What are Chinese People’s Views on Siblings Based on China’s One-child Family Planning Policy?

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Abstract. This paper explores the effect of the one-child policy on Chinese young people and children from young people and children’s own perspectives and experiences. Using the research questions and participants’ responses, the author has divided this paper into four further sections. Firstly, it addresses how young people and children define sibling relationships. Then, it reviews young people and children’s opinions on being an only child. Thirdly, it explores the importance of sibling relationships. Fourthly, it focuses on the effect on the participants of the one-child family planning policy. Finally the author will explain the overall conclusions.

Definition of Sibling Relationships

What is the Sibling Relationship and What is It for?

Young people with siblings both in Group A and Group D defined siblings as a very important relationship, claiming that siblings supported each other both in practice and spirit. Moreover, sibling relationships were believed by many of the participants to be closer and more stable compared with ordinary friendships as they were also connected by blood.

Smile: Siblings are not only your relatives but also your friends. It is a very close relationship. They will take care of each other selflessly. My sisters help me when I cannot solve a problem. For example, I asked my sisters for help when I fought or quarrelled with other children over childish things when I was a child. They still encourage me and give me a hand when I meet with difficulties. (Group A)

Yi: It is a relationship which is based on genetic connection but also goes beyond it and is more like a kind of friendship. Your siblings may be your best friends. They are there to help. For example, when I had some trouble with other children when I was young, I would tell my sister, because she is seven years older than me, and she would talk with the child who was giving me trouble. (Group A)

Zhen: Siblings are not only your family, but also your friends. It is a life long relationship, and more stable than many friendships. (Group D)

Min: Siblings always help each other. I remember that once I was on my way home from school when I was young, and I saw a bigger child bullying my little brother. I pushed him into a paddy-field without thinking. (Group D)

There is no doubt that the participants, whether those with ‘approved’ siblings or those with siblings against China’s one-child family planning policy, all acknowledged that sibling relationships are very important and that siblings stick up to each other (Morrow, 1998; Edwards et al., 2005). Moreover, in my study, participants emphasized that siblings are often also best friends, and since they have a close blood relationship, they feel the relationship is more stable, more loyal and closer compared with ordinary friend relationships.

What are the Strengths and Drawbacks of Being in Sibling Relationships?

When questioned about the strengths and drawbacks of being in sibling relationships, young people with siblings both in Group A and Group D believed that siblings are people who share your
feelings and support you, also dealing with sibling relationships helps in getting on with others. On the other hand, siblings diverted parents’ attention and family resources away from the participants.

Yi: There will be one more person whom you can believe in and who will support you in the world. In particular, when your parents are getting older, you will discover how important your siblings are. However, sometimes, they will compete with you for parents’ attention, affection and other limited resources within the family. (Group A)

Li: You have to share your siblings’ failures when you share their success. (Group A)

Zhen: Having siblings makes children learn to share and to make sacrifices earlier in life, and dealing with sibling relationships taught me how to associate with other people, but we cannot get the government benefits, which are only allowed for only children in China. (Group D)

Min: As I have two brothers I found that it is easier for me to get on well with other people, also I can consult with my little brother when my life changes, but my family do not have enough money to support me in what I want to do whereas only children’s parents probably can get enough. (Group D)

As participants claimed sibling relationships, on the one hand, support each other. In particular, Yi stated that siblings are even more important when parents are getting older (This also reflects the idea that sibling relationships change over time, see below). Moreover, dealing with sibling relationships can be an advantage in getting on with other people later on in life. Overall, ‘share’ is the word associated with sibling relationships, siblings share either good or bad feelings with each other and they also have to share parent’s attention and family resources. Again, it is interesting that, differing from Morrow (1998) and Edwards et al. (2005), in my study none of the participants with siblings mentioned whether siblings were often fighting over sharing possessions.

Who did You Play with in Your Childhood?

In answering the question ‘who did you play with in your childhood?’, the young people with siblings both in Group A and Group D replied that siblings were the main playmates in their childhood and also that they played with other children who were available in neighbourhood or school settings.

Smile: I played with my sisters when I was a child. Yes, I enjoyed it, I liked to. I also played with other children who were the same age. (Group A)

Li: Mainly, I played with my classmates. I only played with my sister after school. (Group A)

Hao: I did like to play with my older brother when I was young because he took care of me and made me happy and never hurt me. (Group A)

Zhen: I played with children the same age as me in my neighbourhood. (Group D; There is a five year gap between Zhen and her nearest sibling)

Min: I played with my little brothers, cousins and children from the neighbourhood. (Group D)

Peng: I played with my little brother and other children. (Group D)

It is evident that all the sibling participants mentioned they played with siblings except for Zhen who has a five year gap with her nearest sibling - she claimed that she played with same age children in neighbourhood. Moreover, Smile mentioned the ‘same age children’ as well. At the same time, every sibling participant reported that they played with children in neighbourhoods or in school settings who were available, except for Hao who only mentioned her brother. Also only Min mentioned her cousins as playmates (see a comparison with only children below). It seemed that it can be concluded that siblings as well as available children in neighbourhoods or school settings were children’s playmates (Morrow, 1998; Edwards et al., 2005), and age is a relatively important factor.

Do Sibling Relationships Change over Time?

Furthermore, according to my participants, most of them believed that sibling relationships changed over time and in a positive way. For example,

Yi: There are some changes. When I was a child, the relationship between my sister and I was more like competitors for our parents’ love and attention. But when I was about 11 years old, she
started to introduce her friends and classmates to me, and the relationship between us was more like friends, it has remained like this ever since. (Group A)

Zhen: Of course, people’s feelings change. When we were young I used to be annoyed as they always followed me around, but now I feel so happy that I have got them. (Group D)

As I discussed above, in fact Yi stated early on that the older you are, the more important siblings are. Comparing with findings of Edwards et al. (2005)—“Most children are aware of changes in their own and their siblings’ abilities and interests … significant events … momentary changes in each others’ moods” (p. 59), participants in my study only commented on changes in the way they were more like friends, and they felt more happier about the relationship. Again, this is a positive view.

Overall, in my study, both participants with ‘legal’ and participants with ‘illegal’ siblings agreed with Edwards et al. (2005) that the sibling relationship is one of the most important relationships, which is supposed to help both in the practical and emotional matters in life (also see Morrow, 1998), and compared with normal friendship, many of my participants felt that the sibling relationships were closer because they also had a blood relationship. Moreover, siblings as well as available children from neighbourhood and schools were their main playmates during childhood (Edwards et al., 2005), and ‘the same age’ was a term sometimes used, but cousins were rarely referred to. In summary, sibling relationships are natural and important although siblings have to share family resource and parents’ attention.

### Definition of Being an Only Child

This part was planned to discover only children’s perspectives on what advantages and disadvantages are for being an only child. It is divided into three categories. The first one is strengths of being an only child. The second one is drawbacks of being an only child. The last one is about playmates in childhood.

First of all, concerning the strengths of being an only child, only children participants pointed out that they would get all the attention and family resources.

Win: Parents give you all the attention and support that they can give. (Group B)

Rose: Everybody in the family loves the only child. It is an advantage in getting your parents’ attention and also all the family resources are spent on the only child. (Group B)

Dan: Every child is the same living under their parents’ care, but an advantage may be that my parents pay more attention to me. (Group B)

Tt: One can enjoy one’s parents’ love by oneself. (Group C)

Chen: Monopolize everything in the family. (Group C)

It can be seen that there is no difference between the fundamental point of the older only children and that of the younger only children, all of them are aware that they are the centre of the family, everybody in the family loves them and they get all the family resources. This may reflect the title ‘Little Emperors’ or ‘Empresses’, which were mentioned in summary of Jiao et al. (1986), they earn (Stanat, 2006; Watson, 1997; Cannon, 1990).

Secondly, when consulted about the drawbacks of being an only child, young people from Group B (the first only children generation group) declared that the disadvantages to personal character were not necessarily those described by Yang et al. (1995) and Jiao et al. (1986), but rather that feeling lonely and family and social obligations were a cause of stress. In particular, Yang mentioned the “4:2:1” phenomenon, which Hesketh et al. (2005) discussed in The Effect of China’s One-Child Family Policy after 25 Years, meaning that a couple “will be solely responsible for the care of one child and four parents” (p.1174), under China’s undeveloped social security system.

Win: Being an only child means more pressure, more responsibility and more duty for me to the family.

Rose: Sometimes feeling lonely, also, pressure to support parents.

Lin: As I said - parents put all their efforts into the only child, we, as the only children, feel very stressed. We cannot afford to not achieve parents’ expectation. Sometimes we have to give up our
own dreams to meet parents’ requirements. Moreover, as only children, we have no one who can share our responsibility to support our parents.

Overall, from the only children’s point of view, they believe that they feel lonely, but they do not think their personalities are necessarily at a disadvantage as described in Yang et al. (1995) and Jiao et al. (1986). On the other hand, although younger only children seemed not to think about the responsibilities to their families yet, the older only children do feel stressed by their duty to their family’s values and responsibility for supporting their parents in the very near future.

Finally, since sibling children replied that siblings were their main playmates during childhood, the question of how only children adjust their status in finding playmates raised. I have found that since only children do not have siblings, they alternatively find somebody else to play with, for example, cousins, classmates and children in their neighbourhood.

Yang: I played with my cousins, as well as my classmates, I get on very well with them. However, since I have blood relationship with cousins, we are closer. I see my cousins as siblings. (Group B)

Heng: I played with my little brother (cousin) mainly when I was a baby, now I also play with my classmates and children in my neighbourhood. (Group C)

It can be seen that cousins, neighbours and classmates were only children’s playmates in childhood. In particular, it seems that ‘cousin’ is the most important term, which was mentioned quite a few times, since cousins are the closest blood relationship in the only child’s peer group. Although it is a part of Chinese culture to address people as relatives or family members even when they are not (Fang, 2006), it is still significant to see that Heng referred to their cousins as ‘little brother’.

**Effect of the One-child Policy on Chinese Young People and Children**

Regarding how people’s lives are affected by the policy, the young people with siblings in Group A suggested that the policy had not affected them yet and they understood the policy as the solution to reduce the large population and will not reject it. However, the majority of them think the policy should be revised as they were experiencing and seemed to enjoy their sibling relationships, although one participant totally supports to keep the policy, explaining that China is not yet well developed and its population size is a big obstacle.

Young people from Group B (the first only children generation) all seemed to support the policy, as they believed that the policy is good for controlling population and improving Chinese people’s lives qualities, although some of them were aware that their lack of siblings might have some negative effects which reflected the studies of Yang et al. (1995) and Jiao et al. (1986), such as selfish and spoiled children. Moreover, there was even one younger only child from Group C held the same view as the first only children generation, although rest of 10 to 14 years old children had not really thought about it.

Young people who have siblings who were born against the policy in Group D also believed the policy is good for China’s situation, although their families were fined and at the same time they were aware of the negative effects on only children as the first only children generation group were (see above, also see Yang et al., 1995; Jiao et al., 1986).

Overall, the data demonstrated that the majority of participants in my study see the one-child family planning policy as justified in the current Chinese context and are not going to disobey it, since they believe that the policy is good for controlling birth rate, for improving Chinese people living qualities, and for developing China’s economy, although at the same time they did feel sorry about not having siblings and more children in the future, and admitted that there are some negative affects, such as selfish and self-centred children (see Yang et al., 1995; Jiao et al., 1986; Ching, 1982). This finding may also reflect on the Chinese collective culture (Santoro, 2000; Zhao, 2000; Song, 1999) whereby Chinese people are used to sacrifice their own interests when individuals conflict with collective or country.
Conclusion

I adopted the sociological approach to find out how the one-child family planning policy affects Chinese young people and children’s daily lives with regard to sibling relationships. Firstly, regarding sibling relationships, most participants commented that they are very important although they did not mention sibling relationships. Sibling relationships are believed to be more equal and free, they are more like friends, but more stable, loyal and closer since they have a very close blood connection. They also commented that sibling relationships change over time, the older you are, the more important sibling relationships are, but on the other hand, no one mentioned fights between siblings. Secondly, both being an only child and having siblings have advantages and disadvantages. Yet, from the views of only children themselves in my study, the effect on personality is not necessarily a disadvantage, despite what many previous studies concluded. Finally, although it seems that most participants (including young people who have siblings who were born against the policy) acknowledged that the current Chinese situation justifies the policy, and do not intend to contravene the policy, but rather are willing to contribute their abilities for China’s development in all aspects, there were still more than half of participants who would have liked to have had more siblings or would like to have more than one child in the future if it were possible.

References