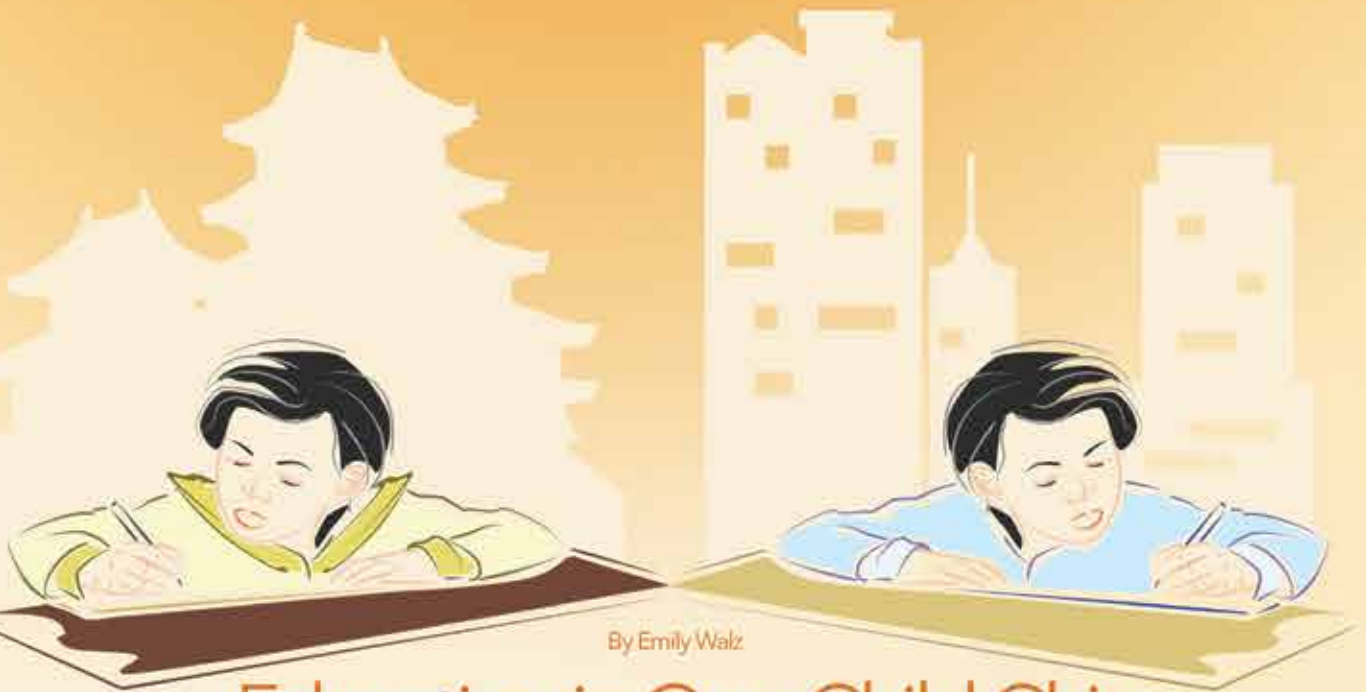


The More Things Change...



By Emily Walz

Education in One-Child China

Since the implementation of the one-child policy some thirty years ago, entire generations of singletons have grown up in the Middle Kingdom. Concerns that only children end up spoiled and socially maladjusted for lack of siblings seemed to be confirmed by early studies. Yet, more recent research revealed no significant differences between single children and multiple-child families except a slight tendency to score higher in academic measures.

The pejorative “spoiled” might also be seen as a concentration of resources. From hopes and dreams to time and money, only children are the sole recipients of the family outpouring. Combined with the near-universal belief in education as the best option for economic and social upward mobility, this leads to an especially sharp focus on school for families with single children.

China’s oversubscribed higher education system

and all-important gaokao entrance exam causes an environment of intense competition, and stories of young children putting in fourteen-hour-plus days studying, while the central government implements new restrictions designed to get parents to let their kids play more.

The Onlies

Joy Yunping Chen is an only child born to parents in Shanghai in the 1990s. A high achiever, she was accepted early to Fudan University and went on to a Master’s program to study international affairs in the United States. She points to the traditional importance of education, regardless of family size: “Whether or not parents have one or more children, in traditional Chinese families, we value education a lot.”

While popular notions may be of explicit pressure from parents for support in their old age, Chen, who studied political science as an undergradu-

ate, has not had that experience. "At least among my friends, our parents are not counting on us to support them, but encourage us to explore and achieve more. My friends and I are all very grateful to our parents. A lot of parents give pressure to their children to choose some popular majors, such as economics and finance, management. It may be due to the idea of "yang er fang lao" (raising a child in order to be cared for later when someone gets old), but more due to the fact that it is not easy to find a job with good pay or even get a job."

The employment market in China is tight for college graduates, with many more earning diplomas every year than positions are available to them, and business-related majors are often seen as the surest way to a secure line of work.

The question of support becomes vital in part due to China's incomplete social safety net. Employees of the government or the shrinking state-owned enterprise sector can rely on pensions in their old age; those who work in the private sector or are self-employed have no pensions, and many depend on their offspring. With fewer working-age people to support China's graying population, the "4-2-1" problem, representing a married pair of only children stuck between supporting four parents and one child of their own, has become a hot topic.

But for Chen and others, whether or not their parents pressure them for support, it seems to be a given. Chen says, "I will support my parents, both financially and morally. For me, it is something taken for granted. I feel it natural and am super thankful for my parents for supporting me."

Family Dynamics

From the still-extant sprawling compounds that used to house extended families, to the single-last-name clan villages, the evidence of the prized place of large families in China is still visible, along with the importance of lineage and family name. If these ideas have loosened their grip some in recent years, having a family is still of paramount importance, even if it is a single-child family. China has near-universal marriage rates, with the pressure to marry closely linked to the perceived duty to produce a child.

When a family has several children to bear their parents' hopes and dreams for success (and the

capacity to support the older generation as they age), there has often been more freedom, at least for the younger children, to take risks and seek their fortunes away from the family's traditional line of work. In single-child families now there is very little room for experimentation, as most children are oriented to future career success from a young age.

The one-child policy has created some level of gender equality as the single child is given access to all the advantages the family can manage, regardless of whether it is a girl or boy, as opposed to multiple-child scenarios, where a family's limited resources might be focused on educating one or more of the sons at the expense of the daughters.

Jill Huang Xiaoting, one such only daughter, is a 24-year-old from a smaller city in Northeast China. As an undergraduate, she attended Tianjin Foreign Studies University and majored in English with a minor in Finance.

Thinking about her younger years and the investment her parents made in her, she recalls, "I learned lots of instruments growing up. I learned piano when I was four, but I gave up because I constantly fell asleep in the class. So later I turned to another traditional Chinese instrument, the guzheng. I learned that for about ten years. I also learned painting for about five years, traditional Chinese painting."

In her view, this is common. "Every kid learns [these skills] when he or she is growing up, because the Chinese society is very competitive, even in terms of the competition between parents. They want their kids to learn as many skills as they can." Pausing, she adds, "I don't think that's very healthy because parents are kind of like comparing with each other."

Long Hours

When asked, Joy Chen is modest about the effort she put in as a young student. "My level of working hard cannot be compared to my later classmates in university coming from other provinces which are super competitive among students to get to a good university."

If comparatively easy, the routines Chen describes are not for the faint of heart; starting from the fifth grade, her father began sending her to extra tu-

toring in English and math on the weekends. Her description of her educational experience is an accounting of a steady dwindling in hours allocated for sleep. "My daily schedule would be: 6am wake up, and 9 or 10pm go to sleep for primary school and junior middle school. For high school, 5am wake up and 10 or 11pm go to bed for the first two years and 5am wake up and 12 or 1am go to bed for the last year in high school."

Chen lived on campus in a dormitory as a high school student. "As my home is quite far away from my school, I chose to live on campus and it was great experience. I learned a lot from my roommate especially sharing of literature, and being self-disciplined."

Huang also spoke of the intimacy that grew between her and her classmates with their many long hours together. She remembers in high school, "We used to get off at 10 o'clock in the evening but then because of regulation, the education bureau sometimes would investigate us, so we would have to get off at 7, and move to an abandoned factory to continue our studies under the supervision of our teacher." At this factory, she noted, "there is no class, just, you have to study on your own. The teacher would stay there and supervise you and make sure you are studying."

She thinks the pressure Chinese parents put on their children is understandable; the single child is their only chance, their sole heir, and their investment. Of the pressure she feels to find a good job and support her parents, Huang says only, "I try my best not to disappoint them. By not disappoint them, I mean just become financially independent as soon as possible."

She continues, "The aging problem in China is very serious, because for every only child in the family you not only have your parents, you also have your parents' parents, four

plus two, six - you have to take care of all six of them when they get old, and it's very important for you to become financially independent."

When asked if she will take on this role, she responds immediately in the affirmative. "Of course. It's like a responsibility, or obligation."

Road to Riches

Ma Xue, an only child born in the 1980s to parents in a third-tier city in Jiangsu province, studied English literature at Nanjing University, with the goal of becoming an interpreter.

Growing up, she says, "I didn't get a lot of, how to say, the 'wealthy life treatment' like other kids, but [my parents] try to give me everything they have, I understand that, too. I'm a single child, I grew up in a single child family, but I didn't get spoiled."

For Ma, education is an equalizer. "I think education is so important, it's a chance for you to get equal treatment with others." It's also a path to a more fulfilling life on a bigger stage.

She credits her mother with some of her earlier views. "Because my mom, I think, she told me before, what if you are beautiful and poor, how would society treat you, what would happen to you? Knowledge is the only way. [...] It's like, if you want to see the world by yourself, you want to explore, you have to do the education, you have to go to college, go to another city, then you can have a better-paying job, you can have a good job, have money, then you can travel around. Have your own life.

"So for the rest of my classmates, maybe friends, that grow up in a single-child [household], they are thinking that education is really is the only chance, the only way out. So they try to work hard outside of their hometown, go to bigger cities, maybe get a prosperous life afterwards."



Overflow

In large part due to its status as the most populous nation on earth, China has higher absolute numbers of students in higher education than any other country. Even so, the demand exceeds supply, with estimated college spots for only half of the students taking the gaokao.

One of the priciest options for the parents interested in securing for their children the best education money can buy is to send them overseas. With the numbers of Chinese willing to pay the high costs of a foreign education swelling, China now has more students abroad than any other country.

The UNESCO Institute for Statistics estimates that nearly 700,000 Chinese students studied abroad in 2012, more than three times as many as second-place India. The largest proportion (some 200,000) enrolled in institutions in the United States, followed by almost 100,000 in Japan and slightly smaller numbers in Australia and the United Kingdom.

Joy Chen reflects on the number of her friends who feel guilty about the exorbitant expense of their abroad education. "It costs a fortune for an ordinary family to support a child to study abroad without scholarship. My friend who wrote me [a letter recently] had already got a job before finally deciding to further his study in the U.K. For him and for many friends of mine similar to him, their family may only be able to afford to either support his study abroad or to help him buy an apartment for his future marriage, as housing is very expensive in China."

Sign of the Times

Perhaps the most familiar analogy to these sunup-to-sundown study routines and the intense pressure comes from China's own past; the would-be scholar-officials, many of whom dedicated their

entire lives to studying to pass the keju, or civil service examination, most often with the aid of private tutors.

The system may have been idealized as a meritocracy, and it was true to differing degrees under various dynastic policies that rural, impoverished men who sat for the exam could theoretically pass and become civil servants, bringing wealth and honor to their families. While there is debate over whether its main purpose was to maintain social stability by offering the theoretical possibility for the less-educated classes to advance, in practice, it remained a system where the rich had the advantage.

At the end of the Qing era, with the military threat of Western powers at the borders and many within China concerned that the nation had fallen behind, the dynasty abolished the imperial examination sector, instituting widespread reforms in education as a means to modernize. A century later, the system looks similar to the older eras in many regards; as acceptance to society's upper echelons is based on a single, all-important test, the nation is dedicating their life to learning, only for the rich to prevail. It would seem, the more things change the more they stay the same. **NDX**

