The effects of the one-child policy on the social status of women in China

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HS4008: Social Institutions of Contemporary China
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25 October 2015
Introduction

The one-child policy was introduced in 1979 by the Chinese government to control the population as it was then essential for the economic expansion and the living standards of the people. The policy was a set of regulations with restrictions on family size and the timing of marriage and child-bearing. However, it did not actually stipulate that all households could only have one child. Exceptions applied in some cases. For example, if the first child was disabled or when both parents were single child themselves, the family was allowed to have a second child (Hesketh and Zhu, 1997). Rural families were also allowed to have a second child after 5 years if their first child was a girl (Bulte, Heerink and Zhang, 2011). Since its implementation, the effects of the one-child policy had been subjected to extensive debate. The total fertility rate had decreased from 5.81 in 1971 to 2.31 in 1990 (Tsiu and Rich, 2002) and it was further reduced to 1.7 in 2004 (Hesketh, Li and Zhu, 2005). Today, most of the families are small with only one or two children.

In China, parents have a strong preference for sons as they are able to provide manual labor, continue the family’s lineage and have the ability to support parents in their old age. With the one-child policy, it restricted the number of children parents could have and caused couples to undertake any method, even if it means to sacrifice their daughter, just to ensure that they have a male among their surviving offspring. According to Banister (2004), daughters were permanently lost primarily through sex-selective abortion of female fetuses and secondarily through excess female infant deaths, due to infanticide, abandonment, ill-treatment and neglect of infant girls. During the period 1981 – 2000, the one-child policy was responsible for the absence of approximately 15 – 20 million women out of the 40 million women who were estimated to be ‘missing’ (Bulte, Heerink and Zhang, 2011). When the pregnancy or their
daughters “disappeared”, it allowed the couple to have another child in an attempt to have a son. Due to this cultural preference for sons and the sacrifice of insignificant daughters, it caused an imbalanced sex ratio in China and resulted in a significant higher number of males as compared to females.

Status of women then seemed to be undermined as they were not as worthy and valued as the men. There were also many other negative consequences that had resulted from the policy. However in the recent years, various existing literatures reflected significant changes in the condition and status of women since the implementation of the policy. The changing social status of women had seemed to level up the gender equality in China today. In the subsequent paragraphs, I would be looking at how the social status of women had changed with the effects of one-child policy.

**Work opportunities**

In urban China, the existence of the one-child policy alongside with the rapid development had given more opportunities to women across the country. Traditionally, women were usually deemed the “caretakers” in a family, playing both the role of a wife and a mother (Fung, 2014). They were expected to be subservient throughout their life to their father, husband and sons. However, with the rapid industrialization due to the Communist Party’s economic reform policy, this brought about new ways for women to break out of their subservient cycle. The construction of factories increased a plethora of job opportunities for both men and women throughout China (Fung, 2014).

Women were encouraged to enter the workforce to help advance the country’s economic development. And with the one-child policy being in place, Nie and Wyman (2005) found that it
allowed the women to pay less attention to familial pressures to begin childbearing and motherhood and more attention to their own career. Through work, they gained the ability to be able to earn their own wages and the opportunity to break away from their dependence on their male counterparts. Women were empowered because now they were able to lift their own socioeconomic status without depending on anyone and this was only made possible through the existence of one-child policy (Fung, 2014).

Fong (2002) also agreed that urban daughters born under the one-child policy had benefited from the demographic patterns by the policy. She admitted that indeed women were the ones that faced a glass ceiling produced by their extra burden of domestic responsibility and by gender norms that favored men in elite professions (Fong, 2002). However, women also enjoyed the protection of a glass floor created by the expanding markets for feminine jobs in the service and light industry sectors as such jobs were deemed to be only ideal for the women (Fong, 2002). This meant that there was more job opportunities specifically for the women and it would be less likely for the women to fall to the bottom of the society. On the other hand, men had neither the obstacle of glass ceiling nor the protection of a glass floor. They could easily rise to the top and fall to the bottom of the society. Hence urban daughters from the one-child policy were able to enjoy a competitive edge in the society because they could make use of the glass floor to protect themselves from slipping down the social scale and push the boundaries of the glass ceiling to attain higher social status for themselves. As compared to the men, their lives could only get better.

**Education opportunities**

Besides the increasing work opportunities available for women, Fong (2002) also suggested that urban women born under the one-child policy were greatly empowered due to the
education opportunities that opened up to them. Due to a great demand for female workers in the midlevel job markets, the education system admitted more girls than boys at the high school level (Fong, 2002). Girls began to have more education opportunities.

Furthermore, according to Tsiu and Rich (2002), it was found that there was no gender differences related to education between single-girl and single-boy families in urban China. The research further supported Fong’s stance as it meant that girls were not being deprived of education and in fact, received equal education opportunity as the boys did. Regardless of the gender, parental expectations for their only child were high and most families spent a large sum of money on their child’s education. The narrative of every single child family in China was the same; it was to “provide the best for the child” (Yuan, 2013). A recent article had complemented this research as it put to light how some parents scrimped their entire lives, with one goal in mind which was to pay for their daughter’s education (Bradsher, 2013). In the article, the Wu family lived in a cramped house in a village in western China and had never owned a car, or took any vacation trips in their lives (Bradsher, 2013). They also skipped their traditional New Year trips to their ancestral villages so that they could save on transportation and gift costs and also took the time to take on holiday jobs to earn more money (Bradsher, 2013). All their earnings were meant to put their daughter through college.

Thus, it was evident that having only one child under the one-child policy not only encouraged parents to spend generously but also made such spending possible, which would certainly have not been possible if there were more than one child in the family. The gender-neutral parental expectation and the generous family spending on not just boys but girls’ education suggested a significant improvement in the status of girls (Tsiu and Rich, 2002). Just like the boys, girls were also being seen as worthy investments to their parents.
Marriage and Family Life

Aside from the increased exposure to work and education opportunities, urban women born under the one-child policy benefitted in their marriage and family life. According to Fong (2002), women enjoyed the protection of a glass floor created by the hypergamous marriage system. They could marry up and gain social mobility while men were often forced to choose between permanent bachelorhood and marriage to someone of lower status (Fong, 2002). As women became more educated and career oriented as explained above, their expectations for future husbands were raised even higher as they looked for someone with a higher social status than them. Moreover, the one-child policy had skewed the demographic makeup of China and caused a shortage in women. These factors placed the women in an advantageous position as they could afford to be picky when it came to choosing their future husbands (Fung, 2014).

Not only did urban women get to reap such benefits, literature reviews had also reflected that the one-child policy effects had altered the composition of marriage practices and aspects of family life for rural women. These changes had reshaped the gender roles of rural women. Under the one-child policy, a rare and socially undesirable uxorilocal marital arrangement had emerged in rural China (Hong, 1987). It refers to the husband residing in the wife’s household. Supported by Hua (2003), such uxorilocal marriages were chosen for “practical” and “preservative” reasons. Families with daughters were unlikely to let daughters go to the groom’s village to live because they would be needed for the parents’ old age security as well as to boost the life-long earning potential of the household (Hong, 1987). Furthermore, the son-in-law that the families gained would provide extra economic support or labor and help to perpetuate the patrilineage (Hua, 2003).
This rise of uxorilocal marriage advanced the role of women in China as women could use their scarcity as a leverage to negotiate for an uxorilocal marriage (Hong, 1987). They now had the choice to still marry and stay in their own village at the same time. And if their husbands were not agreeable to such an arrangement, they could continue looking for another one.

Conclusion

Overall, looking at the changes in women’s roles and statuses in different aspects of lives, there was definitely an improvement in women’s economic opportunities and their social positions in the society since the implementation of policy. The one-child policy had resulted in parents investing heavily and pinning high hopes on their only child regardless of gender. Traditional beliefs that boys are more important than girls were no longer predominant as parents now adopt the strategy of “raising a daughter as a son” (Fong, 2002). With women becoming more educated and career oriented, they were able to transcend gender norms (Fong, 2002) and proved themselves to their parents that they could be as worthy and valuable as men. Though they might still be limited by the traditional Confucian belief in patrilineality and filial piety in the society, women today generally were able to enjoy greater freedom and higher social status as compared to the past.

However, most literature reviews focused largely on how the roles and status of urban women had changed. Not only were there lesser literature reviews focusing on the rural women, there were also a lack of indication on how their roles and statuses had been shaped by the effects of one-child policy. Apart from the trend of uxorilocal marriage arrangement that allowed rural women to marry without leaving the comforts of their homes, the lives of rural women seemed to not have changed drastically in other aspects of their lives. Moreover, there were some critiques towards the uxorilocal marriage arrangement. According to Hua (2003), this uxorilocal
marriage arrangement created some dilemmas. While a woman was supposedly released from the trial of marrying into another village and adjusting herself to a new environment, which could be hostile to her, nevertheless, the wife in uxorilocal marriage had never enjoyed “propriety and respectability” endowed in a normal virilocal marriage (Hua, 2003) because such practices ultimately contradicted the dominant pattern of virilocal marriages. Under such circumstances, it was hard to assess if the lives and status of the rural women had improved.

To conclude, the insufficient data would be difficult to measure the extent to which rural women had also been empowered like the urban women by the effects of the one-child policy. Therefore, while there were ample and detailed literature reviews on urban women, the study would have been more comprehensive if there could be more studies on rural women so as to better understand the level of gender equality in China today. Hence, in my next research proposal, I had decided that I would like to fill up the gap by focusing on a group of rural women and aim to understand how the effects of one-child policy had on them and how these effects had impacted their social positions in China.
References


