

CHINA'S LITTLE EMPERORS AND EMPRESSES

One Child Families and Consequences

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“Zhi and Hui” my father called, “Go help your mom with the cooking!” We stopped our card game immediately, rushed to the kitchen and started cleaning vegetables quickly and nicely. When the job was done, we did not expect to be praised or receive “Thanks” because helping our parents was our duty. That was when I was a child in China, some thirty years ago. It was a typical parent and child relationship. Being obedient, hardworking and well mannered was expected of all children.

Unfortunately, in today's one-child families, the picture is no longer the same. Parents and even grandparents have surrendered their traditional parental authority. Rather, they say to their only child: “Can grandpa do anything for you?” or “Do you have enough pocket money today?”

The one-child generation born after 1978 in China is growing up during a time of unprecedented economic recovery and social transformation. Parents' reason that “this is our only child and we have no second chance” encourages many parents and grandparents to turn their backs on the traditional Chinese parental role as teachers and disciplinarians. Being deprived of all the freedom, material enjoyment and knowledge of outside world as kids under Maoist rule, the parents today are determined to pour all their energy, time and resources into creating for their only child a “comfort zone”, where all material needs and wants will be met unconditionally.

Unfortunately, the overall result is just the opposite of many parents' expectations. The comfort zone, in most cases, has become a perfect place to spoil a child. Parents' unstructured devotion towards their young children is becoming their constant headache as their children grow bigger and their demands increase. If you go to China and talk with parents who have only one child, you will hear the same descriptions being repeated over and over again: self-centered, disobedient, lazy, bossy, dependent, and materialistic.

In a family where there is only one child, he or she becomes the center of the world. According to statistics, the average Chinese family spends more than 65% of the total family income on their child. Today's children receive weekly allowances that are 500% more than children twenty years ago. American movies are these kids' favorite entertainment, replacing the traditional Chinese arts, which are considered boring. Nike and Adidas are the latest fashion craze and McDonalds's and Kentucky Fried Chicken their favorite fare. According to an official Chinese study, more than 13% urban children and 6% rural children under the age of 12 are over weight, the highest number in Chinese history.

The Chinese call these kids the “Me Generation”. Growing up in a care-free environment created by their parents, these kids expect every family member to serve and care for

them. They are not expected to help in the kitchen or do any domestic chores. Nor are they held accountable for their misdeeds. Many of these children have a difficult time being team players because they all want to be leaders. Therefore, conflicts and clashes are common in daycare and schools, and throwing tantrums in public are no longer taboo.

The one-child family is transforming the traditional Chinese social and economic structure. The first group of children born after 1978 is getting married. Every young couple has to face the reality of caring for aging parents. Today, there are fewer children to care for the aging population, creating an 4-2-1 (four grandparents, two parents and one child) upside down pyramid family structure. This is forcing the Chinese government to create public and private elderly care facilities, something that is new to Chinese society. Traditionally, the elderly expected to be cared for by their children at home until their death.

Another challenge is higher education. Higher education is not as readily available in China as in America. Fewer than 20 percent of high school graduates pass the annual three-day brain wrenching college entrance examination. The remainder of young adults has no choice but to pick-up something that they are not interested in or prepared to do. Remember that these kids have “great” expectations for themselves and from their parents. Many parents are living their dreams vicariously through their children. As a result, depression and loneliness are common among these spoiled and frustrated emperors and empresses, who are not sure of their own identity and destiny in the face of a not so “care-free” reality.

There are encouraging bright spots. Today’s Chinese children are overall healthier and one to two inches taller compared with the previous generations. They are growing up in freer society, which contributes tremendously to their unprecedented openness, creativity and desire for change. This “computer and internet generation”, as I call it, is worldly and connected. They are more ambitious and socially rebellious. They want a better life and a freer society.

The Chinese government is taking steps to cope with the unwanted consequences and challenges of the one-child family. One of the boldest moves recently is to allow newlywed couples, who are the only children of their parents, to give birth to two children. By doing so, the government hopes to reintroduce the belief that a sibling contributes to making someone a better, less selfish person, and as a result, contributing to the overall social stability

Tomorrow’s China lies in the hand of this new generation of little “emperors and empresses”. Although they are facing tremendous challenges I believe they will, like any the previous generations, figure out their own way to survive, forge ahead, succeed and win.