not simply give up hope after having a daughter. Increasingly, the success of singleton daughters is being strongly invested in by their parents and are being afforded interest and opportunities that they may not have had if they were competing with brothers for the

attention and resources of their parents. The 4-2-1 family structure funnels financial and other support all towards the single child, regardless of gender. “Girls born after China’s one-child policy... have more power to challenge detrimental gender norms than ever before, thanks to the decline of patriliney and the absence of brothers for their parents to favor.” (Fong 1098). It has been seen that “Parents whose love, hope, and need for old-age support are all pinned on just one child tend to do whatever is necessary to make that child happy and successful, regardless of the child’s gender.” (1102).

Furthermore, parents are realizing that to be cared for when they are elderly, they must assist their daughters in becoming economically beneficial. Since the policy went into effect and was implemented between 1979 and 1982, the first generation of singleton daughters is between the ages of 32 and 35. Except for government and large company employees, China’s lack of comprehensive pensions means that almost 70 percent of all elderly people depend on financial help from their children (Settles, et al. 13). The traditionally son-oriented task of caring for aging parents has fallen on these singleton daughters. The idea that daughters could not support their elderly parents has been a significant obstacle to equality between sons and daughters, and parents would avoid investing family resources in their daughters because of this (Fong 1101). This generation of daughters who were economically enabled by their parents are beginning to prove that daughters are able to provide their aging parents with financial support, and have thus, proved that daughters can be as filial as sons (1101). This has both alleviated some of the pressure to have sons and shown that daughters, when afforded the opportunity, can be just as beneficial to the family. The traditional way of viewing daughters only as future wives to be given to another family through marriage has changed. Daughters are increasingly being seen as valuable assets to their natal families. Since parents can have only one child, when that child is a



daughter the parents must depend on their daughter for affective ties and their future economic welfare. This altered family dynamic increases the value of the singleton daughters to their parents and, in turn, increases the parents' investments in their daughters (Deutsch 370). This demonstrates a destruction of patriarchal norms.

As discussed, the first generation of singleton daughters has reached their mid-thirties. This means that daughters who were only children are now having single daughters of their own. The impact of the OCP on gender preference and preference in number of children has been drastic. A study published in 2004 revealed that in Shanghai only about half of individuals aged 20-30 years old desired to have even two children, and the mean number of children desired was 1.46. Additionally, the same study reported that more than 75 percent of respondents said that it does not matter about having a son or a daughter (Settles, et al. 11). Son preference has long reflected the gender inequality in China (Deutsch 379). "This shift towards accepting a norm of one or two children, and having less of a gender preference is a major difference from Confucian ideology." (Settles, et al. 11). This shift is not isolated to large urban areas. Research has found that rural areas have also seen a shift in preferences. In the early 1990s, a survey of a hundred households in the Guanzhong prefecture of the Shaanxi province, found that the most popular number of children desired was two with one daughter and one son. When asked about investment in children's education and career aspirations, the difference in responses regarding boys and girls was not very large (Gilmartin, Rofel, and White 89).

The 2006 study of undergraduates also found that only children had more gender equitable preferences for their future offspring. Of all students asked, the majority (60 percent) had no sex preference, and of those who indicated a preference, over one-fourth (28 percent) would prefer to have a daughter. Of this, the only children respondents came closest to parity.

Again, a majority (63 percent) had no sex preference, but of those who did express a sex preference almost half (43 percent) preferred to have daughters (Deutsch 379). Another study, conducted in 2001, data was collected regarding total of 35,585 women ranging in age from 15-49 years from 346 cities and 1041 villages found that over a third (37 percent) of respondents had no sex preferences for their offspring (Ding and Hesketh 372). Of the women who expressed gender preferences, the women were given the scenario of having two children. Responding to this, 72 percent expressed the desire to have both a girl and a boy while 10 percent expressed the desire to have two girls (372). Also, young women under the age of twenty-five – especially in urban areas – were more likely to express the desire to have daughters (373). This demonstrates an enormous break in the traditional preference of sons and the view that having daughters is a disappointing outcome.

Ultimately, the OCP does not appear to be undermining filial piety, but does seem to be undermining patrilineal practices (Deutsch 381). This dynamic has been critical for the positive impact the OCP has had on gender equality. Since filial practices have remained intact, there is still a necessity for the offspring to carry on the family lineage, bring resources and success to the family, and care for their aging parents. These obligations and expectations make ensuring the development of the child into a family asset critical. When a son is not present to carry out these duties, the duties are being transferred to the singleton daughter, and with that comes the support, attention, and investment of the family in the daughter's success. The OCP has caused the traditional practices of filial piety to come in conflict with traditional patriarchal, patrilineal, patrilateral and patrilocal practices. Although these practices were historically complementary to each other, the OCP's restructuring of the Chinese family has caused a shift in their relationship and filial practices have overcome patriarchal practices to the benefit of singleton daughters.

The OCP has empowered singleton daughters that no longer have to compete with siblings, particularly brothers, for the support, attention, and investment of their parents. The focus of the parents on success of their daughter has led to enormous gains in gender equality in China. The new role of the daughter in China as an empowered, important part of the family has provided daughters with opportunities that they previously had not had access to.

### **Education and Gender Equality**

Education is viewed in Confucianism as the primary way to achieve a better self and to improve society (Wang 34). As such, education is highly valued in Chinese culture, but it has in the past been seen as a male undertaking. As demonstrated in the changing role of the daughter in the Chinese family, singleton daughters are receiving unprecedented family support, attention and investment. Not only do singleton daughters receive undivided resources from their families, but they also do not have to compete for and share with siblings – especially brothers – the resources. Traditionally, adult sons and adult daughters were to serve different roles. Sons were expected to perform the filial duties discussed in the previous section such as caring for parents in their old age. As such, education for sons was critical to for the benefit of the entire family. Conversely, since daughters were to be given to another family to procreate, formal education for daughters was dispensable and daughters were more commonly taught to cook and clean in order to care for their martial families (Wang 26). It was common for daughters to drop out of school to allow family resources to instead pay for the education of a son or for elder sisters to leave school and begin working to support the education of their younger brothers. This sacrifice was encouraged and highly praised (11). The deprivation of the daughter's education to support the son's aligned

with Confucian patriarchal principles, but with only a single child in the family, singleton daughters do not face this challenge and instead are viewed as valuable assets to the family. The support of the singleton daughter's education is critical to her ability to support her aging parents and to better the family's standing.

Since education and literacy have been rising for both genders since the mid-twentieth century in China, a simple analysis of the rise of literacy and levels of education for females is not sufficient to demonstrate the benefit of the OCP for singleton daughters. I will instead use studies that focus on educational achievement among singleton daughters in comparison to singleton sons and daughters from multi-sibling families. Numerous studies have occurred that focused on documentation of a single city, single school, or single region in China. Overwhelmingly, this research has shown that singleton daughters not only enjoy more investment in their education than daughters in multi-child families, but also that singleton daughters often receive more investment of family resources in their education than singleton sons do. A 1996 study that used survey data from four Chinese provinces found that the parents of singleton daughters invested more in the education of their daughters than the parents of singleton sons (Bian). A 2002 study of 1,040 singleton daughters and sons in Wuhan, China found no difference in the parental expenditures and expectations in their single children based on gender (Tsui and Rich). And, a 2003 study of 220 children aged 14-19 in Yangzhou, China found that parents invested equally in their child's education regardless of gender (Veeck, Flurry, and Jiang).

In 2011, Dr. Ming-Hsuan Lee of the National Sun Yat-sen University in Taiwan published the first nation-wide study of the OCP and gender equality in education in China. Dr. Lee used individual-level data from the China Health and Nutrition Survey (CHNS) from 1989,

1991, 1993, 1997, 2000, 2004, and 2006. The CHNS is a collaborative project between the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's Carolina Population Center and the National Institute of Nutrition and Food Safety at the Chinese Center for Disease and Control Prevention. The CHNS uses a random cluster process to create a sample size of 4,400 households with a collective total of 16,000 individuals across nine provinces in China that vary substantially in both their geography and economic development (Lee 44). Table 1 is a representation of the findings of this research with regards to the schooling of girls.

**Table 1** Determinants of years of schooling by gender and by rural and urban area in China (OLS)

	Dependent variable: years of schooling					
	Urban			Rural		
	Girls (1)	Boys(2)	All (3)	Girls (4)	Boys (5)	All(6)
<b>Onlychild</b>	0.329 (0.155)	0.141 (0.386)	0.219 (0.249)	0.861* (0.427)	0.465* (0.181)	0.574** (0.240)
<b>Female</b>			0.055 (0.130)			- 0.189 <sup>o</sup> (0.063)
<b>Fatheredu</b>	0.103 <sup>o</sup> (0.062)	0.035 (0.096)	0.045 (0.042)	0.157** (0.047)	0.129** (0.036)	0.139** (0.029)
<b>Motheredu</b>	0.082 (0.061)	0.008 (0.086)	0.088 (0.041)	0.136** (0.036)	0.016 (0.032)	0.070** (0.024)
<b>Hhinc</b>	0.667** (0.151)	0.321** (0.113)	0.853** (0.172)	0.187 (0.162)	0.087 (0.243)	0.056 (0.208)
<b>income_comm</b>	0.213 <sup>o</sup> (0.101)	0.075** (0.015)	0.092** (0.018)	0.558 <sup>o</sup> (0.242)	0.408** (0.131)	0.535 (0.982)
<b>Farminghh</b>				- 0.069* (0.026)	- 0.056* (0.020)	- 0.062** (0.023)
<b>nonfarm_comm</b>				0.618** (0.148)	0.119* (0.053)	0.497 (0.398)
<b>Constant</b>	9.601** (0.607)	10.795** (0.932)	9.928** (0.435)	7.642** (0.731)	9.436** (0.622)	8.637** (0.527)
<b>R<sup>2</sup></b>	0.163	0.310	0.169	0.239	0.124	0.154
<b>obs</b>	141	147	288	517	564	1,081

Note all regressions include community and birth year fixed effects

Statistical significance level <sup>o</sup>P\0.1, \*P\0.05, \*\*P\0.01

(Lee 47, slightly modified)<sup>1</sup>

Table 1 demonstrates that the coefficients on *Onlychild* is all positive in all the models (and statistically significant in the rural models), which shows that only children had more years of schooling than children in multi-sibling families. The result is not surprising. Parents of single children can invest more fully in the educational development of the child since the resources of

<sup>1</sup> For explanation of the controls used and regression analysis performed, see "The One-Child Policy and Gender Equality in Education in China: Evidence from Household Data" by Dr. Ming-Hsuan Lee

the family need not be divided amongst multiple siblings. However, these differences affected singleton daughters more than singleton sons. Being a singleton daughter in an urban area increased the years of schooling by 0.33 when comparing the singleton daughter to girls who had siblings, while singleton sons' average years of schooling increased by only 0.14 when compared to boys who had siblings. Likewise, when examining rural areas, singleton daughters enjoyed 0.86 additional years of schooling over daughters in multi-child families, while singleton sons' received an increase of 0.47 years over their counterparts in multi-child families (Lee 46). This indicates that singleton daughters not only received additional educational opportunities than daughters with siblings, but also that the opportunities for education for singleton daughters improved more drastically than for singleton sons. This may be because parents are more likely to invest in the education of a son regardless of additional children. Overall, the singleton status is beneficial to both genders, but singleton daughters receive comparatively more educational benefits from their singleton status.

The results of this regression regarding the control variables also revealed interesting findings. The educational attainment of the father had a positive impact on the years of schooling for the child regardless of gender, and the impact was larger for daughters than sons in both urban and rural areas. However, the educational attainment of the mother had little effect on the years of schooling of the son, but had a positive effect on the years of schooling for the daughter (Lee 47). As the first generation of singleton daughters who benefitted from increased education is now having single daughters of their own, we can expect the mothers to pass on this benefit to their daughters, further increasing gender equality in education.

The table indicates that a gender bias in education still exists in multi-child families, but that this bias is overcome when there is a single child. Singleton daughters receive more

schooling than daughters who must compete with siblings for family resources, and singleton daughter receive equal – and sometimes greater – educational opportunities than singleton sons. The single-child status of daughters under the OCP has made a positive impact on the equity of education in China based on gender.

### **Labor and Gender Equality**

Since its rise to power in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party touted its support for equal opportunity and support for women in the workforce. A great deal of legislation was created based on the principle that men and women should have equal right to paid work and be treated equally in the labor market. However, the actual enforcement and application of legislation for a gender equal labor market has been markedly weak.

Despite obstacles, China boasts one of the highest levels of female labor force participation in the world and one of the smallest gender wage gaps in urban areas among developing countries. The post-Cultural Revolution labor force participation rates of women were high, but women were often shunted into lower-skilled jobs than men and thus, jobs with lower pay. This laid the foundation for disadvantaging women by segregating them into the bottom end of the labor force (5-6). While women do have high participation rates and there is a closing wage gap among like jobs, women still represent a higher proportion of lower-wage employment. China's labor market is fair from gender equal, but the OCP has greatly aided Chinese women in closing the gap in the gender stratified labor market.

Since female labor force participation rates have been high and rising since the Cultural Revolution, I will frame my argument similarly to what I used in my section on education.

Instead of focusing on increasing participation, wage gaps, and so forth, I will use a comparison of singleton daughters to singleton sons and daughters in multi-sibling families.

In rural areas, there are less varied opportunities for employment for both genders with agriculture being the dominating sector. The OCP has been relaxed for farming families due to the demand for labor and in many areas if the family's first child is a girl, they may have one more with varied rules as to how long the wait must be. However, if the first child is a boy, they may not reproduce again. Even with this exception, there are still large numbers of singleton daughters in rural areas. While precise data is difficult to collect from rural areas, there has been a noted increase in women's empowerment in agriculture. Without sons to inherit the property, singleton daughters are more often inheriting the family's land, which makes them greater economic stakeholders. This is a direct break in patrilocal practices. Women have also been seen in increasing numbers to be running farms largely unassisted by men (9).

The study performed by Dr. Ming-Hsuan Lee also included a chart on education using the China Health and Nutrition Survey (CHNS) from 1997, 2000, 2004, and 2006 to show the impact of siblings on income, employment, and career types. Table 2 is a summary of her findings.



**Table 2** Comparison of only children and children with siblings

	Children with Sibling(s)	Only Children		
		All	Girls	Boys
<b>Average years of schooling (years)</b>	9.4	10.8	11.1	10.7
<b>Annual income (yuan)*</b>	6,748	8,402	9,505	7,781
<b>Occupation*</b>				
<b>Professional/technical worker</b> (doctor, professor, lawyer, architect, engineer, midwife, nurse, teacher, editor, photographer)	3.3%	9.27%	14.0%	6.6%
<b>Governmental sector</b>	0.8%	1.22%	1.8%	0.9%
<b>Office Staff</b> (secretary, office helper)	3.5%	13.04%	21.1%	8.5%
<b>Farmer, fisherman, hunter</b>	44.4%	15.19%	7.0%	19.8%
<b>Skilled worker</b> (foreman, group leader, craftsman)	6.6%	7.87%	0.0%	12.3%
<b>Non-skilled worker</b> (ordinary laborer, logger)	19.0%	17.30%	22.8%	14.2%
<b>Army/police</b>	2.1%	4.22%	0.0%	6.6%
<b>Driver</b>	3.8%	6.01%	0.0%	9.4%
<b>Service Worker</b> (housekeeper, cook, waiter, doorkeeper, hairdresser, counter, counter salesperson, launderer, child care worker)	16.4%	22.26%	31.6%	17.0%
<b>Athlete, actor, musician</b>	0.2%	3.66%	1.8%	4.7%
<b>Sample size</b>	1,047	322	116	206

\* The information is drawn from the latest survey wave 2006 or 2004

Source 1997, 2000, 2004, and 2006 CHNS

(Lee 45, slightly modified)<sup>2</sup>

Table 2 shows females who were raised as singletons have a significantly higher income than the average for children with siblings. Interestingly, singleton daughters average nearly two thousand more yuan of income per year than singleton sons. From this, we can see that being a singleton daughter greatly affects the earning power of the woman. Also significant, singleton daughters are almost twice as likely to be professional/technical workers than singleton sons and are more than four times more likely than children with siblings are. The latter can be explained by the additional education, resources, and support given to single children, but the former is surprising. This may be related to the fact that singleton daughters are also receiving, on average, more education than singleton sons. Another possible explanation is that some gender norms related to employment are still prevalent. For instance, a singleton son may leave school earlier because he is able to take a mid-wage job as a skilled worker, such as a foreman, but these jobs

<sup>2</sup> For explanation of the creation of Table 2, see “The One-Child Policy and Gender Equality in Education in China: Evidence from Household Data” by Dr. Ming-Hsuan Lee

are not generally seen as fit for women, so a singleton daughter may stay in school longer in hopes of taking a more gender-fitting job, such as being midwife or nurse, which happens to be high-wage employment. If this is occurring, the gender-based stereotypes of certain fields of works may actually be working in the favor singleton daughters as it encourages them to continue their education and enter the workforce in higher waged and skilled positions.

Because female labor force participation has primarily been in the lower-skilled and lower-wage employment, the dramatic increase in the likelihood of women being professional or technical workers when they have been raised as singleton daughters is astounding. Also surprising is that singleton daughters are twice as likely as singleton sons to be employed in the governmental sector. This implies that singleton daughters' employment is also granting them an increased voice within the government. It can be seen that singleton daughters not only have more education, higher salaries, and more representation in government work than children raised in multi-sibling families, but also singleton sons.

Research has additionally shown that young adult women in China are feeling increasingly empowered since the implementation of the OCP. They are more likely to enter the labor force to provide financial support for their parents, which reduces the significance of patrilineal lineage, which, in turn, creates further female empowerment. This results in greater gender equality in China and a cyclical cycle of empowerment that is beginning to emerge (Wang 14). Preliminary research has also shown that since women can only have a single child, they are remaining in the workforce longer prior to having a child. Trends also indicate that mothers of singletons are returning to the workforce after having a child since they will not be having more children and the singleton will be in compulsory education within a few years, so child-rearing need not be the sole occupation of the mother.

The OCP clearly assists in lessening the gender stratification of the labor force in China. Singleton daughters not only enter the labor force in larger proportions, but they have higher-skilled and higher-waged occupations than both non-singletons and singleton sons.

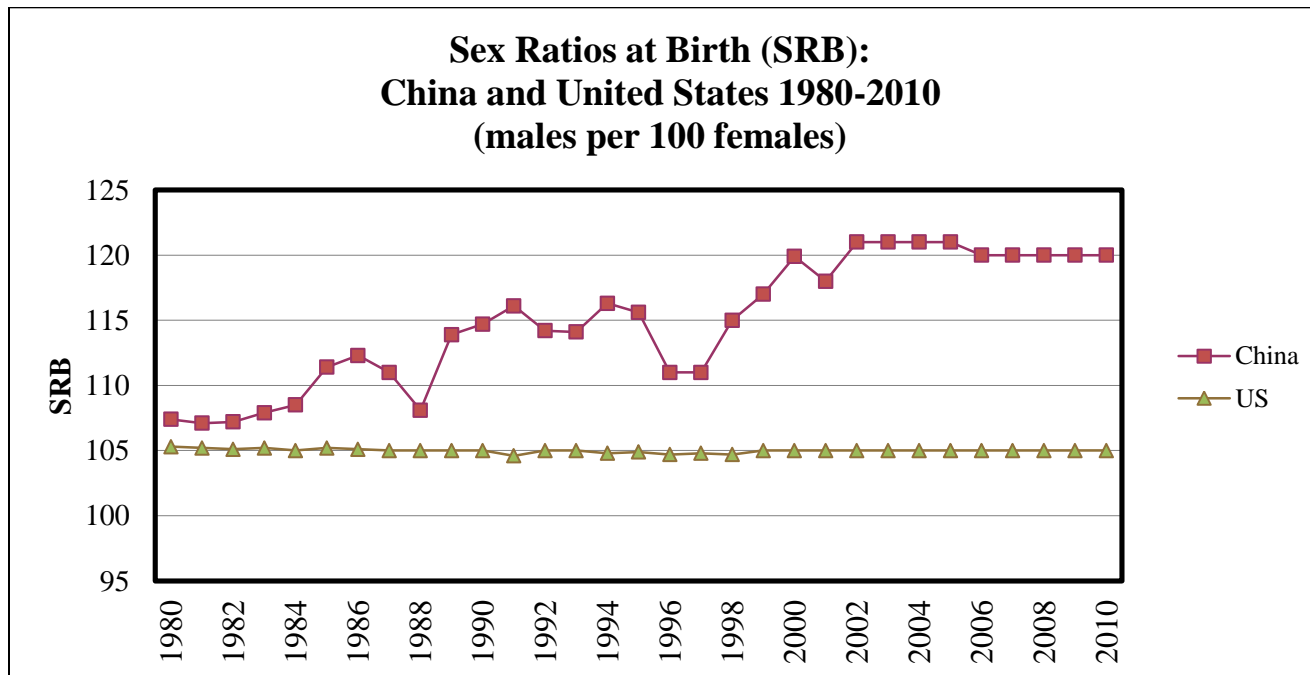
### **Marriage Dynamics and Gender Equality**

Another major factor to be considered in gender equality is marriage dynamics. Traditionally, females in China have not only been subordinate to men during marriage but have also had little input in choosing their spouse. The OCP is changing this patrilateral dynamic. Increasingly, women are gaining power in choosing spouses and within marriage and family.

As discussed in the section on family structure, women have traditionally had little power within the family. The father reigned supreme within the family unit, and in accordance with the Three Obediences of Mencian Confucianism, the woman must “obey her father before marriage, her husband when married, and her son when widowed.” (Judd 166). Women had very little input in deciding when or to whom they would be wed, and after marriage, they were to obey their husbands and produce children.

When researching the OCP, one often finds the shocking statistics on son preference in infants. This has led to gender-selective abortions, female abandonment, and female infanticide. These atrocious human rights issues have actually led to some surprising results when one considers all related gender equality measures. A normal sex ratio balance (SRB) is around 110 males to every 100 females at conception and around 105 males to every 100 females at birth (Poston). The chart below shows the SRB from China and from the United States over the last three decades.

Chart 2



(Poston, modified)

As seen in the chart, the United States's SRB follows the normal rate, while China's SRB is strongly out of proportion with, at its highest, over 120 males born to every 100 females. This has resulted in over 40 million "extra" Chinese males born between the years of 1983 and 2010 (Poston). This surplus of males is coupled with a roughly proportionate 30-40 million females missing (Zaidi 153). Collectively, this forms an enormous imbalance in the supply and demand for wives with three men to every two eligible women in many areas (Settles, et al. 10). With high supplies of males seeking a wife among a scarce supply of females, the power in selectivity of spouses is increasingly being transferred to the women. For example, a few decades ago in Beijing, parents would submit their daughters' information to a matchmaker and bachelors and their parents would select eligible candidates. Now, at Jade Lake Park in Beijing bachelors prepare resumes and post them on a wall. Single women stroll by looking at the submissions and taking notes on which bachelors they wish to contact (Poston). Furthermore, singleton daughters who are well-educated and economically stable are able to be more selective in their spousal

choice, are in no need of quickly finding a spouse for economic stability, and may not find having an early marriage or any marriage at all to be attractive (Settles, et al. 23).

Within the marriage, spousal dynamics are becoming increasingly equal. Since the marriage age is rising, especially in urban areas, singleton daughters have become educated and spent many years supporting themselves in the labor force independently of their natal family or a husband. This makes the wives less likely to be subordinate to their new husbands since they have spent almost a decade forging their own paths. The mandate of only having a single child also shortens the period of time when child care and related housework is necessary, which allows more options and opportunities to negotiate or renegotiate household tasks and gender roles with the relationship (Settles, et al. 23). A study in Dalian, a large city in Liaoning Province in northeastern China, performed in 2002 found that while wives were more likely to do household chores than husbands, but husbands were far more likely to help with household chores than the older generation of men whom responded that they did no housework at all (Fong 1105). The same study also found that in families where the wife's income is higher than the husband's, the husband did even more housework than the wife. The study noted that in one family, the husband worked a factory job while the wife rented a fruit stand and sold fruit from 8:30am to 7:30pm. Despite both being employed, the wife did all of the housework. However, when the husband was laid off from his factory job, the husband took on the majority of the housework, including having dinner ready every night when his wife came home from work. Also, the study found that both singleton sons and singleton daughters expect a more egalitarian division of responsibilities and labor than their parents have. Some young men even indicated that they planned on doing more housework than their wives in order to "win and keep" a wife in the tight marriage market (1105).

As demonstrated in the labor section, singleton daughters actually have a higher average income than singleton males and males with siblings. Thus, women are coming into relationships often with a higher income than their spouses. This alters the traditional dynamic of the wife being fully reliant on the husband, and, in some instances, the roles are reversed and the husbands are more reliant on the higher income of their wives. Traditionally, even women who worked prior to marriage would give up their employment after marrying to take on the responsibilities of full-time child-rearing and housework. But, due to only being allowed to have one child, women are returning to the workforce after having their single child, and are thus able to invest in their careers and continue to improve their status and power within the family (Wang 23).

Women have also gained more equality in terminating a marriage when they desire to. Before the implementation of the One Child Policy in 1979, divorce rates were below 5 percent in China, but this has increased to over 15 percent in 2001 (Settles, et al. 10). Traditionally, even widows who remarried were publically scorned for having broken their filial bonds to their late husbands and his family, and the government regularly honored young widows who remained chaste until death with monuments (Mann 14). Now, women can both file for divorce and remarry as desired. It is argued that the increasing independence of women brought on by the policy as well as having only one child has reprioritized the traditional bonds of marriage. Since they only have one child, young couples are able to spend more time and energy individually pursuing careers and avocations, which may lead to couples feeling freer to part ways because they have separate interests and can support themselves (Settles, et al. 10). Though rising divorce rates may be considered a negative outcome, the independence of spouses pursuing individual interests as well as collective interests indicates rising equality in the marriage dynamic. Women

may also feel freer to initiate a divorce when they want to because in most instances they are no longer fully reliant on their husbands' income and have means by which to support themselves financially. The ability of both spouses to choose to terminate the marriage leads to more gender equality with the marriage since there is a more equal power dynamic.

The OCP has altered marriage dynamics in China, making them more gender equal. The SRB imbalance, the educational and career attainment of singleton daughters prior to marriage, and the lack of necessity for one spouse to be involved in full-time child rearing has created a more equitable dynamic and empowered women both in selecting a spouse and within the marriage.

### **Religion and Gender Equality**

Although China has a variety of religions that exist in different areas of the country, ancestor worship is a religious practice that permeates most regions and religious traditions in China. "Ancestor worship and bloodline continuation are the core norms of lineage in China." (Y. Peng 770). Intersecting with Confucian tradition, ancestor worship is also highly patriarchal, patrilineal, patrilateral, and patrilocal. Traditional ancestor worship practices involve sons honoring their natal family's ancestors while daughters worship their spouses' natal ancestors. Ancestor worship is "the Chinese cultural construction through which descendants are united by a common goal and shielded from misfortunes by ancestral spirit" (770). Sons are obligated by filial piety to worship their ancestors and maintain any associated tomb, altars, or tablets, and failing to do so could result in punishments like illness for neglecting them (Wolf 160).

Traditionally, all women were ritual members of their marital family and had no place in the ritual worship of her natal ancestors. This went so far as to dictate that when a woman died, her ritual place was in the genealogy and at the ancestral altar of her husband (Mann 10). This was so enforced that in death, the soul of an unmarried daughter would not be seated in her natal altar because, as a San-hsia villager in 1973 stated, "They are supposed to die in other people's houses." (Wolf 149). Essentially, daughters had no place in the ritual lineage of their birth families and only sons could continue the necessary worship of the ancestors of the natal family. A woman was not considered a full member of her husband's family until she was able to prove her worth to the lineage by producing a male heir to the bloodline (Shi 89). Without a son, not only did the bloodline die, but the worship of ancestors in that lineage ended as well. If a woman died without having born a son, she died not only lacking an ancestral claim to her natal family but also lacking full integration into her marital family's lineage. Furthermore, if a wife were to attempt to bring her parents' ancestral tablets with her at marriage, they were be relegated to an altar in a back room or a lower, subjugated altar, thus being neglected (Wolf 153). Thus, having at least one son was critical and the more sons produced, the more focus and reverence the ancestors of that lineage would have.

During the Cultural Revolution, religion in China was brutally oppressed. For thirteen years, there was a total suppression of religion, which ended in December 1978 with the policy of freedom of religious belief being restored by the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Party Congress. The next fall, places of worship, such as mosques, churches, and temples, began to reopen, and in 1982 the National Constitution Revision Committee vice-chairman Peng Zhen stated that as long religions did not interfere with the state and remained supportive of patriotism, "Citizens enjoy freedom of religious belief. ...citizens may believe in religion or disbelieve" (Macinnis 7).



Along with overcoming the challenges of reforming after prolonged government oppression, religious traditions and communities in China had to cope with changes in society brought about by other government policies. At the forefront of these challenges was the OCP, which was implemented in the years following the reinstatement of religious freedom.

After the lessening of restrictions on folk religions, China has seen an enormous resurgence of ancestor worship. A survey in 2009 by the Chinese National Bureau of Statistics confirmed this. The survey was of individuals fifteen years or older and persons of a variety of statuses and backgrounds in China. 72.4 percent of those surveyed reported visiting ancestors' graves in the previous twelve months. Seventeen percent believed in the power of ancestral spirits. In a 2007 survey, 17.5 percent identified as ancestor worshippers and 19.9 percent confirmed being adherents to a communal folk religion in which they worship a local deity, ancestral spirits, or both (Yang and Hu 514). The strong forms of ancestor worship and belief were unsurprisingly reported in higher percentages in rural and lower social class communities than in urban areas (516).

Because it has only been 35 years since families have first been influenced by the strict OCP, it is yet unclear what the full impact of the One Child Policy will be on ancestor worship. In most families that have had only daughters, the father is still alive to worship his ancestors and the filial lineage has not ended yet. This prematurity makes it difficult to predict the exact impacts of the OCP on gender dynamics. But, there has been preliminary research that indicates that women are becoming increasingly involved in natal ancestor worship and possible shifts in how religious lineage is tracked.

The 2009 Chinese Bureau of Statistics survey mentioned above found that the primary practitioners of ancestor worship and folk religion were females (Yang and Hu 516). This is a major break in the traditionally male-dominated practices. Particularly, the shift to females being the primary practitioners of ancestor worship strongly indicates the increased value of the role of females in the family. It has also been observed that during the ancestral ritual practices of the traditional Grave-Sweeping Festival, “breaking with patrilineal tradition, women were more likely to worship their own parents rather than their husbands.” (Goossaert and Palmer 235). Women worshipping and honoring ancestors at the graves of their natal families instead of their martial families demonstrates not only that women are retaining their own familial identity in religion, but also that they are gaining power and status in religious practices. Being the primary carrier of the family’s spiritual well-being in the afterlife empowers those with that responsibility. And, preliminary reports show that daughters are increasingly being empowered in this manner, especially when sons are not present.

When there is a singleton daughter, the family is given a choice: concede that the familial line is dead and cease the worship of generations of ancestors or transfer the religious duties that would usually fall upon the son to the singleton daughter. Although definite results are premature, it seems as though the latter is more likely to occur. When threatened by extinction, the definition of ancestral lineage is beginning to shift. Daughters are increasingly remaining religious members of their natal families and being empowered in the same way sons have traditionally been empowered. This follows a similar pattern to the increasing reliance on daughters for care of the aging parents. Now, daughters are caring for their parents in their old age and also caring for the spirits of their parents after their deaths. The shift in the definition of ancestral lineage also indicates that women do not have to rely on becoming married or have a

son to gain religious significance. Instead, she is religiously significant by her own existence. Passing religious responsibilities and duties down to the single child regardless of gender is empowering females and increasing gender equality in religion in China through ancestor worship.

## **Conclusion**

The OCP has forced changes in the family structure in China that have empowered singleton daughters. The continued need for filial support has prompted parents to invest full family support and resources into their single child, regardless of gender. Without the competition for resources brought about by a brother or multiple siblings, singleton daughters have reaped the benefits of the undivided resources and support. As I have shown, singleton daughters receive more education than singleton sons and children from multi-sibling households. The channeling of familial resources and support to the singleton daughter alters patrilineal practices and shifts towards bilineal equality. With the first generation of singleton daughters now in the labor force, we have seen not only that their average annual income is higher than singleton sons and children from multi-sibling households but also that singleton daughters are far more likely to be employed in professional or technical careers and in government work. Empowered by education and stable income, these women are entering into more gender equal marriages and, because of an imbalanced SRB, they are often the party with more spouse-selecting power. Low fertility rates have allowed women to wait longer before marrying, helping them develop self-reliant tendencies, and remain in the workforce after marriage, which prevents forced full reliance on the husband. With both spouses earning incomes, participating in housework, and having the

ability to make decisions in the relationship, the marriage dynamic is quickly shifting from a patrilateral dynamic to a bilateral dynamic. With only a single child to support the parents and carry out other familial duties, singleton daughters are remaining attached to their natal families. Women are increasingly reported to be caring for their own aging parents and worshipping the ancestors of their natal families. This is a clear move away from patrilocal practices and towards neolocal practices.

The shifts from patrilineal, patrilateral, and patrilocal practices to bilineal, bilateral, and neolocal practices show a deconstruction of the patriarchal system and rising gender equality in China. These shifts can be traced directly back to the changes the OCP caused in traditional Chinese family structure. With the first generation of empowered singleton daughters now having single children of their own, we can expect gender equality in China to continue to rise. Not only will the next generation of daughters in China benefit in the same way their mothers have from family resources and support, but also China's next generation of daughters will be raised by parents in a more equal marriage dynamic and have successful, educated, empowered women to emulate. Also, the first generation of singleton sons who were raised in a more gender-balanced educational environment, have female peers who are often out performing them in the workforce, and are entering into more gender-equal marriages are now passing these experiences down to their children as well. We can expect China's next generation of sons to be increasingly regularized to a more gender equal norm with parents in a bilateral marriage dynamic and successful, educated, and empowered role models of both genders. I predict that extreme patriarchy of previous generations will become more obsolete as those traditions are witnessed less and less by each additional generation.

Despite other problematic outcomes of the OCP, it has had a positive impact on gender equality in China. Women in China are more empowered and have more opportunities available to them because of the OCP than any previous generation. We will continue to see gender equality rise in China as the new gender dynamics continue to develop.

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