One Child Policy in China

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ABSTRACT

This research paper focuses on China's one-child policy and its effect on women in the social spheres of the workplace, household, and education. The one-child policy, a policy enforced in 1979, was a policy to control and restrict the rapidly growing population of China. Mao Ze Dong's rule, which was able to bring up women's status by various laws and campaigns, was brought back after Mao's death and the CCP's rise. Exploring the one-child policy's impact on women specifically, this paper argues that on the surface, the one-child policy limited women's participation in the workplace has decreased and the mistreatment they received was similar if not worsened. However, women were also found to benefit from the one-child policy in the household and education. In the household, many mothers have risen in the internal hierarchy of the home as the passion for education has intensified in China. Not only this, the daughters of one-child families were able to receive full attention and education as they were the only child in the house. Comparing women's status and gender equality before and after Mao's rule has changed greatly because of the one-child policy.

A New York Times article "A Prosperous China Says 'Men Preferred,' and Women Lose" states, "'When it came to promoting women's rights, China used to be in the lead,' said Feng Yuan, a feminist scholar in Beijing. 'But now we are falling behind.'"

With the abolishment of the one-child policy, the question of the effects that the one-child policy brought to China, especially towards girls and gender equality arose. In the beginning stages of research, many articles stated the negative results of the increase of sex-selective abortion that the policy lead for girls, based on the many girls who were thrown away because of the prioritization of boys. Those sources portrayed the intermediate effects of the one-child policy displaying the disappointing results of the policy. However, other sources claimed that the one-child policy was beneficial for girls, at least in a broader sense.

In opposition to the articles that focus on the increase of sex-selective abortion of girls, it was found that families that kept their girl were able to give all their resources for good education to the girl, allowing more girls to receive more education compared to when boys were favored for education in multi-children families in the past. As more girls were able to receive a proper education, their status in society rose, eventually leading to the change in the forced social norms making women in charge of households with men starting to take part in the households willingly.

Although the one-child policy had flaws, there were side effects in which women were able to improve their status in China.

This essay will outline the significant changes that the one-child policy was able to bring to women, their social status, and the norms that surrounded them as well as the improvements that still need to be made to secure complete gender equality.

The Marriage Law

The treatment of women has changed throughout Chinese history. Generally, women held less power than men throughout Imperial China and the era of the Republic of China, and men dominated both social and political structures (Gaetano and Jacka, 2004; Dikotter, 2008; Hardee, Xie, and Gu, 2004). This long-held culture changed during Mao's empowerment, as women started to be more employed and achieve rights. Mao held the slogan that "women hold up half the sky"; he introduced the idea that women should also start being economically active (Perry and Rosovsky, 2003). With the slogan, Mao tried to give more power to women compared to the traditional Chinese patriarchal society.

As soon as he rose in power, Mao made many significant social reforms (Wang, 1999). Many of his reforms focused on women and women's rights, one of them being the Marriage Law. Before Mao, many marriages in China were arranged and forced to follow tradition. Marriages were arranged to form or continue family to family relations, or to eliminate a family member to feed and take care of (Qin, 2019; Freitag, 2010). This was disadvantageous to women as women were forced to go out and marry older people that they had never met. Because of the male-prioritized culture, women were often married to a stranger at young ages (Johnson, 2009; Liu and Chan, 1999).

The Marriage Law in 1950 stated that both genders were equal and that both members of the union had to agree on getting married (Yuan, 2017). This attempted to eliminate forced marriages that many young people, especially young women, feared. The new marriage law improved the lives of many young people, giving them the right to have a free choice in marriage. The Marriage Law also provided a civil registry for all legal marriages, which raised the legal age for marriage, 20 for males and 18 for females.

The Great Leap Forward Campaign

The "Great Leap Forward" campaign created a step forward in the women's movement in China. Mao launched the "Great Leap Forward" in order to reconstruct China from an agrarian economy to a communist society (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2020). The campaign focused on making an attempt to bring an oppressed, low-status group to key areas of national life. To women, the campaign was an outgrowth of the mass mobilization of human labor that was at the lowest position in the development strategy, representing an actual policy helping women in China (Wang, 1999).

The mass mobilization of women's labor was considered to be a substitute for capital investment, allowing them to create alternatives in

increasing the production of agricultural and industrial fields. Not only this, Mao installed more human rights, such as banning the sale of women into prostitution. Foot binding (a practice done among young Chinese girls in which tight binding was applied to young girls' feet to limit further growth of their feet and keep them small) was also abolished (Zhan and Montgomery, 2003; Hong, 1997). Women were able to own their own property and land and were able to be employed in all areas because they were considered to be equal as men. According to the United Nations Figures from UNIFEM (United Nations Development Fund for Women), 39% of the workforce, 39% of students in secondary education, and 20% of the parliament were made up of women. Also, almost 50% of China's doctors and 30% of engineers and scientists were women. Like so, women's lives were improved by being given more job opportunities and received equal payment as men, which gave them more independence from men. These legacies with the reforms that Mao created allowed Mao to be well respected, especially by women.

Prejudice Against Women

Despite these radical changes that Mao created, prejudices against women were still present, as the social norms that were long held could not be broken in such a short time. After Mao's death, the Communist Party of China, commonly known as the CCP, seemed to continue promoting gender equality, as they tried to combine multi-candidate elections with mandatory quotas to encourage more political participation from women (Xiajuan and Lijun, 2016; Reality Check: Does China's Communist Party have a woman problem?, 2017; Phillips, 2017). However, the policy brought side effects of deepening gender inequality as parents had the preference for boys over girls.

As in many cultures, in the Chinese culture, the bloodline of a family is passed down through the male side. Passing down a family's bloodline not only is significant in China but is also an important factor in families of other cultures (Das Gupta et al., 2002). As male heirs usually carry on the family name as well as other wealth or position of the family, males are prioritized over females. Families in Japan carry on the family name through the an adoption of a male in the case that they cannot produce a male heir (Lewis, 2020). Like so, the male heirs are taken as an important role in the family and are treated specially. This naturally raises the status of males, as well as the demand for wanting to have sons over daughters. Not only this, many elders consider having sons as a retirement investment, as sons would ideally earn more money to take care of their parents after retirement. The favoritism was intense, as parents went through sex-selective abortions to have boys instead of girls (Zhu and Hesketh, 2009).

Many couples abandoned their female babies, hoping that another family would adopt her (Venema, 2017). Sometimes, the baby would be trafficked by orphanages to be adopted into wealthy families abroad such as the United States, Netherlands, United Kingdom, and Spain. In 2012, almost 3000 Chinese children were

adopted in the United States, as well as 40,000 in the Netherlands, Spain, and the UK combined (Custer, 2013).

The impact of the one-child policy as well as the tradition of favoritism towards male heirs resulted in a huge gender imbalance, as there are 30 million more men than women (Sotamayor, 2020). The centralization and decentralization of power were enough to impact policies towards women. During Mao's rule, Mao's ideal on gender equality was able to create policies that focused on women and bringing more equality between the two genders. On the contrary, the CCP's policies did not focus as much on women, as their attitude was not so favorable towards women. Despite Mao's hard efforts in bringing women up the ladder to promote gender equality and attempting to improve women's lives, the CCP brought back the patriarchal society where women were looked down upon by men. The society that the CCP brought was more like the society before Mao's power, where women were more harshly discriminated against. Because of this regression that the CCP made in gender equality, the improvements that Mao put his effort into creating were slowed or even stopped

The CCP after Mao's death

Unsurprisingly, women are also found to underperform in the public and political domain. Publicly, many women are discriminated against in workforces, facing many disadvantageous policies that only apply to females just because of their gender. Politically, women's' voices were not heard as much, since the ones with political power are usually if not always men. Women took minor positions in politics, pressured under male politicians to take an actual stance. The way women were undermined after the CCP took over can be seen to be quite different from when Mao's power allowed for more concentration towards women's' rights.

As previously mentioned, the one-child policy of the CCP was able to bring about extreme favoritism towards men in Chinese society, but this favoritism can be noticed not just within families but also in the public such as the political sphere. After Mao's death, the CCP has made numerous promises to raise the rate of women's participation in politics such as combining multi-candidate elections with mandatory quotas. (Guo, Zheng, and Yang, 2009) Despite these efforts that the CCP has made, the results of women's participation in politics have risen to some extent. However, most of these female leaders are likely to occupy less prestigious positions than male leaders, showing the incomplete success of the CCP's policies that had aimed to bring a more gender-equal society in the field of China's politics (Su, 2006; Rosen, 1995).

Women in Workplaces

Similar situations can also be seen in the general workforce. Data showed that only 9.7% of board directors from listed companies in China were women, and 20.1% out of 401 enterprises had a woman CEO in 2018 (Number of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) members in China from 2009 to 2019, by gender, 2020). These figures show how underrepresented women are in

positions of leadership in China. This corresponds to a similar trend in politics, where 24.9% of all positions in single-house parliaments in China are held by women.

When it comes to representation by women in politics, China ranks 75th out of 188 countries, demonstrating how women fare poorly in the public domain (China Power Team, 2018). Most OECD countries also have a gender gap in the labor market, as most female workers occupy lower positions than men. China follows this unfortunate trend, where many women hold low positions that serve male authority figures in higher ranks of companies (Bernstein, 1983). Highly discouraged by the work environment and limited opportunities for growth, women's participation in the labor force has been declining, as shown from data stating that the participation rate was 73.2% in 1990, but dropped to 60.5% in 2019. Furthermore, women made up 43.7% of the total labor force in 2019. This can be inferred to be partly influenced by the mistreatment of women (China Power Team, 2018).

As women are still thought to be taking roles in the house, they are not treated equally as men in the workforce. They work from being viewed as workers that are not focused mainly on work but households for their families, which lead to further discrimination towards the female workers. Female workers also face a stereotype that says they will have to quit their job once they get married or give birth to a child, as they will have to give their full effort in the domestic sphere. All of these stereotypical thoughts towards women lead them to being treated unequally in the workplace (Perry and Rosovsky, 2003). Female workers also bear the stereotype that female workers are not as useful as male workers. Higher ranking men do not perceive female workers to be less passionate in the workplace, and not as committed physically and intellectually. Due to these stereotypical attitudes that many employers have towards women, female workers endure various types of discrimination from colleagues and supervisors. It is not uncommon for female workers to sign special agreements that preclude them from getting pregnant for a certain time period, as pregnancies require maternal leave. If in any case this promise was not kept, women were told that they would be fired without compensation (Qin, 2019).

The companies' bias against maternal leave is understandable to some degree, as a maternal leave of a worker puts the company in a less favorable position without a worker to help the company but also at a position that the company is unable to hire another one as the worker will come back. Controlling one's family planning is not only unhelpful and wildly inappropriate, but it crosses many lines. But the way most companies treat female workers as if it was something that should be accepted as something obvious and expected depicts the reality of the average working environment for Chinese women. These stricter policies that are mandated towards women specifically show that although there have been various efforts made in trying to change the social atmosphere regarding women and promoting gender equality, the heavy

stone of different stereotypes, discrimination, and social norms has barely budged. There is also discriminatory behavior seen towards women in their wages. Data shows that Chinese women earn only 84% of what men earn for doing similar work (Chenkuang, 2019). Though this number had been narrowed from being 77% in 2018, the current percentage still shows how women are being paid less than men simply because of their gender (China Power Network 2018). The Global Gender Gap Index announced that China ranked 106 out of 153 countries, which depicts the severe problem of discrimination towards women and mistreatment of them. These attitudes towards women have been an enduring part of the culture for a long time, and it would be difficult to change at once. But if harder efforts are made and the heavy rock starts to move, the Chinese society in which gender inequality was intense may loosen up. In fact, the participation of women in the workforce has significantly decreased. The World Bank's data on the percentage of participation of females above 15 years old in the labor force shows that the participation rates of women in the workforce have constantly been decreasing since 1990. The World Bank shows that in 1990, 73.241%of women participated in the labor force. Contrary to this high rate of participation in the past, in 2019 the data shows that 60.451 percent of the female population in China are working (International Labour Organization, 2020). This decrease in the rate of female workers shows that Mao's policies that encouraged women to work were indeed able to improve gender equality among workforces as his policies were able to increase women's participation. It can also be interpreted that the CCP's policies that followed Mao were not able to continue this, as fewer and fewer women are being part of workforces every year. This again shows how the CCP's policies did try to take on or even exceed Mao in his women-favored policies but failed to do so.

Because China enforced the one-child policy, it can be inferred that the government has already intervened in personal choices regarding childbirth. This fact makes it much more culturally acceptable that employers also intervene and try to take part in the issue of employees' family planning (Schneider, 2011). Due to this culture and the one-child policy, employers feel authorized to voice opinions about an employee's pregnancy.

Though the one-child policy was enforced, it is widely known that half of China was allowed to have a second child for various reasons. This shows how the government made room for exceptions. As such, the impact of the one-child policy has been debated, as the policy varied for regional governments who used their discretion to carry out the policy.

Rights for Girls: A Different Aspect of the One-Child Policy

The purpose of the one-child policy was to manage China's population, as China had been facing overpopulation issues for a long time (Steffensen, 2012). However, this policy that was aimed to control the population has created some unexpected side effects. It can be seen that many girls in fact benefitted from the one-child policy,

as they were able to receive more schooling and education than girls before the one-child policy was implemented (Lee, 2011).

Before the policy was enforced, many girls were not given an education; families with many children prioritized boys in education, and girls were left to learn housework. This discrimination from the fixed gender stereotype hindered girls from receiving a proper education. However, as the one-child policy was enacted, families were able to focus their resources on their one child, and if that only child happened to be a girl, she was finally able to gain their parents' full attention and get formal schooling. This had major implications as a college degree made her eligible for work opportunities previously denied to her. It can be said that girls being educated properly has allowed them to raise the employment rate of women in offices. In this aspect, it can be seen that girls definitely benefited from the one-child policy.

The one-child policy created unintended consequences. Fong (2002) describes how the only child in each family ultimately benefited from gaining more attention from their parents, improving their chances for better educational opportunities and outcomes. Fong's research found that children were able to receive their parents' full attention while growing up due to the one-child policy. As families were forced to only have one child, they were able to raise one child with a lot more care, as parents were able to concentrate more on one child's education. Children were able to grow under parents that were able to intensify their level in maintaining a life based on being a successful student in China.

Receiving the full attention of their parents, children were given more opportunities to thrive in becoming a top student in China and fulfill their parents' expectations. This was definitely different than the past when the one-child policy was not enforced, as then only a few children were selected to receive support from their parents and receive high-quality education (Lee, 2011). These would most likely be the eldest child or the male child in the family. The other children were mostly left out in terms of education, as regular families would not have enough to support all children to the fullest. This would have obviously led to differences in the attitudes of parents, as they would have different expectations for each child depending on the amount of money and effort they have put into the particular child. Having multiple children led to the unequal distribution in care within families, but it was the one-child policy that was able to hamper this.

In her essay, Fong shows how children are benefited by the one-child policy. She specifically elaborates on a real-life example in which she tutored a girl that was an only child. In her example, Fong showed how girls were often criticized by their parents, especially their father, due to the prevalent preference for boys over girls. Because of the favoritism for boys, Ding Na, the girl in Fong's anecdote, was often scolded despite her studious behavior. However, as Fong and Ding Na worked hard and finally were able to succeed in being accepted in a prestigious college in China, it was only then that Ding Na's father

praised his daughter for her achievement by stating that he was wrong to have scolded her, and that “A daughter like (Ding Na) is worth ten sons" (Fong). This recognition that Ding Na’s father made primarily shows the severeness of the favoritism culture for boys over girls in most Chinese families, but it also shows how girls are being recognized for their achievements a lot more than before. Of course, it can be said that this is mainly because the one-child policy allowed for parents to focus more on their child’s education using all of their resources on the one child. Fong stated that urban daughters who were born under the one-child policy benefited greatly from the demographic pattern that was produced from the policy. In the countryside, the opportunities for employment and education still remain low for most families regardless of the number of children. Whereas in the cities having multiple children meant that the children must compete with one another in order to achieve family resources for their future. The one-child policy in this aspect was able to promote a sense of modernization by reducing the number of people to compete for resources within families.

Such statements from Fong can be supported by the rate of female students enrolled in college. Data from the National Bureau of Statistics show that 50.6 percent of postgraduate students were female in 2016 and 52.5 percent of college students were female. Like so, recent statistics show the massive upward trend of women in education (Xinhua, 2020). Put together with Fong’s assertion, it can be said that this influx of women participation in education was derived from the one-child policy, as the policy was able to encourage parents to pour all of their resources into the one-child they had, and in the case of girls, they were able to receive the education they were not guaranteed due to competition within siblings before the policy was enacted. After girls were able to gain the resources they were not able to, it was shown how women can also thrive in areas other than the domestic sphere, which is slowly beginning to be proven to China’s public. However, it cannot be said that complete success is achieved as vestiges of the old norms from China’s patriarchal society still remain visible. Though it can be seen that women are now facing less gender inequality, this is only seen on the surface of China’s society, as the inner lives of Chinese women are still defined by many gender disparities.

Other Consequences of the One-Child Policy

Fong (2002) stated that low fertility mothers transitioned from being under patrilineal, patrilateral, and patrilocal family societies to bilinear, bilateral, and neolocal relationships within the family. This transition may suggest that there has been a change in domestic roles as another side effect of the one-child policy. Fong states that in her students’ parents’ generation, men were the ones expected to have better jobs and earn more money for the family, while women took charge of domestic roles. However, the fathers were more likely to help around with housework than the students’ grandfathers, who told Fong that they did not encounter housework at all. In a few students’ families, the fathers did

more housework than the mother, especially when the mother worked or earned more than the father. These situations show great improvement in the participation of men in the domestic sphere.

Fong (2002) also states the results of a survey in the ideal division of domestic work in one's marriage, with the results showing the percentage of male respondents that said they were willing to do more than half the work was slightly higher than the percentage of those who said their fathers did any housework at all. In the female section, the percentage of females that said they wanted to do more of the housework than their husbands was lower than the percentage of those who said their mothers did more housework than their fathers. When the male respondents that said they would do more housework were asked for their reason why, some responded that they needed to do the housework in order to win and keep their wives, as it is more likely for the wives not to get good jobs to obtain neolocal housing before marriage. Others with girlfriends stated that their girlfriends are already lazy in everyday life, and to expect them to do the housework is not really realistic. Like so, the perception of gender roles in the domestic sphere can be seen to have lightened, especially for the younger generation. As the younger generation today grew up under the one-child policy, girls were able to be treated and supported almost as equally as boys in terms of education or other resources, and this led to girls reaching relative equality with boys. It can be seen from the male responses that girls are not "lower" or "under" the boys, and they think of each other equally (Lee, 2013). These outcomes are the results that were unexpected and unintentional when creating the one-child policy but turned out to be beneficial for all.

Maume and Bellas's (2000) study of Chinese husbands' participation in the household supports such an argument from Fong. The article theorizes that time availability and gender-role ideologies have influenced the reason why men's' participation has increased in households. The time availability of the husband and wife has changed for many Chinese families, as more wives are employed. As both the husband and wife went out to work, they naturally shared the housework that wives only did when they were not employed as much. For gender-role ideologies, the article states that the traditional beliefs on gender and marital roles that mark "men as the primary provider, women as the primary housemaker". Contrary to these traditional beliefs the less traditional beliefs led to a more balanced division of labor between genders, which is more commonly seen these days. As expected, men with less traditional beliefs tend to do more housework than those with more traditional beliefs, but there is an increasing number of men with less traditional beliefs, which signals more men's participation in housework labor. Not only this, the article mentions that "those with higher educational levels also engage in more household labor" (Lu, 2004; Maume and Bellas, 2000), which correlates to Fong's assertion on the one-child policy.

Accounting for Fong's claim and the article, it can be said that the one-child policy led to more education and attention for women to be employed more and be treated equally as men, changing the lifestyle of wives and also the mindset of many men's beliefs to become less traditional, ultimately resulting in more men's participation in the domestic sphere.

Conclusion

The one-child policy that was initially created to control the overwhelming population in China brought unexpected side effects of improving gender inequality. Historically, women were much lower in socioeconomic status within Chinese society, placing men as the superior gender. As Mao came into power though, there seemed to be some development in the way women were perceived. Mao strongly promoted gender equality, raising women's status greatly by imposing different policies. However, these efforts made by Mao became meaningless once the CCP took over. Although the CCP claimed to encourage gender equality and women participation politically, they made no significant action in making it a reality. As a result, the progress that women were making in terms of making an equal society seemed to have halted. But after the one-child policy was introduced, women started to make progress towards equality once again.

As the one-child policy was able to receive the full attention and resources that had to be dispersed amongst other siblings, girls were no longer pushed out of the priority of boys within families. More girls were able to get a full education and enter colleges, seeking a similar, if not the same educational opportunities. The social attitude has also changed in the domestic sphere, as more men are now willing to take part in households, which used to be unimaginable a few decades ago. However, there are also changes that are not yet accomplished, such as the position of women in the political sphere or in workplaces. Despite the great progress that China made in promoting gender equality, women are still experiencing discrimination in the workplace, and women are under-represented in politics. Overall, the issue of gender inequality in China has improved significantly compared to the era before Mao, but there are still areas for improvement that China should work toward.

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