China’s One-Child Policy and The Prospect of Rising Urban Gender Equality in Division of Household Chores

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HS 4008 Literature Review

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The One-Child Policy is enacted in 1979 to curb China’s population growth (McLaughlin, 2005, pg. 307). Government legislation dictated that every couple in China has to have only one child except in special circumstances (BBC, 2013). Couples are allowed to have two children should they both are the only-child or whose “first-borns” (BBC, 2013) are “handicapped” (Wang, 2005, pg. 2). The literature review will be on the policy’s highly debatable social consequence, which is the prospect of improving urban gender equality, focusing on the category of division of domestic labour. Works will be organized under chronological publishing sequence in two sections. One section will review studies conducted in China. Under the context of the policy’s implementation, Fong (2002) and Deutsch (2006) argued for a rise in attitudes towards gender equality but only Fong (2002) discussed that such attitudes will be reflected in household chores allocation. However, Zuo and Bian (2001), Pimentel (2006), and Shen (2011) found that women were still doing the bulk of housework compared to their husbands. Although Liu’s (2006) and Kim’s and Fong (2014) articles were not related to the area of concern, their studies revealed that “gender (attitudes)” (Liu, 2006, p. 494) were heavily influenced by parents and such attitudes are important in the negotiation of household chores allocation. The second section consists of overseas research on housework distribution dynamics by Hochschild and Machung (2003); and Blair (1992).

Zuo’s and Bian’s (2001) “1998 Beijing” research revealed the prevalence of gender inequality with working women having to do more domestic work than their husbands who were also employed. They conducted interviews of “39 dual-earner couples” (p. 1128) ranged between ages of “29-52” (p. 1126) and most had only-children. Instead of attributing the prevailing gender inequality to the One-Child Policy, they proposed that it was due to the Chinese society’s “dominant gender ideology” (Zuo and Bian, 2011, p. 1124) which regarded women as the “main homemakers” (Zuo and Bian, 2011, p. 1124) and men as “main
providers” (Zuo and Bian, 2011, p. 1124). This came from the “gender (role) theory” (Zuo and Bian, 2011, p. 1124) whereby there was a “gendered meaning” (Zuo and Bian, 2011, p. 1124) to domestic and waged work. By doing household chores, women could also be assured of “marital resources” (Zuo and Bian, 2001, p. 1124). Such a situation conformed to the “equity theory” (Zuo and Bian, 2001, p. 1124) whereby there was an “equitable exchange” (Zuo and Bian, 2001, p. 1124) of resources. Zuo and Bian (2001) also utilised the concept of “gendered resources” (p. 1131) in which there are “obligations” (p. 1131) for each gender to fulfil in order to gain “resources” (p. 1124). Zuo and Bian (2001) discovered that men were expected to conform to the “breadwinner role” (p.1127) and this was “reinforced by their (working) wives” (p. 1127). Differing from Fong’s (2002) study, Zuo’s and Bian’s (2001) female (and also male) respondents were very insistent on having sole responsibility on housework even when they considered work to be equally important (p.1128). This can be explained by the lack of social recognition of “women’s work” (Zuo and Bian, 2001, p. 1131) in Chinese society. We will see later that researchers are split on determining if rising gender egalitarian attitudes are held and/or exemplified by the urban couples on housework distribution.

Fong’s “Dalian City” (2002, p. 1098) research focused on rising urban gender equality as a result of the One-Child Policy. She conducted a longitudinal “participant observation” (Fong, 2002, p. 1100) of her tutees and their families from “1997, 1998-2000” (Fong, 2002, p. 1100); and a survey of “2273 students in Dalian City” (Fong, 2002, p.1100). Fong’s (2002) study saw that “low fertility” (p. 1098) has enabled women to work and contribute financially to their maternal and husbands’ families thus giving them the ability and ‘right’ to negotiate their housework load. Differing from Zuo and Bian (2001), Fong (2002) argued on how females seek to resist or negotiate socially-entrenched “gender norms” (p. 1102) to their “empowerment” (Fong, 2002, p.1102). This is exemplified in the category of the division of
domestic labour. Fong (2002) claimed that her participants’ fathers were able to contribute more in domestic chores compared to her participants’ “grandfathers” (p. 1105). One respondent’s mother was a fruit seller whose husband was retrenched (Fong, 2002, p. 1105). As she carried the bacon home, she requested her husband to contribute more to housework (Fong, 2002, p. 1105). He became in charge of making dinner (Fong, 2006, p. 1105). Fong (2002) implied a more egalitarian distribution of housework responsibilities. This may be misleading as this situation occurred as a result of her husband being deprived to be the breadwinner. A research gap here is that would an equitable distribution of housework be attainable if her husband continues to hold a stable “nine-to-five job” (Fong, 2002, p.1105). In her survey, there were a higher percentage of male students who were more receptive to an egalitarian household chores allocation compared to the percentage of total survey participants whose fathers contributed to housework (Fong, 2002, p. 1105). Fong’s (2002) heavy reliance on survey data to assume that her female student participants would enjoy an equitable division of domestic chores in the future, posits a research gap in which this may not be reflective of what will happen in reality.

There are three articles published in 2006. Pimentel (2006) focused on analysing “gender attitudes” (p. 349) for different cohorts in housework allocation while Liu (2006) was finding out how “gendered identities” are created through learning from parents. The third study was by Deutsch (2006) on the erosion of “patrilineal norms” (p. 2006). In Pimentel’s (2006) “Beijing 1991” (p. 348) research, both surveys and interviews are conducted for “1778 married couples” (p. 348). Couples were divided into 3 cohorts including those who are married during the “economic reform period (1980 to 1991)” (Pimentel, 2006, p. 349).

Similar to Fong (2002), Pimentel’s (2006) study revealed how “policies in different historical periods” (p. 349) may affect “gender attitudes” (p. 349). Unlike Fong (2002), Pimentel (2006) argued that the one-child policy led to “reinforcing women’s domestic responsibilities” (p.
as couples want their only-children to be well-rounded. Results indicated that gender egalitarian attitudes in the “1980-1991” (Pimentel, 2006, p. 351) cohort were found amongst wives but not husbands (Pimentel, 2006, p. 351) and they had the smallest “percentage of congruent egalitarian spouses” (Pimentel, 2006, p. 351). “45% of couples (had) segregating sharing” (Pimentel, 2006, p. 351), an increase from previous cohorts; while only “4.4% (had) integrated (partnership) sharing” (Pimentel, 2006, p. 351). However, Pimentel (2006) argued that “segregated sharing” (p. 351) is a form of “non-egalitarian sharing” (p. 351) since women do a larger proportion of housework. Hypothesizing from the above results, Pimentel (2006) suggested on “a backlash towards (household) gender equality” (p. 361) amongst married men in the “Reform cohort” (p. 349). His finding materialized Hochschild’s and Machung’s (2003) finding that there is a stalled “cultural understanding of marriage and work” (p. 12) in society. Although Liu Fengshu’s (2006) qualitative study was not directly related to investigating gender equality in urban households, his study is useful in revealing how only-children cultivated “gender-specific” (p. 494) identities which nullify the notion of rising attitudes towards “gender equality” (Fong, 2002, p. 1105). By utilizing Bourdieu’s “gendered habitus” (Liu, 2006, p. 494) theory, Liu (2006) argued that “socialization” (p. 494) caused only-children to conform to “gender stereotypes” (p. 493), thus inhibiting them from developing their individuality. He conducted “20 semi-structured interviews of only-child families in Chengde City” (Liu, 2006, p. 492). The intersection of factors such as being the only-child, gender and class has strengthened parents’ “gender-specific expectations” (Liu, 2006, p. 501) towards their children. Parents of a higher social class tend to raise their only-daughters to embody both “feminine and masculine” (Liu, 2006, p.501) stereotypes of being beautiful while “incorporating manliness (nanziqi, 男子气)” (Liu, 2006, p. 501). This was identical to Fong’s (2002) study who contended that parents raised their daughters in the hope that they would fulfil the absent role of the son as the main breadwinner of the family. Liu
(2006) did not agree with Fong (2002) that some “gender norms” (p.1102) can be strategically conformed to women’s advantage while others were ignored. He felt that “symbolic violence” (Liu, 2006, p. 502) was caused to maintain “masculine domination” (Liu, 2006, p. 502). A future study can find out if there is the presence of the “gendered habitus” (Liu, 2006, p. 494) in the negotiation of housework allocation between couples who grew up as only-children, therefore inhibiting gender equality in urban households.

Different from Pimentel (2006) and Liu (2006), Deutsch’s (2006) qualitative interview study included “undergraduates” (p. 372) from both urban and rural areas. She aimed to find out if children born under the one-child policy will agree less with “patrilineal norms” (p. 372) and more with gender egalitarianism. Similar to Fong (2002), Deutsch (2006) argued that parents advocate their daughters to “violate gender norms” (p. 379) and only-children believed in gender egalitarianism. Even though Deutsch’s (2002) study was not directly related to household dynamics, her work is useful in showing how parental “socialization” (Liu, 2006, p. 494) generates gender egalitarian attitudes in only-children. Likewise, her study can be expanded by other researchers in the future to prove that when married, these daughters will “violate gender norms” (Deutsch, 2006, p. 379) by pressing for a more equitable distribution of domestic work.

There were two longitudinal studies on gender equality in urban areas published in 2011 and 2014 respectively. Shen YiFei’s (2011) argued for the persistence of gender inequality in households. Shen YiFei’s (2011) methodology involved “participant observations and (conducting) interviews” (p. 6) on “45 (urban) families in Shanghai between year 2006-2009” (p. 6). The three-generational family that she chose to analyse had two people born as the only-child; one was the father and the other his 4 year old daughter, “Hanna” (Shen, 2011, p. 12). Thus, it can be deduced that the family was affected by the One-Child Policy. Shen (2011) sought to emphasize that there was still gender inequality within gender relationships.
“Hanna’s father” (Shen. 2011, p. 19), the family’s highest earner, dominated over financial matters and distributed monthly allowance to his wife, which demonstrated the traditional view that males dominated the “outside (sphere)” (Shen, 2011, p.19). On the other hand, “Hanna’s mother” (Shen, 2011, p. 18) believed in pleasing her husband in the way he wanted, which to her meant maintaining her youthfulness. There is also the persistence of the disproportional division of domestic labour. Shen (2011) suggested a new social phenomenon, “intergenerational inequality” (p. 20) whereby “Hanna’s mother” (p. 18) did not do any household chores, instead the burden is shifted to “Hanna’s grandmother” (pg. 19). The point to note here is that neither “Hanna’s father” (Shen, 2011, p. 19) nor “Hanna’s grandfather” (Shen, 201, p. 17) did perform any housework. Shen coincided with Fong’s (2002) claim that the status of the female generation that “Hanna’s mother” (p. 18) belonged to is improving as well. An area of concern here is whether “Hanna’s mother” (p. 18) or even other married females will be doing the bulk of the housework if they were not living with their in-laws.

Next, the “mixed-methods 1999-2013” (Kim and Fong, 2014, p.1) study by Kim and Fong (2014) showed that “adult gender preferences in 2012” (p. 1) among people born “between 1979 and 1986 in Dalian” (p. 1) were primarily reflective of their indications during “adolescence” (p. 1). Those who indicated their “child gender preferences in 1999” (Kim and Fong, 2014, p. 12) had largely showed no change in their preferences in “2012” (Kim and Fong, 2014, p. 12). However, there were “14.32% of men preferring daughters in 2012” (Kim and Fong, 2014, p. 12), a rise from “9.11% (of them) preferring daughters in 1999” (Kim and Fong, 2014, p. 12). Nonetheless, there were a much larger proportion of female respondents preferring daughters and also male respondents preferring males (Kim and Fong, 2014, p. 12). Similar to Fong (2002), their research revealed how participants strategically employ “gendered social expectations” (Kim and Fong, 2014, p. 19) to frame their expectations on their children. Female children are being expected to marry well-off partners (Kim and Fong,
2014, p. 19). Their research was not related to the effect of the One-Child Policy implementation on gender equality in housework allocation. However, it is crucial as we can study in future if “gendered social expectations” (Kim and Fong, 2014, p. 19) were taken into account and strategically employed by couples when negotiating housework allocation. Interviews revealed that individuals’ gender preferences were influenced by family socialization (Kim and Fong, 2014, p. 20). This was similar to Liu (2006) on his emphasis of “socialization” (Liu, 2006, p. 494) in creating the “gendered habitus” (Liu, 2006, p. 494). Only-daughters with parents who showed favouritism for males (although not explicitly) will tend to prefer males (Kim and Fong, 2014, p. 20). For instance, survey participants who had at least one parent who preferred males, the possibility of them preferring a son were “1.71 times” (Kim and Fong, 2014, p. 15) the possibility of them “having no gender preference” (Kim and Fong, 2014, p.15). A future study can probe if the only-children’s “gender (attitudes) or ideologies” (Hochschild and Machung, 2003, p. 15) can be attributed to family “socialization” (Liu, 2006, p 494).

The second and last section of the literature review will utilise overseas research done specifically on household labour allocation. Blair’s “1998 survey” (1992, p.184) study was on the extent of parental influence on “children’s sex-based” (p. 178) housework allocation. Thus, it can be used to substantiate Liu’s (2006) and Kim and Fong’s (2014) findings. Blair (1992) used “social learning theory” (p. 183) to explain that children “imitate” (p. 183) from their parents or learn as a result of “(parental) enforcement” (p. 183). It was found that daughters did “9.1% of housework” (Blair, 1992, p. 188) compared to “sons at 7.6%” (Blair, 1992, p. 188). For fathers who were “egalitarian” (Blair, 1992, p. 192) attitudes, sons only did a mean of “5.09 hours” (Blair, 1992, p. 192) compared to “3.76 hours” (Blair, 1992, p. 192) for those whose fathers held “traditional gender ideology” (Hochschild and Machung, 2003, p. 15). The “1970 to 1980 longitudinal American study” (p. 3) by Hochschild and Machung
revealed how differing “gender ideologies” (p. 15) shaped “gender strategies” (p. 15) to handle housework conflicts. The study revealed how one’s “gender ideology” (Hochschild and Machung, 2003, p. 15) will not correspond to one’s action in reality. For example, “Nancy and Evan” (Hochschild and Machung, 2003, p. 35) held “egalitarian and transitional ideologies” (Hochschild and Machung, 2003, p. 35) respectively. “Evan passively resists” (Hochschild and Machung, 2003, p. 35) calls to do more housework as he felt that the responsibility was on “Nancy” (Hochschild and Machung, 2003, p. 35) and he had already allowed her to go to work. In the end, “Nancy” (Hochschild and Machung, 2013, p. 35) still handled a large proportion of housework. This situation is illuminated by the “family myth” (Hochschild and Machung, 2003, p. 45) of the “upstairs-downstairs agreement” (Hochschild and Machung, 2013, p. 35) whereby “Evan” (Hochschild and Machung 2003, p. 46) looked after “the car, garage and dog” (Hochschild and Machung, 2003, p. 46).

In conclusion, studies on the effect of One-Child Policy like Fong’s (2002) and Deutsch (2006) implied rising egalitarian attitudes and such attitudes be exemplified in a more equitable distribution of labour (Fong, 2002). Zuo and Bian (2001); Shen (2011) and Pimentel (2006) disagreed on rising gender equality in the area of household work distribution. However, Pimentel (2006) suggested a more gender egalitarian position taken by women but not by men towards housework allocation. Hochschild and Machung (2003) showed what happened in the negotiation process for doing housework if couples had differing or similar “gender ideologies” (p. 15). Blair (1992), similar to Liu (2006) and Kim and Fong (2014), relied on “socialization” (Liu, 2006, p. 494) to show how children’s “gendered (attitudes)” (Liu, 2006, p. 494) came about. A possible research area can be a longitudinal study to find out if the adult pattern of domestic labour distribution in China’s urban households will mirror the pattern in their adolescent years spent growing up as only-children.
REFERENCES


