

“As Good as a Boy” But Still a Girl: Gender Equity Within the Context of China’s One-Child Policy

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Abstract

What would happen if gender inequality were suddenly and forcefully proclaimed to be non-existent by the authorities? The Chinese one-child policy has to some extent functioned as a unique social experiment to answer this question. Historically, sons have been preferred in China. Yet, with the restriction of one child per family, many people have been rendered sonless and forced to find solace in the well-known propaganda slogan: “Having a girl is as good as having a boy.” Delving into the life experiences of singleton daughters in urban China, this study reveals that, within nuclear families, daughters are in many ways treated as if they were sons, which demonstrates people’s potential to overcome previous gender discrimination when circumstances require. However, outside the realm of nuclear families, the treatment of daughters as akin to sons falters, dissolves, or backfires in various ways, revealing that true equality cannot be achieved without a radical confrontation and systematic adjustment of existing power relations. This study contributes to understanding gender equality in China while also serving to document lived experiences in relation to a unique policy that was recently abolished.

Keywords

gender equality, one-child policy, women’s empowerment, son preference, China

Introduction

Feminism is very often viewed as being divided between “equity” and “difference” (e.g., Bock & James, 2005). While the former approach focuses on women’s entitlement to treatment equal to that of their male counterparts, the latter finds mere “sameness” inadequate, highlighting instead the need to recognize existing “differences” between genders. The Chinese one-child policy, which functions as an almost “natural setting” (Huang et al., 2015; McGarry & Sun, 2018) for various sociological observations, provides a unique window into the “equity versus difference” debate. By forcefully claiming to the public that a daughter should be deemed equal to a son without systematically addressing the deeper roots of son preference, it raises an uncanny mirror to the equity discourse.

More specifically, gender inequality has long been blatant in China, in part manifested through the explicit preference for having a son over a daughter. Sons are preferred because, in an agrarian context, they promise greater financial return and will extend the family line, whereas daughters typically marry into another family and are therefore subject to an inferior status (Hesketh & Zhu, 2006). However, the one-child policy, which prohibits a couple from bearing more than one child, has the unintended yet inevitable effect of

rendering many people sonless. In order to placate the public, justify the policy, and ensure its successful implementation, the Chinese government widely promoted gender equity as a kind of ideology that was best represented by the well-circulated slogan, “Having a girl is as good as having a boy” (“生男生女一样好”). Superficially, the slogan’s proclamation seems to have smoothly materialized into reality. Chinese girls have become part of the family project (Tu & Xie, 2020), gained unprecedented leverage within the family (Fong, 2002), and been well documented as receiving abundant educational resources (Lee, 2012; McGarry & Sun, 2018; Tsui & Rich, 2002; Veeck et al., 2003; Yi, 2007). Meanwhile, deep-seated gender preferences cannot be changed overnight (Wang, 2005); more importantly, as the policy utilizes women’s welfare as a propaganda tool (e.g., Greenhalgh, 2001) but does not seek to achieve women’s empowerment per se (Currier, 2008; Fong, 2002), radical

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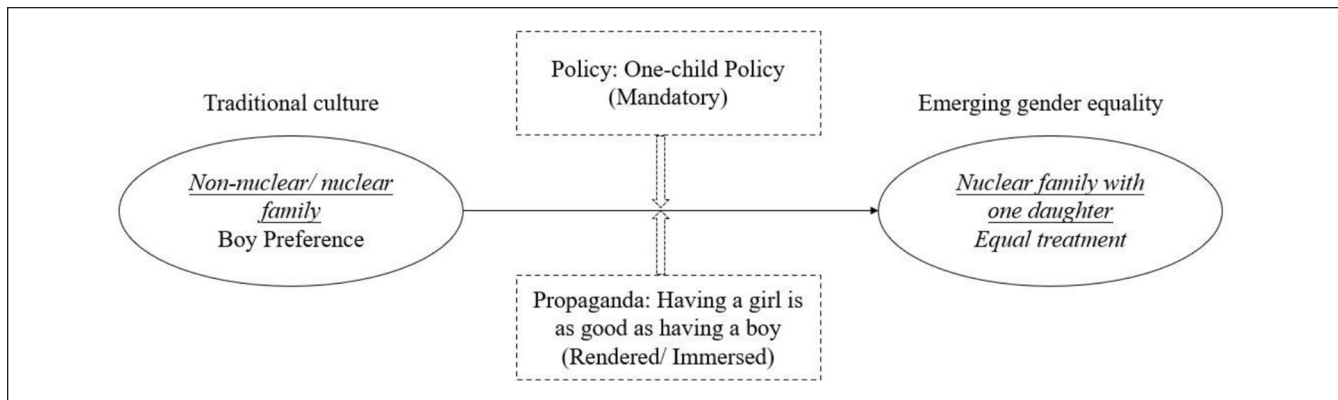


Figure 1. Outline.

confrontation, and systematic correction of what lies behind the son preference is largely lacking.

By delving into the life stories of equity-endowed singleton daughters, the current study seeks to portray human experiences within an exaggerated equity approach context and thus explores and discusses the extent to which this approach is or is not valid. The study reveals that, on the one hand, even the simple proclamation of gender equity has the solid potential to alter parents' feelings toward their daughters; on the other hand, equality as such is fundamentally limited due to its inability to reach beyond its immediate scope, as the vestiges of existing bias will emerge and exercise their impact in various ways. The study thus argues that, since the source of change resides within existing power relations that are unequal in nature (Cavarero, 2005; Flax, 2005; Williams, 2000), "differences" between the two genders must be radically confronted before real "equality" can be achieved. The study contributes to current understandings of gender-related social justice while also documenting lived experiences in relation to a unique policy that was recently abolished.

The article begins with a brief introduction to Chinese feminism, which sheds special light on this specific situation. It then presents two cases that detail how different social bodies reacted to the proclamation of equity, following which themes drawn from these cases are discussed. It is important to note that this study only focuses on the condition of daughter-as-the-only-child in urban areas, where the public responded to the one-child policy with a high level of civilized obedience. It does not seek to generalize its findings to certain rural areas where the policy was met with blatant and sometimes violent resistance, nor does it apply to situations where variation was permitted (e.g., a second child was allowed if the firstborn was a daughter). These situations, while consistent within themselves, vary vastly across categories, and imply very different themes of feminism that should be discussed separately. The current context is chosen here for its potential to reveal subtleties

unique to a situation where gender-related injustice, at first glance, seems to no longer be a problem (Figure 1).

The One-Child Policy, the Accidental Empowerment of Women, and Chinese Feminism

The Chinese one-child policy was implemented as an effort to control the population size and optimize the development of the country; meanwhile, the policy has had huge impacts on gender relations, in part by contributing to empowering urban, young females (e.g., Fong, 2002). Chinese society has traditionally valued sons over daughters (e.g., Wang, 2005). Yet, when there is only one child in the family, a girl as an only child will become the family's "only hope," just like boys had been (Fong, 2002; Xu & Yeung, 2013), and they consequently benefit from generous investment (Lee, 2012; McGarry & Sun, 2018; Tsui & Rich, 2002; Veeck et al., 2003; Yi, 2007). With newly acquired familial expectations alongside the absence of a sibling with whom to compete for parental favor, Chinese daughters began to acquire unprecedented resources and leverage (Fong, 2002).

Meanwhile, it is important to note that the aforementioned situation is but an unintended result of the policy. Although the welfare of women is sometimes mentioned as part of the political propaganda surrounding the policy (e.g., Greenhalgh, 2001), in terms of its initial motivation and impetus, the one-child policy did not originally consider gender per se, or the empowerment of women (Currier, 2008; Fong, 2002). In fact, from certain perspectives, the policy may be viewed as rather hostile to women, in that women's child-bearing rights are compromised and compulsory abortions may be elicited (e.g., see Keng, 1997). While daughters in urban areas are generally empowered by the increased and concentrated parental investment they receive, girls living in other circumstances may face adverse consequences as part of the downsides of the policy (e.g., Greenhalgh & Winckler, 2005). As a part of the top-down management of the country,

the policy essentially limits individuals' child-bearing opportunities in exchange for national prosperity, with women's welfare being either elevated as an unanticipated blessing or diminished as collateral damage—neither women nor gender equity are ever prioritized.

Following that, and notwithstanding the fact that the policy's implementation has been successful, it is also important to point out that Chinese society is far from being culturally attuned to, or institutionally prepared for, a potentially sonless reality. The preference for sons is far from being eradicated (Wang, 2005), and gender stereotypes persist—albeit in a less drastic sense—even when there is only one child in the family (Liu, 2006; Yu & Winter, 2011). Son preference is on the decline mainly for pragmatic reasons rather than radical transformations of the mind (see Ling, 2017), and the non-discriminatory treatment of girls witnessed in China reflects the sonless condition of some families rather than society embracing the concept of investing equally in daughters (Hu & Shi, 2020; Yi, 2007). In some cases, the preference for boys may in fact be highlighted and strengthened by the policy since parents only have one chance to have a child (Yu & Winter, 2011). On the one hand, such a situation can be a manifestation of a “cultural lagging” (Ogburn, 1957) phenomenon in the sense that an individual's deep-rooted values may not catch up with the transformation of society in the real world. Yet, on the other hand, this can be an indirect demonstration of how daughters, though proclaimed to be “as good as sons” in order to justify the policy, are faced with unequal treatment on a wider, institutional level once they enter society (e.g., Gu, 2018; Heshmati & Su, 2017; Ji et al., 2017). Indeed, systematic consideration of gender inequality issues is largely lacking.

All of the above may offer a metaphor for Chinese feminism in general. Historically, in China the women's rights movement—although generally transformational and effective—has been largely characterized by the predominance of external imposition and the absence of individual awakening. Studies (e.g., Croll, 2013; Evans, 2003; Yang, 1999) have pointed out that, in Chinese history, women have typically been liberated, educated, and rendered legitimate members of the public sphere by the state to serve the needs of a larger cause; meanwhile, personal initiatives from women themselves, as well as inherent understanding and support from the general public, remain lacking. This has to do with China's feminist tradition, rooted in the society's overall historical past, with an implication that is twofold. From the mid-1800s onward, Chinese history has been fraught with ongoing major socio-political struggles that occupied central attention and absorbed major resources; women's social status was advanced and their welfare considered only in reference to these struggles. Specifically (see, e.g., Cheng & Zhao, 2015; Zhang, 2011), from the mid-1800s to the mid-1900s, as China (an agrarian society) was faced with military invasions from industrialized countries, its major tasks were

to “repel the foreign and pacify the self”: to fight with external military forces, and simultaneously negotiate with internal feudal, imperial forces so as to gradually “modernize” the country. During this process, women were pushed out of the private domain and granted the status of “(female) citizens,” both as tangible resources to aid in wars and social movements, and at times as a token of the desired “modernization.” After foreign forces were dealt with and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) gained the regime, the main task was for the CCP to solidify the regime and develop the country's economy. Because CCP premised its ideology on Marxism and derived its main rationale from the goal of eradicating social-class-related inequalities, women were mobilized as legitimate and productive contributors to the development of the country's quest toward social (class) equality and overall prosperity. Women were thus again granted legitimate status in public domains, but only in relation to other causes. On the one hand, this Chinese feminist tradition is clearly one in which women's status is always considered in light of other issues and not for its own sake. On the other hand, however, the fact that gender is secondary in feminist movements is not necessarily a fundamental flaw, but may well be seen as constitutive of an alternative way of materializing gender equality to the extent that it fits the society's specific condition (e.g., see Dong, 2008; Spakowski, 2018; Zhang, 2011). In terms of the one-child policy, it can be seen as one manifestation of the above-mentioned feminist tradition in which gender-related views are disrupted and women's empowerment is promoted, either as a part, or as a consequence, of the country's birth-control endeavor, and one in which the broader institutional environment surrounding gender equality will necessarily lag behind real-world developments because women's welfare, per se, has not been specifically addressed. Similar to the Chinese feminist metaphor, the implication of this one-child situation is also twofold. Some worry that women's status will move backward once the one-child policy ends (Liu, 2015; Zhou, 2019). Others are more optimistic—for example, it is believed that the one-child generation may have already acquired certain resources to navigate various situations (Fong, 2002), and it may be that a bottom-up approach of self-empowerment among young Chinese women has already occurred (Liu, 2017).

Gender Roles and Identity Within the One-Child Context

It has been persuasively argued by philosophers such as Butler (1990) that there is no fixed “essence” inherent in gender, and that gender is constituted through nothing but people's repeated acts in daily practices, learned and expressed based on social and cultural norms. It is therefore the case that specific gender roles differ widely across contexts (Mencarini, 2014), and that what is expected of a certain gender will vary

according to the social and cultural circumstances. Within China's one-child context, as described above, responsibilities and resources that were once exclusively attached to the male heir were partly shared by females, especially within nuclear families, owing to the one-child-per-family limit; females who had once been assigned inferior roles in relation to their male counterparts became elevated.

If gender is socially constructed, it follows that people are not born with, but rather socialized into, a certain gender role. Gender roles are sets of behaviors, attitudes, and characteristics expected and encouraged of people based on their biological sex (SparkNotes, 2006). And from a very young age, individuals pick up social cues from their surroundings in terms of how to act and what to become in relation to their gender (e.g., Leaper & Friedman, 2007). The family, as a primary source for learning norms, acts as a particularly powerful site for gender socialization among all social institutions (see, e.g., Carter, 2014). As will be shown through the present study, within their nuclear families, young females growing up in only-child families were treated and expected to be "as good as" male heirs by their parents, and accordingly have strived to be as such. When the "equally as good" status was threatened by conflicting messages from outside the family, the position that they, as females, should be treated equally stood firmly and unequivocally. This may demonstrate that the influence of family is so strong that, even when social structural conditions change, gender cues internalized through families at early stages remain stable (Ridgeway & Smith-Lovin, 1999, cited in Carter, 2014). Alternatively, it may also be interpreted as, when the meanings that individuals attach to their own identity differ from those perceived by the outer system, the individuals, rather than changing their own meanings (which is often the case), might also act to change the outer system (Stets & Burke, 2014, commenting on Cast & Cantwell, 2007).

The Current Study

Background

This qualitative study was initially conducted in 2018. At that time, debates that had occurred over decades were becoming increasingly heated; the one-child restriction had recently been abolished in 2016, and attention to China's birth-control policy had peaked. Among the voices, those of young Chinese women who grew up under the one-child policy deserve special attention, since both the feminist aspects of the policy (Greenhalgh, 2001) and the perspectives of singleton children (Hu & Shi, 2020) remain under-researched. In addition, the life stories of this group's members are expected to be particularly telling, since these young women were raised under the longstanding philosophy of "girls are as good as boys," only to witness this value dissolve when they reached adulthood. This situation is partly related to their entering the real world as young adults,

and it is further exacerbated and dramatized by the sudden shift in policy that has sparked personal reflection and foregrounded the gender-related aspects of women's identity.

Participants

The participants were recruited through the first author's personal connections, and all met the following essential criteria: (1) participant is an only child and self-identifies as a female; (2) participant reached adulthood before the one-child policy ended, but at the time of the interview was aged 18 to 25, an age range that is a period of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000) and features heightened exploration of the self in relation to wider society; and (3) participant was raised in the Chinese urban context, with at least one parent working in a government-affiliated/government-sponsored institution. It is important to note here that the third criterion does not apply exclusively to those who have a political career; rather, it applies to a considerable proportion of urban middle-class residents, for instance, public school teachers. This criterion was established because the one-child policy had the most certain and obvious control over people who were "Ti Zhi Nei" ("体制内"), or "working within the (government) system." Members of this population, whose careers were likely to be directly monitored by the government and who had much to lose if penalized, were most likely to follow the policy without question. Whilst the one-child policy, in principle, also applied to the majority of the urban population who worked "outside of the system," the compliance of this population is much less systematic, and thus any one-child case may be more reflective of other factors than an overall reaction to the policy restriction. In addition, whilst employees who work within the government systems are highly likely to be subject to strict institutional control in terms of the authenticity of only-child status, those who do not may enjoy certain leeway, and in the latter case, researchers are not able to tell whether a self-proclaimed only-child status is authentic. The choice of focusing on participants with at least one parent working in a government-affiliated/government-sponsored institution, therefore, simultaneously ensures that experiences were representative of a considerable (although specific) segment of the population, and avoids complicating the logistics of the research. Clearly, however, the experiences of only children who do not meet this criterion deserve their own investigation.

Method, Research Process, and Ethics Considerations

A qualitative approach was chosen due to its potential to elicit detailed stories (Creswell, 2007) and aid in exploring the nuances and complexities of the particular setting (Patton, 1987). Semi-structured interviews were employed to gather data, since this approach is frequently used in the field of gender studies and is believed to simultaneously offer

participants sufficient autonomy while ensuring consistency across themes (e.g., Doyle, 2020). In line with one of basic features of semi-structured interviews—which is to have some questions prepared in advance while also leaving adequate room for improvisation and follow-up questions (Wengraf, 2001)—each interview included a series of open-ended questions, ranging from broad, general ones (e.g., “Could you tell me something about growing up as a daughter under the one-child policy?”) to specific ones based exclusively on the participant’s answers (e.g., “You previously mentioned that a majority of your family members were neutral about the policy—Did this mean that some of your family members were not neutral, and could you elaborate on that?”). Particular focus was placed on how the participants experienced and perceived the often subtle but unignorable conflicts relating to being female within the special policy context, and the interviews were in-depth in nature in an attempt to ensure that individual stories, rather than general notions, were elicited through the process (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). When answering the interview questions, the majority of participants automatically chose to rely heavily on their personal experiences and narrated their life stories by describing vignettes in very rich detail. When this occurred, they were not only allowed to do so, but were responded to with prompts and enthusiasm. In accordance with the native language of all participants and the researchers, the interviews were conducted in Mandarin.

In terms of ethics, permission to conduct the research was granted by the university’s ethics committee. All participants gave written consent prior to the interviews, and were informed that participation was voluntary and they could drop out at any point during the interview without giving a reason. On the one hand, none of the interview questions were specifically designed to elicit intense emotions; on the other hand, considering that the general topic of gender equity may evoke negative feelings, close attention was paid to the language and body language of participants throughout each interview. In a few cases, when the participant started to exhibit signs of distress, they were offered the opportunity to take a break, or to move to another interview question.

Analysis and Representation

In the first step of the analysis, thematic analysis was employed to make sense of the data. In doing so, the researchers generally followed the process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2012), which includes familiarization with the data; initial generation of codes; searching for potential themes; and reviewing, refining, and naming the themes. Both researchers generated codes independently and compared notes during two rounds of discussion, after which several themes were developed. Partly due to the fact that most participants narrated their personal life experiences in rich detail, there were great variations across the different sets of

data; however, several recurring motifs (as general themes) did emerge, suggesting the existence of a common denominator of all experiences.

It is worth mentioning that, during the data analysis process, the researchers were surprised and highly intrigued by the degree of inner coherence and the vividness of some participants’ narration of their personal experiences (which might be due to the high education levels characteristic of the urban only-daughter demographic, coupled with their strong personal interest in relevant issues). Therefore, to pay tribute to these marvelous accounts, and to preserve (to the extent possible) and share with the wider community the abundant insights they contain, two individual cases were selected as focal points, and are presented in detail below. This approach was utilized to study Chinese “privileged daughters” within the one-child context (Tu & Xie, 2020), as well as in social science research in general (e.g., Finn, 2017). The two stories were selected on the grounds that: (1) both fit very well the recurring motifs identified through thematic analysis and (2) both not only were deemed meaningful material for analysis, but also were identified as metaphors for the broader context. Other stories were not discussed or included at length here due to space limitations, but they contributed to the drawing out of emergent themes in the initial stage. Taken as a whole, they also fit into these themes, but they are not drawn on specifically in the discussion section.

Finally, in presenting the stories, the terms *she/her/hers* are used because, as confirmed, these are the preferred gender pronouns of the participants.

Feminist Standpoint Phenomenology and the Researchers’ Position and Self-Reflection

It is also worthy to note that the feminist standpoint phenomenology is invoked as the foundation for constructing the gender-sensitive lens through which the one-child policy is viewed. Borne out of the awareness that existing knowledge (albeit claiming to be objective and universal) is implicitly male centered and exclusive of women’s experiences, feminist standpoint phenomenology offers an alternative way of thinking by placing women at the center of academic inquiry (Brooks, 2007). Such a stance, at the broadest level, can be viewed as offering the point of departure for the current study, which defies the seemingly gender-unrelated nature of the population policy and probes its unintended yet solid impacts on women’s lives. Specifically, feminist standpoint phenomenology advocates insiders’ research (Barber & Haney, 2016) by acknowledging insiders’ views not as an obstacle to “objective” knowledge building, but rather as a kind of epistemic privilege that holds special value (Cattien, 2017). In relation to this, both authors of this paper were Chinese young females who grew up within the Chinese one-child context and who have long harbored abundant personal understanding of this topic, albeit in slightly different ways (as will be elaborated later). Such an affective

dimension offers both the primary momentum at the beginning stage, and an ongoing source of sense-making throughout the process.

In accordance with the appeal of feminist phenomenology in making “the researcher visible in the text” (Sprague, 2016, p. 211, cited in Ohito, 2019), and for the sake of maintaining the rigor of qualitative research, it is important to elaborate on the researchers’ social positions and particular interests in the research topic. One of the researchers (the lead author) is herself an only child, born into a typical middle-class family in a relatively affluent area of the country. Raised as an “empowered” singleton daughter by her parents, she grew up not particularly aware of the gendered aspects of life until she learned about gender theories in college—at which point she began to look back (as well as forward) on her experiences and realized that gender played a very important part, albeit in a subtle, hard-to-detect, and sometimes mysterious manner. She is therefore particularly interested in exploring and unveiling the hidden mechanisms through which gender exerts its invisible yet solid effects. The second author may be termed “half-an-insider”: a Chinese young female from middle-class origins sharing similar demographic characteristics with the participants, who grew up surrounded by one-child families and was acutely aware of the wider one-child context. Yet, due to certain factors, this author indeed had a younger brother, which brought about a certain kind of personal tension that she simultaneously sought to resolve and sublimate by conducting the current research. Both researchers bring something of their own to the study, and their communication sparked insights during the research process.

Two Stories

Lisa’s Story

A major theme in Lisa’s childhood involved feeling particularly lucky about the combination of being an only child and being a girl, only to discover upon reaching adulthood that such a combination was a disadvantage.

Echoing many singleton children’s experiences that are documented in previous research (e.g., Fong, 2004), Lisa’s early years were characterized by the privilege of monopolizing the family’s resources, both affective and material. Her parents offered her everything as a gesture of love, and she had no siblings with whom she was forced to share. With Lisa being a girl, instead of her gender somewhat compromising this privilege (Fong, 2002), it in fact augmented it—or, at least, that was how Lisa perceived her situation as a young child. Because they had only one child, Lisa’s parents were inclined to be intensely protective, and the fact that Lisa was a girl rather than a boy enabled the inclination to manifest itself without inhibition. Lisa’s father used to say that, had Lisa been a boy, he would have forced his son to go out into the world a lot more, since a boy would have needed that. Yet, because Lisa was a girl, there seemed to be no need

to relax this parental protection. Although the general parental expectations for Lisa involved her becoming independent, having her own opinions, and pursuing excellence—which arguably imply a strong degree of gender blindness—Lisa believed that if she had been born a boy the standard would have been different. Her parents offered her love fully, regardless of her sex, but without fundamentally escaping the trap of boy–girl dichotomous thinking (Liu, 2006). While, as an adult, Lisa understood this as a nuanced form of gender bias, she recalled gloating over this “privilege” as a child—it had seemed to be a situation where uncompromised affection and protection was accompanied by few demands.

In fact, Lisa not only enjoyed the advantages associated with the combination of being female and an only child, but also consciously took advantage of the situation as a child. In school, where her status as the sole recipient of her family’s resources no longer applied as it did at home, Lisa learned to play the “gender card” to secure privileges. She would comfortably refrain from engaging in physical labor, such as arranging tables, knowing that the boys would be expected to do more of it anyway. Aware that her teachers tended to be more lenient with girls, she would be very aggressive toward her male peers while smugly avoiding the consequences of such behavior. Moreover, the fact that Lisa earned good grades, coupled with the general impression that girls performed better than boys in school, gave her a sense of pride. With multiple privileges like these, Lisa recalled feeling very lucky to be a female only child.

However, the blessing of her status would later become a curse. When it came to providing care for her aging family members, Lisa’s only-child status began to impose on her an increasing amount of personal burden (see also Feng et al., 2014; Liu, 2008). One child caring for both parents—and, potentially, grandparents—is an impossible task (Feng, 2006). To make things worse for Lisa, women are expected to fulfill the responsibilities of elder care (Currier, 2008; Fong, 2002; Hu, 2017); this means that the lenience associated with being female that she had once enjoyed was suddenly snatched away from her—special treatment no longer applied. The first sign of this turn of fate appeared when her cousin, who had been the only child of her aunt and uncle, passed away in an accident. Thereafter, her aunt and uncle began to show Lisa extra affection in the hope that she would care for them in their old age. Lisa believed that the reason they “invested” in her, rather than other young members of the extended family (among whom some were male), was because of her age—with her cousin gone, she became the eldest of her generation.

This led Lisa to realize that certain factors, such as her age and the real-world implications thereof, might push the relevance of her gender into the background. She realized that, with regard to familial responsibility, less would not be demanded of her just because she was female. This realization was not particularly pleasant, since she had previously been granted more leeway by virtue of being a daughter/girl,

and she was not equipped with the mindset of being the “substitute son” (Croll, 1995; Liu, 2008), especially when substitute sons are expected to shoulder so heavy a burden. She wished that she had been granted fewer privileges as a child, as she thought that would have made their inevitable loss later in life easier to deal with.

What eventually exacerbated the situation was the reality that, while she was handed the same elder-care expectations as her male counterparts, she was in fact denied the same channels through which to shoulder that responsibility. When she sought a job 1 year before the interview, she had the acute feeling that her male counterparts were much better received by the human resources managers. Like other women that have come before her (see, e.g., Wang, 2005), Lisa found that men could find jobs more easily with similar, or even fewer, qualifications. The collective high achievement of females, which, back in her school days, constituted a source of pride, were now meaningless except for heightening feelings of unfairness. While Chinese women may have enjoyed access to high-quality education due to their only-child status, evidence has revealed that the educational advantages they have gained are not translated into the job market (Cai, 2016). Lisa’s senior kin were compelled to hold her up as being “as good as a boy,” and yet the job market was not ready to deem women equal to men (Gu, 2018; Heshmati & Su, 2017; Lu & Zhang, 2016).

Lisa still counted herself lucky since her parents, who worked full time, would enjoy a government pension when they retired, which would reduce her financial load. Nevertheless, Lisa was unable to escape an overwhelming sense of pressure that was in part related to singleton children’s collective feeling of being particularly responsible for their parents’ happiness (Deutsch, 2006). Lisa quoted a famous saying among Chinese young people to express her feelings: “If you are the only child, even when you want to kill yourself, you can’t, since your parents have no one but you.” Since she needed to repay the once-excessive love she had received, and unable to find another way out, she decided to force herself to grow. She aspired to become strong both psychologically and financially so that she would be able to protect her parents and other senior members of her family. If the world is trickier for women than it is for men, then she was prepared to put in more effort. Beauvoir (1997) once lamented that women are lured into disadvantaged fates due to the availability of an easier path; in Lisa’s case, this easy path seemed to have existed once, yet vanished upon entering adulthood, and she was then compelled to opt for the harder one.

Wendy’s Story

Wendy’s life had been characterized by ongoing tension between being considered somewhat equal to boys while being inherently inferior to them. In response, she attempted to prove herself as not only equal, but in fact superior, to her

male counterparts, which led her to reap certain rewards while also encountering inevitable hurdles.

Wendy’s childhood home was located in a newly urbanized area in the southeast of the country, with her father working as a teacher in a public school. When Wendy was born, the traditional preference for sons was abundant in her region, and the older members of her family displayed a strong preference for male descendants. For Wendy’s parents, while it would have been more convenient if Wendy had been born a boy, they were nonetheless able to make peace with having a daughter. First and foremost, since Wendy’s father was formally employed by the government, any violation of the policy was not to be tolerated; in fact, Wendy said her father had, to a certain degree, internalized the ideology of the one-child policy (see also Nie & Wyman, 2005), considering himself to have done the right thing by being devoted to his child regardless of the child’s sex. Moreover, Wendy assumed that because her mother had long struggled to get pregnant, the delight at finally having a child might have outweighed all other considerations. Overall, Wendy would describe herself as unconditionally loved by her parents, and she had no memory of being discriminated against within her nuclear family.

However, the situation was completely different in her extended family, where discrimination existed in abundance. Wendy’s aunt would openly suggest hiding Wendy in the countryside so that her parents could try having a boy. Although the suggestion was not taken up, to Wendy its mere utterance had a haunting effect that was rendered more intense every time she met with an acquaintance who, as a girl, was actually hidden away in the countryside. Likewise, Wendy’s grandfather, without ever explicitly stating his bias, was significantly harsher on Wendy than he was on other family members of her generation (all of whom were male), and he constantly found fault with her. When the whole family went to pay tribute to their ancestors together, Wendy realized that, while all of her (male) cousins’ names were carved on the tombstone, hers was nowhere to be found. Her father promised to have her name added if that was what she wanted, and yet Wendy fiercely rejected the offer, saying that if her name was not there in the first place, she did not want it there at all.

In response to the discrimination she faced, Wendy described her mentality as follows: “If people do not wish me well, I will become even better off.” She decided that she would prove her worth to the relatives who thought less of her. Echoing other female singletons’ experiences (Fong, 2002; Liu, 2006; Tsui & Rich, 2002; Xu & Yeung, 2013), she found that an important channel through which to accomplish that goal was education. For Wendy, it could be said that her empowerment via education started well before she entered the education system, when her mother took her to visit a fortune-teller who announced that Wendy was “of school material” and destined to succeed in education. Rejoicing at the news, Wendy’s mother spread it around

enthusiastically; everyone took the hint and said similar things about Wendy afterwards. While Wendy's mother's superstitious reaction was possibly related to the parental belief, instinct, or wish that daughters might be able to make up for their disadvantages through education (Fong, 2002; Tsui & Rich, 2002), Wendy was unaware of this mechanism as a child, and believed that she was indeed meant to earn good grades.

The school environment later allowed Wendy to sustain and intensify this belief. As far as Wendy was concerned, while inequality was shown blatantly elsewhere, the school was, in a distorted way, a safe haven that actually exhorted gender equality. The highly exam-oriented school environment meant that, as long as she was able to earn excellent grades, no one cared about her gender. The refreshing sense of equality she felt at school found its way into her household, too. When her entire extended family gathered, the children were routinely asked about their grades, and when Wendy, as the only girl of her generation, vastly outperformed her male cousins, she received generous compliments. This made Wendy extremely proud of herself and, at this point in her life, she believed that if girls were not the same as boys, it was only because they were better.

However, it was also evident that girls getting better grades might not really diminish the discrimination they faced; rather, it might simply confuse people and end up giving discrimination more diverse opportunities through which to declare its presence. Once, Wendy's grandfather decided to check her homework and that of her male cousin. When Wendy's homework was found to be flawless and her cousin's was full of mistakes, her grandfather suddenly became enraged—not with her cousin, but with her. Wendy's cousin profusely apologized to her afterwards, assuming that it was his homework that had infuriated their grandfather and that Wendy had somehow become the scapegoat, but Wendy calmly told him that it was not his fault. She had the insight even then that the real fault lay in the fact that people were not ready for a girl's victory.

Luckily, education still functioned as an effective tool of empowerment for Wendy overall, and as she climbed the educational ladder, this empowerment eventually led to a substantial change of fate. When her outstanding academic performance eventually got Wendy into a top-tier university and then graduate school, she began to keenly feel the potential to achieve upward social mobility through her qualifications. Older members of her family began to say, not as a courtesy but with genuine feeling, how proud they were of Wendy. One of Wendy's aunts had given birth to seven daughters before she managed to have sons, but the two sons, despite the high hopes pinned on them, benefited the family little. Consequently, people began to compare her relatives' families to Wendy's family, saying that her parents might have made a better choice after all. It seemed that real-world benefits and pragmatic considerations made the gender bias in her extended family less relevant because the female

descendants were able to prove that they were better able to survive the system (see also Ling, 2017).

However, there was ultimately no escaping Wendy's diminished status due to being female. As Wendy achieved more academic success, her parents began to wish she had not been "school material" at all. Wendy's less academically inclined male cousins had begun to raise children of their own. Wendy's parents, although denied a son to "properly" carry on the family name, were nevertheless keen to have their bloodline continued through their daughter, and they nudged Wendy to start a family. But Wendy was too busy with education to do so. Rather inconveniently, as the only child, her life plan was critically intertwined with—and thus stood in the way of—her parents' desire for grandchildren. The constant reinforcement within her family regarding how girls "were not the same as boys" therefore resumed, although it manifested in a brand-new form: reproduction. How could a girl prove herself to be better than boys in this case? Wendy said the problems she faced as a female were endless.

Emerging Themes and Discussion: What Happens When Equality Is Proclaimed Without Confronting Difference?

Unconditional Equality: Equal Treatment Without Challenging Bias

In a study considering Chinese single-child nuclear families, Liu (2006) pointed out that, while parents hold equally high expectations for girls and boys, the nature of these expectations are nevertheless gender specific and stereotypical; the male–female binary line of thinking persists even though daughters receive limitless affection. The current study reveals a similar tendency for daughters to benefit from a kind of gender equality in their nuclear families that does not seem to exclude the presence of a degree of bias. Lisa's parents were completely devoted to her; yet, by making a series of specific parenting choices (e.g., being overly protective) based on Lisa's gender, the devotion she received was ultimately predicated on her gender. Wendy's parents treated her well despite the overall discriminatory environment, yet their attitudes before her birth and their subsequent attempts to have another child suggest that they held a lingering belief that having a daughter was somehow different from having a son.

What is presented above may well corroborate the claim that parents' good treatment of their daughters has less to do with them embracing gender equity than it does the fact that they find themselves without a son (Hu & Shi, 2020; Yi, 2007), and what is apparently equal treatment by no means implies the eradication of deep-seated gender stereotypes (Liu, 2006). The differentiation between sons and daughters does not stop at birth (Wang, 2005); rather, it lingers and manifests in various forms. However, on a more positive

note, it is also clear that, within the nuclear family, the acceptance of daughters has become a concrete, if imperfect, reality. Primarily, the young women's experiences add to the evidence that parents of only children may deliberately deny or ignore gender differences even when they personally believe in them (Tsui & Rich, 2002), thereby demonstrating people's potential to opt for egalitarian ideas, albeit partial ones, when the situation requires. Gender-related emotion structures can also be altered (see Ling, 2017), as the young women's parents were emotionally conditioned to fully love their daughters. Moreover, following the line of argument maintaining that, in terms of treating daughters and sons equally, the means the parents enjoy is always more crucial and fundamental than the intentions they harbor (Parish & Willis, 1993), it may be that the already precipitated reality—namely, the situation in which there is no son and all resources are committed to one daughter—can itself lay the foundations for a potentially more radical transformation without more thorough ideological changes taking place.

The Random Nature of Empowerment

Outside the domain of the nuclear family in which a daughter's status as a singleton no longer applies, there emerges a significant degree of randomness as to whether a girl is considered "good." For Lisa, relatives who were in need of elder care readily expected females in the family to fulfill the duty that had been previously assigned to men, whereas the job market was not attuned to doing so; the contrast between these two widely divergent treatments further increased her burden and highlighted personal struggles. For Wendy, relatives outside of her nuclear family obviously viewed girls as inferior; this bias was partly alleviated through educational achievement (Fong, 2004) but nonetheless constantly manifested in other ways.

The young women's experiences overall exhibited the predominantly random nature of the gender equality of only children. When male offspring were absent, lacking, or found to be less than capable—either through providing potential elder care (Lisa) or through offering the potential for upward mobility via education (Wendy)—females were recognized as males' equals because they were expected to serve equal functions. Yet, otherwise, equality would vanish and discrimination reappear, as was illustrated when male competition existed and hence no male-equivalent functions were expected of the female (as in the case of the job market for Lisa), or when females were needed to fulfill obligations that were considered to be exclusively theirs, such as bearing children in the case of Wendy. Gender differences have either been ignored/denied or preserved/highlighted depending on shifting personal and institutional calculations, corroborating the fact that women's best interests were never an inherent part of China's one-child policy (Fong, 2004; Greenhalgh, 2001), and that equality has yet to manifest on an institutional level. More broadly, these case studies attest to the fact

that, without the direct confrontation of the existing power structure, gender equality cannot extend very far beyond specific circumstances.

Yet, it is important to note that, amidst the randomness of the status of females, room for establishing a stable position is limited but necessarily reserved. As Wendy's experience indicates, channels such as education offer hope and sometimes the real possibility for females to acquire substantial equality through their own endeavors. In fact, the existence of such channels is partly what has rendered the one-child situation bearable for the public and hence made it possible for the policy to be successfully implemented. Because claims of equity between sons and daughters are not grounded in reality, and equal treatment is far from being institutionalized, parents without sons have needed to find silver linings in order to feel hopeful about their daughters (as can partly be corroborated by the example of Wendy's mother, who held on to the superstitious belief that Wendy was "school material"). This may partly explain why, within the context of the one-child policy, parents have generously invested in their daughters' educations (Lee, 2012; McGarry & Sun, 2018; Veeck et al., 2003; Yi, 2007); it may also explain why daughters themselves have relied on educational achievement to empower themselves (see Liu, 2017; Martin, 2017). However, education as a channel is necessarily flawed, not only because few can succeed through it, but also because the success women achieve through this route cannot be extended to the job market (Cai, 2016) or to China's biased society as a whole; again, this suggests that real equality will not occur without systematically addressing the existing power imbalance. To take this one step further, viewing education as a means of female empowerment may serve to deepen the illusion of equity.

Seeking (Self-)empowerment While Acknowledging Difference

In a way, the parents in the stories exhibited some unconscious knowledge of the fact that substantial equality is impossible without acknowledging existing difference. The lingering boy-girl form of binary thinking is a sign that the society has not moved beyond conventions fast enough, but it may also constitute an accurate judgment on the current reality that, after all, declares gender equality without being prepared for it. The persistent boy-girl binary thinking the parents in our study exhibited can be seen as a means of resisting moving beyond current conventions, and yet may also be viewed as reflecting an accurate judgment of the current reality, which, after all, has proclaimed gender equality without being prepared for it. In a study concerning the educational opportunities of Chinese only children, Tsui and Rich (2002) found that parents of female singletons spent more on education than did those of male singletons. The authors attributed this to the fact that parents were aware of the disadvantages their daughters would potentially face in

the job market, and therefore tried to remedy the situation by making extra investments. Drawing on the ethnographic observations of a Chinese one-child family, Fong (2004) also commented that a father's harsh treatment of his daughter could be viewed as an attempt to prepare her for a harsh future. From this perspective, binary thinking may be less of an inescapable tradition and more of a necessity, and the role played by parents in female empowerment can be described as one that facilitates equality through the legitimate recognition of the boy–girl binary thought process.

If their parents' soberness is still more or less unconscious, daughters are more consciously sensitive to the differences that exist between genders. There exists no illusion that gender equality has indeed been realized, and their paths toward empowerment can be said to be based on the view of "difference" itself: they strive to work harder or become better than their male counterparts as a means of compensation. Viewed in relation to Chinese females living through the period of Chinese socialist revolutions and reforms in the 1940s and 1950s, who considered their lives as women to have been distinctively enhanced in comparison to the past and were therefore inclined to overlook persistent differentiation between them and their male counterparts (Zuo, 2013), in the current study the participants' acute awareness of receiving differential treatment is reflective of a basically privileged childhood, on the personal level, and certain progress having been made in society in general. This positioned our participants to anticipate more absolute equality. In contrast to their counterparts who had male siblings, and who were keenly aware of this differentiation yet unable to challenge it (e.g., Wang, 2005), the young females featured in this study had obviously taken actions to address their situations. Implicit in Lisa's account is the decision to put in extra effort to compensate for the inferiority assigned to women and to accomplish an equal outcome. Despite constant reminders of female inferiority, Wendy more obviously embraced education as a tool to overcome her disadvantage, and aimed to be not simply as good as, but better than, the boys—an approach that contains binary thinking yet inverts the power imbalance. Through their endeavors, these young women demonstrate how the female pursuit of empowerment will always be set against a backdrop of unequal power relations.

Concluding Remarks

Within China's one-child context, daughters are forcefully proclaimed to be "as good as" sons as part of wider, national needs. Daughters, mostly within the realm of their nuclear families, thus experience a sort of unconditional affection that does not exclude a degree of bias; this simultaneously demonstrates how the simple proclamation of equality may have substantial impacts, and how "equality" by itself is, ultimately, not sufficient. That "equality" cannot simply be

declared true without the existing power imbalance being corrected is further corroborated by the situations facing the young females outside their nuclear family, where discrimination still abounds, while the chances of empowerment once promised to them following the proclamation of equity are thrown at the mercy of specific circumstances. The young females' responses to the situation, which were to soberly acknowledge the existence of "difference" and seek self-empowerment in accordance with it, further highlight the fact that the starting point of pursuing true equity always lies in the previous power imbalance, which must be tackled first and foremost in order to move forward.

Although policy development is not a main focus, the current study nevertheless has implications in terms of policy making. On the highest level, to partly resonate the principle of Kant (1998), people should always be treated not merely as means to achieve certain ends, but also as an end in itself. As elaborated previously, within China's history, policies and movements to advance women's empowerment, though often successful and yielding significant outcomes, are nevertheless not inherently about women's welfare but rather a pragmatic means to serve other causes (see, e.g., Croll, 2013; Evans, 2003; Yang, 1999), and the one-child policy is one marked example. However, however much urban daughters have benefited from the only-child policy, as long as their welfare is not one of the inherent concerns, full equality is unlikely to materialize. In contemporary times, social welfare policies have mostly grown to be implemented, not in the name of solving social problems, but of protecting citizen's rights. Women, as a marginalized group, have not received satisfactory treatment in real-world practice, a phenomenon that is rendered more explicit as China's population-control policy progresses (Zhang, 2015). Policies must not merely consider women's welfare, but acknowledge women as one of the principal subjects during the process and think from their perspective (Zhang, 2017). If the above is too idealized and cannot be easily translated into real-world practices, then policies should at least be gender-sensitive and take into consideration the gendered impacts and gender-related implications of each practice. This first and foremost involves, in this specific case, the establishment of proper supporting measures to protect women's rights on an institutional level so as to deliver what is promised in government propaganda. A daughter born as an only child is promised, positioned, trained, and, to a certain extent, pushed to become "as good as a boy" as an unintended outcome of the one-child policy. By supporting measures such as ensuring that women enjoy equal opportunities on the job market, eliminating gender discrimination in the wider society, catching up to ensure a certain level of consistency and avoiding reducing women to a mere means by which to achieve societal goals, women may then find their improved status nothing but random and easily-dissolvable. In addition, the findings of the current study also point to some specific

policy recommendations. First, it is of crucial importance for policy makers to take measures to ensure that young females are given the opportunity to receive high quality education. Education has long been proven to be an important channel for female empowerment (e.g., Engida, 2021), and, as is exhibited in detail in the current study, young women have successfully utilized education to achieve self-empowerment. The provision of educational opportunity is perhaps especially important in light of the abandonment of China's one-child policy: Chinese society has witnessed young females receiving much-enhanced education investments, partly due to the one-child-per-family quota, and, as the number of children permitted per household has increased in recent years, it still remains to be seen whether favorable educational investment for girls will be maintained. Policy makers should pay special attention in this regard as birth-control policy changes and progresses and intervene when necessary. Second, the current study indicates that policy makers may be able to take effective action in terms of enhancing gender equality and reducing gender discrimination among the public on a cultural and psychological level. Notwithstanding the fact that "son-preference" has been deep-rooted in China's society, the current study reveals that within nuclear families, the structures of feelings toward daughters can indeed be transformed; young women who grow up with concentrated resources also take themselves seriously and pursue full equality as a matter of course and this brings considerable optimism regarding conception changes.

Limitation and Direction for Future Research

There are several limitations to the current study. First and foremost, as has been previously mentioned earlier in the article, it is of great importance to emphasize that this study focuses on the experiences of daughters from a relatively privileged background, and the way these young women experience the only-child policy may not extend to the daughters who come from an underprivileged background. To elaborate, for instance, with the daughters whose parents are relatively well-educated, well-resourced, and aware of the need to be devoted to their children regardless of their gender, and having largely internalized the gender equity national discourse, the participants in the current study have mostly received gender-related bias in a nuanced, mild form. And yet the landscape might be very different for the daughters whose parents are too inhibited by their own personal context to be able to make peace with the situation, in which case the frustration and anguish of being stuck with a daughter and being sonless may escalate into a blatant form of discrimination or explicit conflict; or it may generate situations that the researchers cannot foresee. Future research may

investigate how the daughters from a less-privileged background have been influenced by the one-child policy.

Secondly, the current research puts its focus on the experiences of young women at ages 18 to 25, and whilst this choice is justified as it overlaps with the emerging adulthood period (Arnett, 2000), which features people's heightened self-exploration in relation to social background and subsequently renders the participants' narrative rich and elaborate, there exists the inevitable limitation that these participants were not yet sufficiently experienced in life to give a more thorough picture. For the participants in the current study, they had not yet experienced certain potentially important milestones and life events, such as marriage or the birth of their own children. It may be interesting to conduct the current research on participants who are more experienced in life, either to get a complementary view or to explore their perspectives for their own sake; or, alternatively, it may be interesting to trace the exact same participants in the current research and interview them some years later (which the researchers have planned to do).

Thirdly, the current research elicited only the views and stories from the daughters themselves and did not take into account those of other people, such as parents or extended family members. In relation to this specific article, it may be particularly interesting to interview Lisa and Wendy's parents to see (a) whether or to what extent they have similar views, memories or way of narration as their daughter in response to the same events and (b) how they would react and respond to the narrative of their daughter. If circumstances allow, the researchers of the current study may conduct such interviews. In addition, perspectives from those outside the family—school teachers (who teach only-children), local policy makers, etc.—can also be taken into account and may provide a fuller picture. Future research may investigate young daughters' experiences within the one-child policy context whilst including the voices of multiple parties.

In addition, as a small-scale, qualitative study, the results of the current study cannot be generalized. On the one hand, the lack of generalization potential is not a "shortcoming" of a small-scale, qualitative study, and cannot be seen as such (e.g., see Diefenbach, 2008). On the other hand, however, it may nevertheless be important for the authors to clearly note here that the current study aims to generate ideas and provoke insights, rather than to create generalizable conclusions. It is hoped that the current small-scale study can spark thoughts and enrich understanding as well as draw attention to young Chinese women's life experiences within the unique policy context, especially in light of the policy's recent significant adjustment (or, in a certain way, termination). Further, it is hoped that more researchers will investigate, document, highlight, and empathize with this and similar sets of human experiences, before they vanish into history in today's fast-moving society.

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