This study examined the effects of China’s one-child policy on two traditional aspects of Chinese family life: filial piety and patrilineality. Eighty-four graduating university seniors, who were part of the first cohort born under the one-child policy, were interviewed about their life plans. Comparisons between only children and those with siblings showed that only children were as likely to plan on helping their parents as were those with siblings and were more likely to intend to reside in the same city. The only children seemed to feel especially responsible for their parents’ happiness because of their singleton status. Among only children and those with siblings, patrilineal norms seemed weak. Students’ mentions of family structure to explain their decisions suggest that the one-child policy is undermining patrilineal norms.

**Keywords:** filial piety; one-child policy; only child; Chinese families

In 1979, China introduced the world’s most radical population policy. All married couples were to be restricted to one child (Huang, 1982). By examining the hopes, dreams, and concerns of the first cohort of children born under the one-child policy, the current study considers how traditional Chinese family life might be affected.

**The One-Child Policy**

The one-child policy was adopted in response to China’s unprecedented population growth after the Chinese Communist Revolution in 1949. Better
health care, decreased infant mortality, and longer life expectancy fueled the explosion in population (Lewis, 1987). Although in the 1970s state educational efforts successfully lowered the fertility rate from 6 to 2.7 in 1979 (Greenhalgh, 1990; Short, Zhai, Xu, & Yang, 2001), China’s population was still expected to climb to 1.3 billion by the year 2000 (Ching, 1982), threatening to halt economic development (Yuesheng & Zhangling, 1987).

The introduction of the one-child policy coincided with rural economic reforms that created the economic conditions in which more children would be economically advantageous for rural families (Davin, 1985). The economic reforms also intensified the age-old Chinese preference for sons (Croll, 1994). Resistance in the countryside led to a de facto two-child policy there (Greenhalgh, 1993; Short & Zhai, 1998). In 1989, all rural families whose first children were daughters were extended the option of having an additional child (Cooney & Li, 1994).

Acceptance of and compliance with the one-child policy was much greater in Chinese cities (Greenhalgh, 1990; Kane, 1985). In 1986, one half of the fifth graders in one Beijing study had siblings, whereas only 20% of the first graders did, and by 1989 only 10% in a comparable sample had siblings (Stevenson, Chen, & Lee, 1992). The government could exercise more control over its urban population than it could over its peasants because an urban registration entitles one to employment and important welfare benefits, such as housing, health care, and children’s education, which could be withheld for violations of the policy (Cooney & Li, 1994). Moreover, urban parents did not need children for old-age security (Greenhalgh, 1990), and the costs of housing and caring for children were higher in the cities than in the countryside (Kane, 1985).

**The Chinese Family**

For centuries, Chinese families have reflected Confucian ideals (Gabrenya & Hwang, 1996; Goodwin & Tang, 1996). Children were inculcated with the values of filial piety toward their parents, which included respect, obedience, and the obligation to care for elderly parents and respond to their needs. A collective sense of self was encouraged in which family needs and honor came before personal desires (Stacey, 1983; Yang, 1988).

Family roles were also highly gendered. The Chinese family has been described as patriarchal, patrilineal, and patrilocal (Fei, 1947/1992; Hong, 1987; Stacey, 1983). Women were supposed to obey their fathers, their husbands, and ultimately, their sons. Daughters were expected to leave their natal families and become part of their husbands’ families (Croll, 1994). Stem families included one married son and his wife and children (Stacey, 1983).
Sons were preferred because they provided for their aging parents and carried on the family name (Davin, 1985; Li & Cooney, 1993). The failure to produce a son was considered one of the most unfilial acts. Daughters, viewed as temporary members who could not contribute to the lineage and drained family resources, were devalued in this patrilineal system (Croll, 1994). As daughters-in-law, they held the lowest status in the household (Yu & Chau, 1997).

The patriarchy and mutual interdependence of the Chinese family survived the policies of the Maoist Chinese state between 1949 and 1976 and continued through the reform era (Davis & Harrell, 1993; Stacy, 1983). The marriage law of 1980 reinforced children’s obligations to care for aging parents (Chen, 1985). Adult children, then and now, provide for their parents’ needs through coresidence. In 1986, 80% of respondents older than age 80 years lived with adult children (Unger, 1993). Likewise, 67% of Cantonese elderly lived with their children (Ikels, 1993). Sons are more likely to coreside with parents than are daughters (Davis, 1993; Ikels, 1993; Logan, Bian, & Bian, 1998), although some evidence suggests that this may be changing (Hung, 1995). When aging parents do move in with their children, if able, they contribute child care and housework (Ikels, 1993; Logan & Bian, 1999). Even when elderly parents and adult children do not coreside, children typically visit parents frequently and provide help with daily chores, although contact with sons is more frequent than with daughters (Bian, Logan, & Bian, 1998).

Children also give money to their parents (Yu, Yu, & Mansfield, 1990). In a five-city survey in 1982 to 1983, 36% to 38% sent remittances to family members outside the household (Unger, 1993). Couples remit more money to husbands’ parents than to wives’ parents. Moreover, husbands’ parents receive more money when they had greater need or when the couple had more resources; wives’ parents receive more if they provide child care and housework or if the husbands’ parents are deceased (H. Yang, 1996).

Filial values survive in today’s China. In a 1997 Beijing survey, young respondents agreed that adult children should look after aging parents, assist them financially, respect them, make them happy, and retain contact with them. They were more likely to disagree that adult children should obey parents (Yue & Ng, 1999).

**Only Children and the Chinese Family**

How might the Chinese family be transformed by the one-child limit? Two components of family life seem particularly vulnerable to change: filial piety and the position of women and girls.
Filial piety. People in China today worry about creating a generation of “little emperors.” Only children are reputed to get their parents to buy them what they want through temper tantrums, and parents are said to forego food themselves so their children can have McDonald’s meals. One school counselor opined, “I think this generation will be the most self-centered in Chinese history and will turn traditional Chinese ethics and morality on their heads” (Crowell & Hsieh, 1995, p. 50).

The era of the only child coincides with a period of increasing prosperity in China. Chinese families have unprecedented purchasing power, and their children may exert a bigger influence on family purchases than any children in the world (Chee, 2000). Nonetheless, most parental purchases are directed toward their children’s educational needs (e.g., lessons, toys for good grades, educational toys). Purchases for children do not exceed those for adults (Davis & Sensenbrenner, 2000).

In a study conducted in Beijing and surrounding communities in the mid-1980s, parenting in only-child families was more child centered than in families with multiple children (Chow & Chen, 1994; Chow & Zhao, 1996). Parents spent more time on child care if they had a single child than with multiple children and more readily agreed that parenting was the most meaningful and fulfilling part of their lives. Only children received more toys and lucky money and were more likely to have a bank account (Chow & Zhao, 1996). Parents of singleton (an only child) kindergarteners rejected the traditional belief that children should not “talk back” (Wu, 1996).

This kind of parental attention and investment, however, may not undermine filial piety. In one study of only children ages 6 to 13 years, parents reported that they tried to teach their children good manners, respect for others’ rights, and caring about other people’s feelings, all of which are supportive of group harmony and consistent with values undergirding filial piety (Strom, Strom, & Xie, 1996). In Shanghai in the early 1990s, the average parent’s ideal child possessed a “good moral character,” which meant the child loved others, was group oriented and cooperative, respected elders, had good manners, was obedient and demonstrated dongshi (understanding of adults’ desires; Wu, 1996).

Only children, whose parents invest so much in them, may be especially filial. They might be more likely to internalize parental values and they also bear the entire responsibility for their parents’ welfare. Moreover, although historically sons have been primarily obliged to care for aging parents, in the absence of sons, daughters’ behavior may change. In one study of intergenerational contact and help, although sons had more contact with parents than daughters, daughters compensated when there were no sons (Bian et al., 1998).
Studies of the personalities of only children have produced mixed results. In a study of Shanghai preschoolers, teachers rated the personalities of only children more negatively than those with siblings (Ching, 1982; Falbo, 1987). However, using the same measures with kindergarteners and third graders in Changsha, single children were rated no differently from those with siblings on most negative measures. They were rated worse on their eating habits and preference for fancy clothes but better on noncooperativeness and hostility (Poston & Yu, 1985). In a multicity study of third graders and fifth graders, there were no consistent only-child effects on personality (Falbo & Poston, 1993).

The position of women and girls. Patterns of compliance with the one-child policy underline the preference for sons in China (Li & Cooney, 1993). Sex birth ratios after 1980 show a disproportionate number of boys, which suggests either an increase in sex-selective abortion or in female infanticide (Coale & Banister, 1994; Croll, 1994). Female infants have also been abandoned, hidden, and given up for adoption (Keng, 1997). Son preference has led to widespread abuses against women, primarily in the countryside where there have been reports of enforced sterilization, abortion, insertion of IUDs, and violence against and abandonment of women who produce daughters (Croll, 1994; Dalsimer & Nisonoff, 1987; Davin, 1985; Greenhalgh, 2001; Keng, 1997).

While acknowledging the abuses, at least one prominent Chinese feminist, Li Xiaojiang, has argued vehemently that the one-child policy will ultimately have enormous benefits for women. Although Western feminists oppose the policy because it limits women’s control over their bodies, Li argued that prior to the one-child policy, Chinese women did not exercise reproductive choice. Fertility decisions were controlled by husbands’ families. According to her, the policy liberates women from these demands and allows them to “talk back to their husbands, limit their fertility, and develop their intellectual potential” (Greenhalgh, 2001, p. 869). Greenhalgh (2001) interviewed four other Chinese feminists who were much more critical of the policy because of its negative effects on rural women but who, nonetheless, agreed that urban women had not been hurt by the one-child policy and might have been helped by it.

The one-child policy may challenge traditional patrilineality in China. If parents have only one child and that child is a daughter, the parents must depend on her for affective ties and for their future economic welfare. Arguably, this changed family dynamic could increase the value of daughters to their parents and parental investments in daughters. Parents of only daugh-
ters may not be sanguine about relinquishing them to a husband’s family (Hong, 1987). The destruction of patrilineal norms and behavior would go a long way toward creating gender equality.

Some studies have already documented equal treatment of only sons and daughters. For example, the child centeredness of only-child families applied to those with daughters and those with sons (Chow & Zhao, 1996). Girls were more likely to get the attention of fathers and mothers if they did not have siblings (Short et al., 2001). The purchases Shanghai parents made for their children (who were overwhelmingly only children) showed a “gender-blind parental emphasis on achievement and investment over display and decoration” (Davis & Sensenbrenner, 2000, p. 65).

Parents of kindergarteners in Shanghai overwhelmingly believed that boys and girls should get equal education (Wu, 1996). In a Wuhan study of 768 single-child families with a child in eighth grade, no differences were found in parents’ educational aspirations for their daughters or sons, or in parents’ willingness to borrow money for college for them. Parents’ aspirations were significant predictors of their children’s aspirations. Girls scored as high as boys in math achievement and had equally high educational aspirations as boys (Tsui & Rich, 2002).

Based on an ethnographic study of families with teenaged students in Dalian, Fong (2002) showed that parents’ attitudes toward daughters were changing because of their singleton status. The low-fertility mothers themselves provide more help to their own parents than they would if they had more children. This challenge to patrilineal norms, in turn, encouraged them and their husbands to count on their own daughters’ future help. Fong argued that Chinese parents’ increasing support of and pride in their daughters’ achievements may represent enlightened self-interest.

For the current study, I interviewed a group of graduating seniors who were born in 1979, the 1st year of the one-child policy. Because the policy was not strictly enforced initially, it is possible to compare the views of children with and without siblings. These comparisons are far more relevant to understanding the effects of the policy than comparisons between only children and their peers with siblings that might have been made with earlier cohorts. A family with a single child was an anomaly before 1979, which could explain any differences between only children and others. In 1979, the adoption of the policy changed the status of one-child families (in the cities, at least) from nonnormative to normative. Thus, this cohort offers a special opportunity. Nonetheless, the cross-sectional and prospective nature of the study suggests caution.

My current inquiry focuses on two questions:
Are only children born under the one-child policy less filial than children with siblings? Compared to children with siblings, do only children subscribe less to patrilineal norms and believe more in gender equality?

Method

Participants

I conducted interviews with 84 senior undergraduates (42 males and 42 females), who volunteered to participate, at a university in southeastern China. They were recruited either through word of mouth or were contacted by telephone. All but one of the students contacted agreed to participate. The students' majors were equally divided among English, international trade, and chemistry. Demographic characteristics of the students and their families are presented in Table 1.

These students represent an elite among the Chinese, simply by virtue of attending college. The majors of the students I interviewed are particularly unrepresentative because of the facility in English required. Arguably, however, the characteristics of this sample operate to diminish traditional Chinese values. More educated Chinese, for example, are less likely to favor intergenerational coresidence. Those who major in English or international trade may be more influenced by Western values than other students. Thus, the persistence of filial piety would be particularly powerful if shown in this group. Likewise, although this group as a whole might have more liberal ideas about gender than the average Chinese, it is unclear why any differences between only children and those with siblings would not generalize to less elite samples.

Procedure

Students were interviewed during the 2000 to 2001 academic year. I first interviewed them between November and March, when most were actively engaged in making postgraduation plans. The interviews were conducted at my apartment, which was located at the university they attended. Their responses were recorded by typing them verbatim on a laptop computer. Each interview lasted approximately 1 hour. In May and June of 2001, I successfully recontacted 79 of the 84 students by either telephone or e-mail.

Although it would have been ideal for me to conduct the interviews in Chinese, that was not possible, so the interviews were conducted in English. All Chinese students have studied English for more than 5 years. English and
international trade majors were all quite fluent in English; however, there was a large range of fluency among the chemistry majors. I kept a dictionary available for students who needed help to find the appropriate word.

**Measures**

*Face-to-face interview.* The semistructured research interview consisted of 19 open-ended and closed-ended questions that assessed multiple aspects of the students’ life plans and how their parents figured into them. For example, questions pertained to their immediate postgraduation plans (e.g., Where do you plan to live?), long-term plans (e.g., Do you have a dream for your life?), and their parents’ views of their plans (e.g., Do your parents want you to move back to your hometown?). Students were also asked how they planned to integrate work and family life (e.g., When you and your spouse are working, who will take care of the children?).

Students’ gender ideology was assessed by their agreement with four gender-related statements on 7-point Likert-type scales that ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). The statements included (a) It is better for the family if the husband is the principal breadwinner and the wife has primary responsibility for the home and children; (b) If both husband and
wife work, they should share equally in housework and child care; (c) Ide-
ally, there should be as many women as men in important positions in the
government and business; (d) Parents should encourage as much independ-
ence in their daughters as in their sons.

Students were also asked about their ages, their parents’ ages and educa-
tions, and about where their hometown was. If the urban-rural distinction
was unclear, I asked if the hometown was a city or in the countryside. For the
overwhelming majority of students, their hometown was where their hukou
(residency permit) was located, where they grew up, and where their parents
currently lived.

The order of the questions was structured. However, participants’ re-
sponses were probed to clarify answers and explore themes and interpreta-
tions. For example, if students did not mention their parents as a source of
child care, they were asked what they thought about having their parents care
for their children.

**Telephone or e-mail interview.** Students indicated whether they had final-
ized their postgraduation plans. If so, I asked what they would be doing, how
their parents felt about their plans, and how satisfied they themselves were
(rated on a scale of 1 to 10) about their choices.

**Analysis**

The transcripts were read multiple times by the author, and when possible,
an additional coder. Themes and patterns in the students’ responses to quali-
tative questions were identified. First, closed-ended and open-ended ques-
tions relevant to students’ relationships with their parents and the students’
gender beliefs were analyzed. Subsequently, themes related to filial piety and
gender relations that emerged anywhere in the interview were recorded and
analyzed.

The methods of coding were borrowed from a number of qualitative re-
searchers. In general, the categories were grounded in the data (Strauss &
Corbin, 1990); however, I also explored tentative hypotheses based on the
theoretical and empirical literature on filial piety and patrilinealism in China
(Berg, 2001). This eclectic approach followed the 10 principles and practices
of qualitative researchers synthesized by Tesch (1990).

To assess filial piety, I examined the kinds of help students intended to
provide their parents (e.g., material and/or emotional), whether they felt
obliged to produce children, and whether they intended to coreside with
their parents in the future. Of course, these questions can only assess what
students imagine they will do in the future. They give us a window into their current filial attitudes but do not necessarily foretell behavior. Gender egalitarianism was measured by the students’ gender ideologies, their sex preferences for future children, and daughters’ reports of parental encouragement for nontraditional behavior. The students’ stances toward partrilineal norms were examined in their responses to questions about whose family of origin would provide child care for their children, and why.

Results

The Urban-Rural Divide

Only children were far more likely to come from China’s cities than from the countryside. Of a total of 40 only children, 38 (95%) came from cities, whereas only 2 (5%) came from the countryside. In contrast, students with siblings were close to evenly divided between those from cities (n = 23, 53.5%) and those from the countryside (n = 20, 46.5%; \( \chi^2 = 18.33, p < .001 \)).

To disentangle sibling status from geographical origin, I created a variable (i.e., family type) that separated students with siblings into those from the countryside and those from the city. Because virtually all of the only children came from cities, I created a third group comprised of only children who grew up in cities, which excluded the two singleton students from the countryside. Thus, there were three family types examined: single-child urban, multiple-child urban, and multiple-child countryside.

I included the students from the countryside in the analyses, despite the numerous differences between them and the only children that go beyond sibling status, because students from the countryside might hold the most traditional Chinese values and because they typically come from poorer families. Some scholars of the Chinese family have argued that the basis of filial piety might be changing from material interdependence to emotional interdependence (Wang & Hsieh, 2000). A comparison of the nature of filial piety between students from the countryside and urban singletons might be especially informative, given that parents from the countryside might be materially dependent on their university educated children, and urban parents of singletons might be emotionally dependent on them. Moreover, by including students from the countryside, I could examine the ways in which sibling status transcends urban-rural differences. If the urban and rural students with siblings differ from the urban singletons, it suggests that sibling status effects might generalize beyond an urban sample.
Filial Piety

Help to parents. Any intention students expressed to help or to benefit their parents was recorded. The categories of helping included making the parents happy or relieving their loneliness, taking care of them, giving them money, bringing them to the same city to live together, buying a house for them to live in, having a child for their benefit, and giving them a better life.

Almost two thirds of the students (64%) indicated that they intended to help their parents in some way in the future. One student, who was an only child, eloquently expressed the values of filial piety she had internalized:

Chinese people often believe in Xiao (to care for your parents, to be good for them, to let them live happy, to live well). Xiao, for me, is the main idea is rooted in my heart when I was a child.

Twelve percent of the students mentioned their parents in their life dreams. They included students from the countryside and the city, men and women, singletons, and those with siblings. Those students envisioned their parents as beneficiaries of their hoped-for career and financial success: “I should earn enough to support them in a really good life in the last days of their life”; “Another dream is about career. I hope I can be successful. I want to take care of my parents and give them a better life.”

Almost one half of the students (46.4%) intended to provide materially for their parents, either by housing them, sending them money, supporting them, or “giving them a better life.” Sixteen (19%) of the students intended to do something to enhance their parents’ happiness or ease their loneliness. Material and emotional benefit often overlapped, however. For example, students were classified as intending material help if they said they would buy a house in which they would live with their parents. The material benefit to the parents, in that case, however, might not have been as important as the companionship. Likewise, 12 students (14.3%) reported that they intended to “take care” of their parents in the future; however, it is unclear whether that meant materially or emotionally.

Family type was not significantly related overall to students’ intentions to help. Sixty percent of the urban only children, 61% of the urban children with siblings, and 72% of the countryside children (who all had siblings) indicated at least one way they intended to help parents. The nature of help differed somewhat among the groups, however.

A greater percentage of students from the countryside (70%) mentioned future material help to parents than did urban students from either single-
child families (39.5%) or multiple-child families (39.1%), \( \chi^2(2) = 5.68, p < .10 \), who did not differ.¹ One student described her responsibilities:

I will bring my whole family to the university city. . . . My family has heavy debt, and I have high education in my family—some debt for my fathers’ business, so I must pay off the debt first. . . . Parents who live in the countryside need more help.

Only children were more likely (26%) to mention responding to parents’ emotional needs than were children with siblings whether they came from cities (13%) or from the countryside (15%). Students’ responsiveness to parental feelings was most likely to come up when students discussed where they planned to live eventually. The only children were more likely to report that their parents wanted them to come back to their hometowns (53%) than were students with siblings whose hometowns were either in cities (35%) or in the countryside (18%), \( \chi^2(2) = 5.4, p < .10 \). Only children mentioned that their parents would be lonely if they did not live with them in the future and empathized with their parents’ desire for them to come home. Their only-child status seemed to make them feel especially responsible for their parents’ well-being: “I can imagine if I am old and my only child is far away. I don’t think the feeling is good”; “Maybe I will buy a big house to live with my parents because I am an only child. They will be lonely if I don’t live with them.”

Students’ intentions to live in the same city as their parents were significantly related to their family type, \( \chi^2(2) = 10.1, p < .01 \). Among students who answered definitively, 71% of the only children expected to live in the same city as their parents, as compared to 31% of their urban counterparts with siblings. Of the students from the countryside, 81% also expected to live in the same city as their parents.³ The majority of students in all of the groups stated a preference for living in a different house than their parents, although the only children (26.5%) and those from the countryside (35.3%) were more likely to anticipate coresiding than the urban students with siblings (10.5%), \( \chi^2(2) = 3.16, ns \).

The urban students with siblings sometimes explicitly invoked their sibling status to justify their plans to live away from their parents: “I don’t think they will come and live with me if I live in another city. They have lived in their hometown for so long, and my sister is not too far away from them”; “My parents don’t care where I go because my little brother lives with them. They are not lonely.” It is interesting to note that urban male students with siblings were the least likely (44%) to anticipate helping their parents.
Although the students from the countryside, who have siblings, were as likely as the only children to plan on living in proximity to their parents, they never invoked parents’ loneliness as a reason. The minority who intended to live in a different city from their parents never justified it by invoking their siblings’ capacity to help their parents. Typically, the students from the countryside intended to bring their parents to where they got a job, after either they made enough money to buy a house or after the parents retired. They planned to coreside or live nearby:

My plan is after I have worked for several years to have the ability, enough money to get a house . . . then I can bring them to where I work. . . . If I have enough money, they will live in a different house, but not very far away so I can visit them often. If, for financial purposes I have not enough money, they will live with me in the same house. That is also ok.

The only children who intended to reside in the same city as their parents did not necessarily plan to live in the same house. It is unclear whether and how much conflict their preference to reside separately would generate with their parents. The only children also often faced a conflict between their own wish to look for jobs in Shanghai or Beijing and their parents’ desire for them to move back home after graduation. They often reached a compromise in their own minds by planning to bring their parents to the city where they would get a job and establish themselves:

My parents want me to move back to Nanjing. Sure, that is the conventional thinking of Chinese parents. Especially, I’m the only child. They do miss me a lot. Of course, they will respect my choice. Also, in their mind, my future is the most important. Their hope lies in me. . . . The best way is I can buy a decent house, and I can bring them to the city where I live.

Plans, of course, can change. We cannot know whether students’ filial plans will result in filial deeds. Nonetheless, only children’s intentions to help their parents and live near them do provide evidence of their filial values.

Continuing the family line. One of the most important filial responsibilities is to have children to continue the family line. To one young man, who was an only child, my question of whether he wanted children was irrelevant:

In China the family name is important. My family name is Wang. My father has two brother and one sister, but they all have one child, and all the other children are girls. If they get married and have children, the family name is not Wang so it is my duty to have children.
The obligation to have children, however, seemed to go beyond carrying on the family name. A young woman told me, “It is said there are three disobediences against your parents. The most important is not having a child of your own.”

In total, 17 students expressed either ambivalence or downright negative feelings about having children. Thirteen of them were only children. However, 4 of these only children (2 males and 2 females) who might have preferred remaining childless said that they would defer to their parents’ or in-laws’ desires:

I don’t like children screaming and crying all day. It is troublesome. . . . Now couples live without children and they can live together well and very happily. . . . I think I have to have a child for my parents’ expectations.

The students who intended to have children solely to benefit their parents were always those without siblings. Students with siblings could shift the responsibility to them, like the daughter who said, “I don’t think it is very important because I have an older brother.”

Gender

Belief in gender equality. On the gender ideology scale, only children tended to have more egalitarian ideas ($M = 5.7$) than did urban or rural students who had siblings ($M_s = 5.3$), $F(2, 68) = 2.99, p < .06$. There was no interaction between gender and family type.

Gender preferences. Son preference in China has long reflected gender inequality. When asked whether they preferred a boy or girl, the majority of students (60%) expressed no sex preference. Among those who did have a preference, more than one fourth (28%) preferred girls. The only children came closest to parity. Sixty-three percent of them had no sex preference. Of those who did express a gender preference, 6 of 14 wanted daughters.

Parents and daughters. Parental encouragement and discouragement of nontraditional behavior in daughters was examined. Of the 12 singleton female students who reported that their parents weighed in on gendered behavior, the majority ($n = 7$) said they were encouraged to violate gender norms, whereas of their 7 counterparts with siblings, more than one half ($n = 4$) reported that they were urged to conform to traditional female norms.

Parents who encouraged nontraditional behavior in their daughters put a priority on achievement. They supported or even pushed daughters’ plans to
study abroad. An explicit message from a few of the parents of only daughters was that their daughters should achieve themselves rather than depend on future husbands. As one daughter reported,

My father . . . has great confidence in me. He thinks if I study abroad I can go back to China and make a good salary. I think he is quite open-minded. He goes abroad for business. . . . My father doesn’t want me to have a boyfriend. My mother said you should be conservative in that. Don’t devote yourself to men. Depend on yourself. My father wants me to concentrate on work, on study. For women, they should be independent first.

Among the three urban daughters with siblings whose parents did encourage them to “widen their horizons,” by nontraditional pursuits, such as going abroad or working in a big company, none had brothers. All of their siblings were sisters. In contrast, in three of the four cases in which parents pressured daughters to conform to traditional gendered norms, the daughters had brothers. Parents told these daughters to get married by age 29, go back to their hometown and marry someone there, get a “more peaceful job,” or “get a husband and live a comfortable life.” Parents who discouraged nontraditional gender behavior prioritized their daughters’ future family roles over their potential achievements.

Patrilineality: Students were asked whom they expected to care for their children while they were working. If patrilineality is undermined in only-child families, we would expect only children to show less of a preference or expectation for husbands’ parents to provide child care. However, contrary to prediction, male and female students, whether they had siblings or not, expected their own parents, rather than their future spouse’s parents, to take care of their children, $\chi^2(4) = 25.39$, $p < .001$.

Not one of the male students, however, preferred or expected his wife’s parents to provide child care over his own, whereas five of the women conceded that, regardless of their own preferences, because of patrilineal customs, their husbands’ parents would have priority over their own. It is interesting to note that four of five of these women had siblings, and in every one of those four cases, the women had at least one brother. Three of them specifically mentioned their parents’ patrilineal obligations to their brother’s family: “His parents (would be more likely) according to tradition. . . . My parents would be taking care of my brother’s children”; “I think my parents will take care of my older brother’s children. They have no time to take care of mine.” Likewise, some of the male students rationalized their preferences by claiming that their future wives’ parents would have other children.
to care for: “Because my wife’s parents may have a son, they will have those grandchildren.”

One daughter with siblings, who preferred her own parents, also fantasized that her in-laws would be busy caring for other sons’ children. Two only sons who invoked family structure to justify their preference for their own parents had girlfriends with siblings. One told me, “I am an only son of my family, but my girlfriend is not. So her parents will take care of more than one child. I think my parents will be lonely because mine is the small family.”

Although a number of the students cited family structure to justify patrilineal preferences, by their own logic, the overall implication of the one-child family structure is that ultimately it will undermine patrilineality. Only children were quickest to point out the structural dilemma: “In traditional families, the wife’s family had a son whose children they would take care of, but now they have no son”; “Today many families have just one child. The grandchild belongs to both families, and every grandparent has the right to take care of it.”

These students recognize the contradictions between patrilineality and the one-child policy. Moreover, other students who do anticipate following patrilineal norms justify their choices by invoking a family structure that is fast becoming extinct because of the one-child policy. Both responses foreshadow the demise of patrilineal norms.

**Discussion**

Born in 1979, Chinese students who graduated from universities in 2001 are part of the first cohort of children born under China’s one-child policy. My interviews with them suggest two important findings about how the one-child policy might be transforming Chinese families: (a) one-child families are not undermining filial piety, and (b) the prevalence of single-child families may promote gender equality.

**Filial Piety**

Overall, Chinese students expressed a remarkable level of filial piety. Their concerns for their parents’ welfare emerged spontaneously in many parts of the interview. Although I do not have comparable data for American students, it is difficult to imagine them spontaneously including their intentions to help their parents when asked to articulate their life dreams.

The Chinese worry that a generation of spoiled, selfish children would be the fruit of the one-child policy was not borne out. Single children were as likely to anticipate helping their parents in the future as children with sib-
lings. They also felt more responsible for their parents' emotional well-being and were more likely to plan on living in the same city with their parents. If anything, the child-centered approach of their parents may have resulted in closer emotional ties between parents and children than might be expected traditionally. Notably, only sons were as likely to be responsive to parents' emotional needs as only daughters. It is difficult to know, however, whether the only children's intentions to live near their parents are motivated by closeness with parents or sense of duty. Only children often refer to their singleton status to explain their intentions. Parents will be “lonely” if these only children do not provide companionship.

Filial piety still seems to entail providing grandchildren. Again, family structure matters. The students who indicated that they would have children regardless of their own preferences or despite their own reluctance were all only children. Although the numbers were very small, only daughters and only sons felt this obligation.

Clearly, the graduating seniors who are only children express filial sentiments. They intend to help their parents, live near them, and provide them with grandchildren. The future will tell whether these sentiments translate to filial acts.

**Gender Equality**

The one-child policy appears to be promoting gender equality. Only children in the current study endorsed more liberal gender attitudes than did those with siblings, even when controlling for geographical origins. Given the evidence that parents of only daughters support and encourage their academic achievement, it is not surprising that only daughters have more liberal gender ideas than their counterparts with siblings (Davis & Sensenbrenner, 2000; Fong, 2002; Tsui & Rich, 2002; Wu, 1996). Parents of only daughters have been found to be as likely as those of only sons to consider their child the “hope of their life” (Chow & Zhao, 1996). In the current study, when parents had something to say about gender to their daughters, parents of singletons were more likely to encourage their daughters to resist gendered norms than to comply with them. This parental support for nontraditional behavior is consistent with liberal gender ideas in daughters.

It is less obvious why only sons would hold more liberal ideologies than would sons with siblings. Perhaps parents of single children, whether daughters or sons, expect sons and daughters to provide what they would have gotten having borne children of both genders. What parents need from their children may drive the qualities and obligations they encourage their children to develop (Fong, 2002). Thus, just as only daughters seem to feel as respon-
sible for providing grandchildren as only sons do, only sons may feel as responsible as only daughters do for providing companionship. These less gendered obligations may promote egalitarian gender attitudes.

Patrilineal norms, which reflect gender inequality, seemed weak in the current study. Men and women preferred that their own parents provide child care. Students’ rationales suggest that the one-child policy is at odds with patrilineality. They often invoked family structure to explain their choice of child care providers. Whether the students were products of single-child families, students are aware that potential spouses might be singletons, and that awareness shaped their views of patrilineal norms. For example, some of the male students were aware that their future in-laws might have a strong interest in violating patrilineal norms because if a future wife were an only child, her parents would have only one way to enact grandparenthood. Regardless of whether these male students were only children themselves, the in-laws’ views made perfect sense to them and undermined their endorsement of patrilineal norms.

Caveats

_The rise of individualism._ Individualism today competes with the traditional collectivism of the Chinese family (Tsui, 1989). Students, whether only children or not, anticipate a future in which they will rely on the market rather than family, live on their own, and pursue their own ambitions sometimes in defiance of their parents’ preferences. Some authors have argued that economic scarcity accounts for past interdependence in Chinese families (Stevenson et al., 1992; Tsui, 1989). The prevalence of stem families in the 1980s, for example, is attributable to lack of adequate housing and the economic dependence of children on their parents.

When asked whom they expected to care for children, students were almost as likely to mention paid child care as they were to mention family care. Sometimes they explained their preference as a desire to avoid burdening parents; sometimes their choice was driven by the perceived quality or convenience of market care. Whatever the reason, the provision of child care by parents increases the connections and obligations between generations (Chen, 1985; H. Yang, 1996). In contrast, market care emphasizes the independence of families of reproduction from their families of origin.

Students typically did not want to coreside with parents, even if they anticipated living in the same city. Although parents’ preferences for co-residence were not systematically examined in the current study, other studies show an increasing preference of both generations for separate residences, especially among the well-educated (Logan & Bian, 1999; Logan

Despite these increasing signs of students’ independence, which have been made possible by China’s changed political and economic environment, family relations in China may be simply changing from material reciprocity to psychological interdependence (Wang & Hsieh, 2000). The child-centered approach of the parents of only children may give rise to children who are less subservient but, as evidenced by the students’ concerns with their parents’ happiness, may also foster closer emotional relationships. The collectivism of the Chinese family can coexist with modern values such as egalitarianism, achievement orientation, and assertiveness (K.-S. Yang, 1996; Yu, 1996).

**Intentions, attitudes, and behavior.** The interviews in the current study assessed students’ intentions, which reflect students’ current attitudes but may not accurately predict behavior (Ho, 1996). In particular, the only children’s intentions to live in the same city as their parents are potentially at odds with the students’ postgraduate career plans. In fact, only children were more likely to defy their parents’ preferences for their postgraduate plans than were those with siblings, which often meant that they eschewed opportunities to return to their hometown and instead pursued careers in China’s opportunity cities like Shanghai or Shenzhen (Deutsch, 2004). Previous research has demonstrated that one of the key predictors of children’s help to parents is residential proximity (Bian et al., 1998; Campbell & Matthews, 2000). If only children end up living far from their parents, they may be unable to help them as much as they plan to. Although many of the students say they will bring their parents to the city where the students settle, it remains to be seen whether that will be financially feasible for them. Moreover, involvement in employment has been shown to be negatively related to providing care for elders. To the extent that only children, including daughters, pursue career ambitions, their availability to care for aging parents will be diminished (Zhan & Montgomery, 2003).

**The 1979 cohort.** The students interviewed for the current study were part of the first cohort of children born under the one-child policy. Because of the unique set of historical circumstances that surround this cohort, we must be cautious about generalizing some of the findings.

The adoption of the one-child family policy coincided with China’s economic liberalization. In the decades since then, China’s economy has grown dramatically. Many of today’s only children, particularly in the cities, are growing up surrounded by a level of prosperity unfathomable 20 years ago.
The material indulgence of China’s only children, noted by contemporary commentators, postdates the childhoods of the students I interviewed (McNeal & Wu, 1995). The parents of the 1979 cohort may have cherished their only children but were not in a position to shower them with goodies like McDonald’s meals. Thus, to the extent that affluence and economic development undermine traditional values, the filial values articulated in the current sample may be unrepresentative of later cohorts of only children. Nonetheless, these data do show that if filial piety is being undermined in more recent cohorts, unfettered consumerism may be more to blame than is the one-child policy (Davis & Sensenbrenner, 2000).

Conclusion

Family structure in China has changed dramatically as a result of the one-child policy. In China’s universities today, the majority of students from urban hometowns have grown up as only children. Despite fears that these “little emperors” would reject traditional collectivist values, the only children I interviewed showed at least as much concern for and responsibility toward their parents as other students, and even more emotional closeness.

The one-child policy also seems to be promoting gender equality in some ways. Western feminists have rightly criticized China’s one-child policy because it restricts reproductive rights and has led to abuses against women, especially in the countryside (Croll, 1994; Dalsimer & Nisonoff, 1987; Keng, 1997). Researchers have warned that because elder care falls disproportionately on women, the absence of siblings may be particularly deleterious for them (Zhan & Montgomery, 2003). Although the current study should not be taken as an endorsement of the one-child policy, it does suggest that we need to take a careful look at how any family policy can have unintended consequences for women, whether for good or for ill. It is ironic to note, in some ways, the one-child policy may help urban daughters in China more than did decades of Maoist slogans about gender equality.

Notes

1. Although the one-child policy cannot be publicly debated in China, the government has acknowledged abuses, which it attributes to overzealous officials. The policy is clearly a sensitive political topic; however, more discussion of it has been tolerated in the 1990s. Li Xiaojiang’s position cannot simply be dismissed as based on fear of government response. She is an outspoken critic of other government policies (Greenhalgh, 2001).

2. A copy of the research interview is available from the author.
3. Although I did not ask about family income, mothers and fathers from the countryside were less likely to have graduated from high school (15% and 40%, respectively) than were urban mothers and fathers with either multiple children (56% and 78%, respectively) or only children (73% and 74%, respectively; \( \chi^2 = 22.65, p < .05 \), and \( \chi^2 = 29.15, p < .05 \), respectively).

4. If the urban students were pooled and compared to students from the countryside with siblings, the difference was significant, \( p < .025 \).

5. This analysis includes only those students who clearly planned to live in the same or a different city from their parents (\( n = 60 \)). When I included the “don’t know” responses, the pattern was similar. Fifty-nine percent of the only children, 26% of the urban children with siblings, and 76% of the children from the countryside expected to live in the same city with their parents, \( \chi^2(4) = 11.5, p < .025 \).

6. Elder care is as likely today to be performed by daughters as by daughters-in-law, suggesting that patrilineal norms are already on the wane (Zhan & Montgomery, 2003).

References


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