

# China's One-child Policy and the Changing Family

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## INTRODUCTION

Two major events occurred in China in the late 1970s. One is the establishment of reform and the "open door" policy under Deng Xiaoping, and the second is the implementation of the one-child population policy. The economic and political reforms and the "open door" policy resulted in earth-shaking and unprecedented changes in virtually all aspects of Chinese society. The implementation nationwide of the one-child policy guaranteed a continuation of the decline in China's fertility rate that had begun in the early 1970s. It is within this context of economic, political and demographic changes that a generation of nearly 150 million only children emerged, grew up and were socialized, and helped to bring about important changes in family structure.

China started to implement the so-called one-child family planning policy at the national level in 1979, when 6.1 million couples who had given birth to one child received "One Child Honorary Certificates" in which they pledged not to bear any more children. That was the first phase of China's one-child families. In the early years of the 1980s, the numbers of one-child families increased at the rate of around 4.4 million annually. In the mid-1980s, the government adjusted slightly the family planning policy by allowing couples in rural areas whose firstborn children were girls to have an additional child; this caused the growth rate of single-child families in rural areas to slow down, while at the same time the growth rate of single child families in the urban areas continued to rise. Thus the number of only child families nationwide increased in the 1980s by around 3 million annually. Since the 1990s, the percentage of all births that were one child births has exceeded 90 percent, and this has especially been the situation in urban areas. That is to say, the one-child family has become the norm for the urban Chinese family. This generation of one-child families has had a tremendous influence on family structure, family relationships and family life style of all of China, especially urban China, but has also introduced problems for Chinese society.

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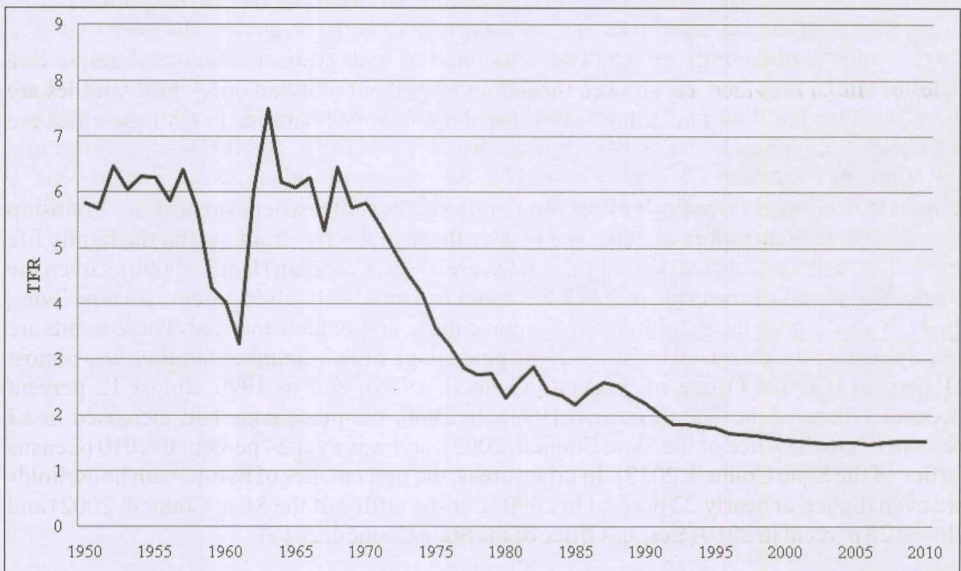
## THE ONE-CHILD POLICY AND CHANGES IN THE CHINESE FAMILY

### Changing Family Size

As already mentioned, an immediate result of the One-child Policy (OCP) has been a reduction in the fertility rate. However, China's fertility rate had begun to fall a decade or so prior to the implementation of the OCP in late 1979. In Figure 1 we report values for China's total fertility rate for each year from 1950 to 2010. We can clearly see that the fertility rate began its decline in early 1970. This occurred as a response in part to an earlier family planning campaign that was begun in China in 1971, namely, the *wan xi shao* program, meaning *later* marriages, *longer* birth intervals, and *fewer* children. Figure 1 shows that the birth rate declined precipitously through the late 1970s (Poston & Gu, 1987; Wolf, 1986); the *wan xi shao* program was very successful, particularly in urban areas. However, the large numbers of children born during the "baby boom" years caused concern among Chinese leaders in the mid-to late 1970s regarding demographic momentum and the concomitant growth potential of this extraordinarily large cohort. Banister has written that at this time the Chinese government was "discovering the existence and usefulness of the field of demography" (Banister, 1987, p.183), and the leaders were cognizant of the demographic momentum of the population's current age structure, especially in the rural areas (Poston, Davis, & Deng, 2012). Hence the "one child is best" norm was established and the One-Child Policy was launched in 1979. The OCP (which was actually an extension of the previous policy) was undertaken so that, in the words of then Vice-Premier Chen Muhua, "the total population of China will be controlled at about 1.2 billion by the end of the century" (Tien 1983, 1991).

In sum, in 1970, the total fertility rate in China was near 6.0, almost the same as it was in 1950. By 1980, it had dropped to 2.3 (Coale & Chen, 1987). The effective control of sibship size had suddenly turned China's large family norm, due in part to the Confucian belief that many sons bring happiness, into a small family norm.

**Figure 1. Total Fertility Rate (TFR), China, 1950-2010**



It is hard to know the exact and precise effects of the fertility policies on the above fertility reductions because (1) there is a time lag from the onset of a policy and when it affects fertility and family size (Zeng, 1991), and (2) the changing fertility rate is complex and affected by factors other than only the one-child policy (Zeng, 1986), for instance, changes in socioeconomic development (Poston & Gu, 1987). But we can glean some effects from the data shown in Figure 1.

First, as already noted, the fertility rate and the resulting change in the size of Chinese families had clearly begun to change before the initiation of the OCP. In the early 1970s, average family size in China peaked at around 4.8. But average family size then began to decline at almost the same time as the fertility rate (Peng & Huang, 1996), to 4.7 in 1978, and to 4.6 in 1980 (Population Statistics Bureau of the National Bureau of Statistics, 1988). According to data from the 4<sup>th</sup> Census of Population in 1990, average family size had dropped below 4.0 for the first time ever (Census Office of the State Council, 1993). And it fell further to 3.5 in 2000 (Census Office of the State Council, 2002), and to 3.1 in 2010 (Census Office of the State Council, 2013).

Second, a three-member family pattern rapidly became much more prominent than ever before. In 1982, the year of the 3<sup>rd</sup> national population census, the percentage of three-member families was 16 percent of all families in China (Census Office of the State Council, 1985); by 1990, it had increased to 24 percent (Census Office of the State Council, 1993), and by 2000, to 30 percent (Census Office of the State Council, 2002). By 2010, the percentage had declined slightly to 27 percent, but this was due mainly to increases in two-person families, i.e., families with no children (Census Office of the State Council, 2013). Also, the data indicate that the percentages of three-member families are always much higher in urban than in rural areas (Feng, 1992).

Research examining the effects of the one-child policy on family size have endeavored to show them precisely using life tables and related demographic methods. Zeng (1991) assembled female life tables for the 1970s and 1980s and concluded that the shrinking size of the Chinese family was due in large part to the fertility policies; he estimated that around one-fifth of the decline in family size in the 1970s was due almost exclusively to the policies.

Feng (1992) examined survey data for 1,293 families with primary school children in five cities of Hubei Province. He showed that about 80 percent of urban only-child families are three-member families, and almost all of the three-member families in Chinese cities are only-child families.

However, the one-child policy's effects on family size are not restricted to declines in sibship size. The policy has further affected family size through family structure and the family life cycle. The "empty nests" of only-child parents are of great concern (Feng, 2009b). Given the changing patterns of co-residence in China, more and more only-child parents are now living by themselves, once their children have begun college and/or have married. These trends are clearly seen in the census data. In 1982, the percentage of two-member families was almost 11 percent (Census Office of the State Council, 1985); and in 1990 almost 12 percent (Census Office of the State Council, 1993). In 2000, the percentage had increased to 17 percent (Census Office of the State Council, 2002), and was over 24 percent in 2010 (Census Office of the State Council, 2013). In urban areas, the percentages of two-person households are even higher, at nearly 22 percent in 2000 (Census Office of the State Council, 2002) and almost 28 percent in 2010 (Census Office of the State Council, 2013).

Research has also found that the average age of the heads of two-member families is in the 45-69 range, suggesting that most of them are the empty nests of only-child parents (Wang, 2006).

### **Changing Family Structure**

At first the one one-child policy had little if any direct effects on family structure. For one thing, its effects on family structure tended to lag, and for another, the policy did not really change the basic normative patterns of Chinese family life, i.e., the overall importance of the extended family structure (Wang, 2006).

Early discussions focused on the so-called "four-two-one" problem, that is, four grandparents, two parents and a single child (Song, 2000). Most attention was directed to the impact of only children on elderly support. However, the four-two-one issue is not that relevant because it has little meaning for co-residence (Liang, 2004). Discussion of the four-two-one issue becomes important when the only children marry, that is, when the only children themselves move from their families of orientation to families of procreation. It is when the only children marry that the "lag" effects of the policy begun to be realized.

First, conjugal families, i.e., the type of nuclear family containing only a husband and a wife, increase quickly. This is due largely to the "empty nests" of the parental families that come about when the only children leave their families of orientation. In 1982, the percentage of conjugal families was only around 5 percent; it increased to over 6 percent in 1990. By 2000, it was near 13 percent (Wang, 2006).

Second, the more typical type of nuclear family, i.e., that containing not only a couple but also their children, has declined. Historically, the Chinese nuclear family has been the co-product of the stem family. When the children in the family, especially the sons, marry, one of them, usually a son, lives with the parents, forming a stem family, and all the other children live elsewhere (Guo, 1995). The one-child policy, however, puts constraints on this process which had characterized Chinese family structure for centuries. Not surprisingly, when the first generation of Chinese only children reached the age of marriage, the standard nuclear family became less prevalent. In 1982, almost 53 percent of Chinese families were standard nuclear families, and in 1990, the figure was almost 58 percent. In 2000, it had declined to 47 percent (Wang, 2006).

Third, the percentage of stem families has been more or less stable over the years, at between 16 and 17 percent from 1982 to 2000 (Wang, 2006). For one thing, when there is only one child in the family, the emergence of a stem family is very likely because the only child will probably eventually co-reside with the parents (Zeng, 1991; Zeng & Wang, 2003).

It should be emphasized, however, that despite these quantitative changes in family structure, nuclear families and stem families continue to be important (Wang, 2006). But some qualitative changes have also occurred, as follows:

First, there has been a simplification of overall family structure and within-family relationships. When there is only one child in the family, the traditional Chinese family changes. In an only-child family, the structure is quite simply father-mother-child. The father, mother and the only child comprise a triangle, with the result that interaction is frequent and intense (Feng, 1992).

Second, when the only child is a daughter, there has been a tendency for a reduction in the degree of patriarchy. Gender is important in the Chinese family structure, and the family has long been treated as patriarchal, patrimonial, patrilineal, and patrilocal (Thornton & Lin, 1994). Patriarchy is still deemed to be very important (Yi & Zhang, 2008). But when the family has only one child, and that child is a daughter, the story changes. Chinese families with only daughters have little choice but to invest in their female offspring, leading to breakthroughs in gender differences in individual achievements and post-marriage relations (Fong, 2002).

Third, family structure has become more fluid. Individual choice has become more relevant. More married Chinese children, especially the generation after the one-child policy, have chosen to have no children, or not to live with their parents, a change due in part to the one-child policy, and in part to increasing levels of socioeconomic development.

### **Changing Intra-Family Relationships**

As already noted, the relationship in the only-child family tends to be simple and basic. Its core is the parent-child relationship, with the center being the child; all intra-family relationships tend to revolve around the only child.

Early in the 1980s, at the beginning of the OCP, only children were at the center of the family. The terms "spoiled brats," and "little emperors" were frequently used to imply that the parents put all of their hopes on their only children and that the children were "spoiled." All the members of the family surrounded the only children and focused their attention exclusively on them and let them do whatever they wanted to do.

A typical image of an only-child family, thus, was one in which the parents invested all of their resources in their only child. The intra-family relationships were no longer based on parental authority, but, rather, on the child and aiding him/her to grow up correctly. The OCP has tended to turn the center from the older generation to the only-child generation.

For one thing, the core of the intra-family relationship is the only children's level of achievement. Being an only child means being the only hope for the family, and also means eventually carrying forward all the family responsibilities. Some research has suggested that the husband-wife relationship has given way to the parent-child relationship (Hao & Feng, 2002).

However, some research has shown that in many instances the mothers of only children have been liberated from childbearing and have been able to participate in society more freely (Abadian, 1996; Zhou & Zhou, 2009). Also, and importantly, there is no consistent finding in the psychological and sociological literature that only children are anymore spoiled than siblinged children. There are few if any statistically significant differences between Chinese only children and their siblinged peers in terms of behavior and personality (Poston & Falbo, 1990a, 1990b; Falbo & Poston, 1993, 1994; Falbo, Poston, & Feng, 1996; Falbo, Poston, & Xie, 1996), that is, there are proportionally as many "little emperors" among only children in China as among siblinged children.

Other research has found that when there is only one child, the traditional gender effect is often weakened. Even if the only child is a girl, the parents still focus their attention on her. This is an important difference from the situation in the traditional Chinese family. Nowadays the only daughter, especially in urban areas, will not be neglected because of her

gender, but will be treated as well as she would have been the case had she been a boy (Fong, 2002).

When only children get married, the intra-family relationships characterizing their families of orientation are still influential. The parents of the now-married only children continue to aid and assist them. The literature has focused on two kinds of assistance: economic assistance from the parents, particularly for housing (Sun, 2006), and assistance from the parents in daily living, especially babysitting and housework. Of interest is Feng's (2006a) research that found that the parents tend to decrease their reliance on their children to support them in their old age, choosing to support themselves independently.

There is no doubt that the changing intra-family relationships in which the only children are now the center of the family has posed to be a great challenge to the Chinese norm of filial piety.

### **Changing Living Patterns of Young Couples**

"A man takes a wife, but a female is married off" is a famous Chinese saying characterizing marriage in China. Virilocal residence that occurs after marriage embodies the male-oriented family system. There are three main types of postnuptial living arrangements: the newlywed couple living by themselves, living with the man's family, and living with the woman's family. These three arrangements are sometimes referred to as "three flowers burgeoning jointly." Whereas in traditional China the second type predominated, in China today there is increasing evidence of the first type. The traditional pattern of living with the husband's family has changed, and the other options are increasingly evident (Sheng, 2011). One survey of married only children with their babies has shown that of those living with their elderly parents, half live with the man's parents, and half with the woman's parents (Feng, 2006b). Also there seem to be some differences depending on whether both the man and woman are single children. When both are only children, they tend much more to live alone as a nuclear family. When neither are only children, they tend much more to live with the husband's parents. When one spouse is an only child, they tend much more to live with their elderly parents, especially the wife's parents.

Research has shed light on the following two aspects of family life. First of all, the living patterns of young married couples who are only children are closely related to issues of parental support. Many young married couples now live alone, resulting in a definite increase in the "empty nest" phenomenon of the one-child parents when they become old.

Second, as the first generation of only children ages and more and more of them marry, those who do not live alone will tend just as much to live with the parents of the wife as with the parents of the husband. In other words there will be a relative balance between virilocal and uxori-local residence. The traditional mode of living in a male-dominated culture is changing in China and will continue to do so.

### **New and Changing Family Lifestyles**

The emergence of a large number of one-child families has also resulted in new and changing family lifestyles in China, especially in urban areas.

First, children have become the focal point, the center of the family. In traditional Chinese families, it was the elderly grandparents, especially on the father's side, who were the center of the family; they were adored by all family members, and were the ones who exercised

decision-making in the day to day life of the family. Their social status, social roles, values, behaviors and habits deeply influenced the family's way of life. The implementation of the OCP and the resulting numbers of one-child families have greatly reduced the multigenerational family form and has weakened the central position of ancestors in the family. In modern families, even when three generations live under one roof, the members of the younger generation now tend to replace the ancestors in the family life, and they have become the center of the modern family. The family's center of gravity is tilting and shifting to the only children. Their uniqueness results in the parents of only children expanding their importance and their position in the family, whether consciously or unconsciously.

Second, there has been a real change in family leisure and entertainment. The separation of adults and children in leisure and entertainment in the traditional family has been replaced by common participation of the whole family, and this has become one sign of the new lifestyle. In the traditional multiple-child family, parents and other adults spent more leisure time with each other, and little with their children; and the children tended to spend their time with their siblings and peers. Parents and their children were quite different in the content and form of their leisure.

In today's one-child families, the parents tend much less to spend leisure time alone or with other adults; leisure with their children has increased significantly. The so-called "collective action" approach to leisure time in the one-child family has changed the form and content of entertainment. Parents no longer only consider their own leisure needs; they pay more and more attention to the needs of their only children. And the children tend to rely more so on their parents as companions and to participate together with them in recreational activities. This has promoted an equality in the parent-child relationship and has restricted to a certain extent the interactions of the children with others.

Third, the children's life style behaviors used to be part and parcel of the family's behavior; however, in the one-child family it now occupies a very prominent position. Not only do the family's activities focus on the children, but the children's life style activities frequently cost more than those of other family members. Intellectual development is now a very prominent feature of the only child's leisure time; parents pay heavily for such leisure items as electronic organs, pianos, computers, extracurricular books, and all kinds of learning tools. The hiring of tutors and the sending of the children to special skills classes have also become an important part of the lifestyle activities of one-child families.

### **The Changing Family Life Cycle**

The prominent American demographer Paul Glick (1947) divided the family life cycle into six stages: (1) family formation, (2) family expansion, (3) completion of family expansion, (4) family scale reduction, (5) completion of family scale reduction, and (6) disintegration of the family. These stages were brought about by such family life events as marriage, giving birth, and the children leaving home. However, the normal family life cycle has been significantly changed in China following the OCP and the millions of one-child families. Changes in the family life cycle have especially occurred in the family of orientation.

First, the expansion stage and its completion stage, i.e., stages 2 and 3, occur at the same time in one-child families. In a one-child family, by definition the event of giving birth occurs only once. In the Chinese family the first birth almost always occurs just one or two years after marriage, and later children come shortly thereafter. In 1982, only one-third of women aged 15 to 49 had their last children within 5 years after marriage; by 1992, the proportion

increased to more than one-half; and by 2001 it reached over 95 percent (Tian, 2011). When parents have only one child, they have it soon after marriage; thus the three-member family pattern is maintained for a long time. Feng (2009a) has shown that on average the mother of an only-child gave birth to the child when she was 27 years, and, on average, the only child left home when she was around 48 years old; thus the only-child family has a father-mother-child structure for about 21 years.

Second, there is only one way, other than through the occurrence of death, for an only-child family to be reduced in size; this occurs when the child leaves the home. If the only child chooses to co-reside with parents, family size, obviously, will not change. Research has tended to focus on the first situation, and the resulting "empty nest" phenomenon, showing that when they marry, about 60 percent of only children move out to form their own families, and only about 30 percent of them live with their parents to form stem families (Feng, 2009b).

### **THE ONE-CHILD POLICY AND FAMILY RISKS AND RELATED ISSUES**

The implementation of the OCP has not only resulted in many changes in the Chinese family, as discussed above, but it has also resulted in numerous risks and challenges for the many millions of one-child families now in China. Among these are old-age security problems for the one-child parents, the impact on the parents of the death of an only child, and the gradual disappearance of the one-child family relationship.

#### **Old-age Security Problems for the One-child Parents**

For centuries in China there have been many fewer elderly people than young children. However, as the first generation of only children gets married, and their parents become aged, the numbers of elderly become larger than the numbers of children.

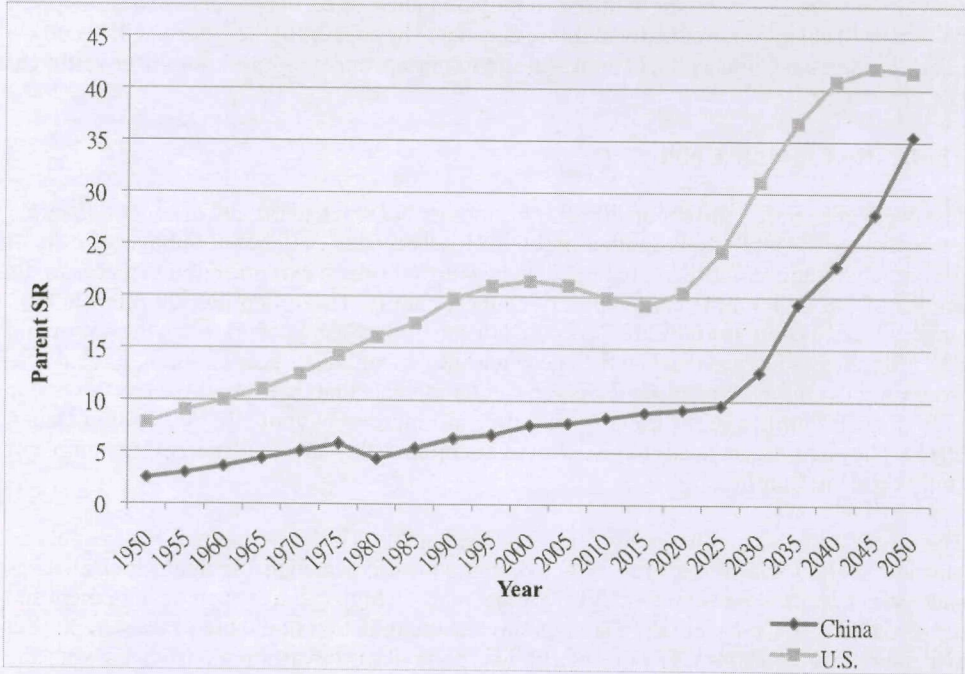
Family support of the elderly has long been the primary mode of elderly support in Chinese society. The notion of "Bringing up sons to support parents in their old age" has been the norm for centuries. But this dynamic is about to change in China owing to the declines in fertility resulting from the fertility policies, and the concomitant declines in mortality. Let us examine these changes in detail.

We will consider these changes in the age distribution using the parent-support ratio (PSR), which takes the number of persons 80 years old and over per 100 persons aged 50-64 (Wu & Wang, 2004). The PSR is an indication of the relative burden of the oldest-old population, i.e., the oldest old parents, on the population aged 50-64, i.e., the children of the oldest old parents. The PSR is an empirical ratio which is meant to reflect the degree of burden the oldest old have on their mid-age or younger elderly children. It does not take into account specifically and directly the actual burden; the financial and emotional costs of caring for oldest-old parents are not measured with the PSR. But the implication is that they will increase in a society with increases in the PSR (Poston & Zeng, 2008).

Figure 2 presents parent support ratios (PSRs) for every five years from 1950 to 2050 for China and for the United States. In 1950 both countries had very low PSRs. In China in 1950 there were less than 3 persons of age 80 and over per 100 persons aged 50-64. There was not much of an oldest old parent burden on the older children in either country in 1950.

By 2000 the parent support ratios had increased three-fold in both countries, for China from



**Figure 2. Parent Support Ratios (80+ / 50-64), China and the U.S., 1950-2050**

2.5 in 1950 to 7.8 in 2000. The burden of oldest old parents on their children has increased in both countries, and the burden is almost three times as heavy in the U.S. as in China. In the U.S. in 2000 there were more than 21 elderly aged 80+ for every 100 persons aged 50-64, whereas in China the PSR was less than 8 persons aged 80+ per 100 aged 50-64.

Both countries are projected to experience even more dramatic increases by 2050. The PSR is expected to increase almost five-fold in China from 7.8 in 2000 to 35.5 in 2050. The PSR is projected to double in the U.S. from 21.4 in 2000 to 41.7 in 2050. The burden of oldest old parents on their children will be extremely high in 2050 in both countries. There are projected to be in China almost 36 persons aged 80 and over for every 100 persons aged 50-64. Although the PSR figure for China is projected to be slightly less than that for the U.S., the change in PSRs between 2000 and 2050 for China will be much greater than for the U.S. (Poston & Zeng, 2008).

By 2050 China will have grown to be one of the oldest populations in the world, and a country with one of the heaviest aged dependency burdens of any population in the world. What will this mean for China?

As we have already noted, traditionally in China, the support of one's elder parents has been the responsibility of the sons. Often the parents lived with the oldest son, and either with or nearby the other sons. The eldest son and his brothers tended to be responsible for providing the parents with economic support. The sons would rely on one of their sisters, or sometimes on one or more of their wives to provide their parents with emotional support. These norms have been adjusted or modified in past decades, especially since the founding of the People's Republic in 1949, and particularly among urban residents. Nevertheless, the provision of economic and emotional support to one's parents has seldom been a major burden. As one

might expect in a population with modestly high levels of fertility, there have usually been many more producers in the Chinese population than aged dependents. These support patterns will change dramatically in future decades. The support of the elderly will become a major problem in China and will constitute an important and major task for the government and the society.

### **The Death of an Only-Child**

The death of an only child occurring after the mother has reached the end of her childbearing years, around the late-40s, is another problem closely related to issues of old-age security of the one-child family, and also can be said to be one of the most extreme circumstances of the impact of the OCP on the contemporary Chinese family. These families are referred to in China as "only child lost families." As noted this major problem occurs when the only-child dies after the mother has reached the age when she can no longer bear children. Recent data from China's Old-age Scientific Research Center indicate that there are these days over one million such families in the country, and they are increasing annually by 76,000 (Zhang, 2013). The government needs to give a lot of attention to this large and increasing number of "only child lost families."

The loss of an only child has many effects on the parents. The one-child parents' mental and physical health is usually severely affected; this is to be expected in a society which attaches such great importance to children's growth, and places a high value on their development and achievements. In China, children are not only the continuation of the life of the parents, but also their ideals and hopes. The loss of a child is particularly devastating if it occurs when the parents have ended the childbearing ages and entering old age.

The death of a young adult offspring has a long-term impact on the one-child families, and causes irreparable consequences; this is especially the situation for parents' old age security. As previously noted, the family support mode in China has for centuries stressed the importance of offspring. In elderly parents' lives, offspring are not just a basis for economic dependence, they are also the caregivers, especially when their parents are weak and sick, and cannot provide for themselves. Children are vital for interpersonal communication and spiritual comfort between generations. This comfort based on blood relationships, like vitamins, is an indispensable element in older parents' lives. And the children also bring spiritual solace to their parents. When/if the only child dies, there is not another to replace him/her. All in all, the loss of an only child is a huge disaster for the one-child parents and families.

### **Problems Resulting from the Lack of a Kinship Network**

Chinese society has long been characterized by complex networks of kinship and family. The eminent anthropologist Fei Xiaotong wrote about people's social networks and their hierarchy in Chinese society. Relationships are the key to social relations. Of critical importance in the family are kinship networks, i.e., the relations of a son or daughter with his/her siblings. Family kinship networks play an important role, both with respect to material well-being, e.g., seeking jobs, providing food, clothing, shelter and transportation, and spiritual well-being, e.g., providing support at weddings and funerals and other major life events.

Kinship networks, however, do not exist for only-children; they have no brothers or sisters. When this generation of only children with no brothers and sisters gets married and has

children, their kinship relationship network has two forms: 1) if an only child marries a siblinged child (couple type A), they will typically have two sets of parents (the parents and the parents-in-law), and siblings-in-law only on one side (the siblinged child's siblings); and 2) if an only child marries an only child (couple type B), they will usually have two sets of parents (the parents and the parents-in-law), but no siblings. A greater impact may well occur for their children. For the children of couple type A, their children may still have kinship relationships with half of the parents' relatives (e.g., paternal younger uncle, paternal older uncle, paternal aunt, or maternal uncle, maternal aunt, etc.). But the children of couple type B will have no parental relatives, i.e., no aunts or uncles. There will only be three kinds of relationships in the family where both parents are only children, i.e., the spousal relationship, the parent-child relationship, and the relationship between grandparents and grandchildren.

When this happens to many tens of millions of people and families in a society, what changes will occur to people's family life, their social interactions, and their social relationship networks? We really do not know what will occur. There never has been such a situation in the history of humankind. And this will be occurring in a society with great emphases on families and family networks.

### CONCLUSION

The OCP continues to exist in China, even though there has been considerable discussion by demographers and sociologists that it is no longer necessary (Gu et al., 2007; Wang et al., 2012). And the one-child population continues each year to increase in size, as does the number of one-child families. The second generation of single children and their families is beginning to appear as the first generation marries and has their own single children. It is certain that there are significant changes ahead for Chinese society, many of which have never occurred before.

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