

My Final Project is a response to China's one-child policy, a policy which lasted for over thirty years and has just ended this October. As a Chinese girl born under this policy, I was used to being an only child (and so were others born during my generation). We were shocked about the fact that after living under it for our whole life, we almost never questioned the validity of such policy until it is officially ended. In this project, I finally reflected on the influences of the one-child policy on us individuals, and used sculpture to criticize this policy.

My sculpture is a set of two painted chairs made of MDF boards. Each chair has three legs. They barely stand when they're separated, even without supporting any weight. However, they lock into each other to share one leg, steadily working together to support one's body weight. They are painted in almost opposite colors, while they also share a common color on their sides. Although they may be interpreted differently by different viewers, these chairs represent siblings, who almost always need each other's support. I use chairs to represent them because, like people live and work, chairs stand and hold weight; the structure of these chairs make their relationship of mutual support very obvious and easy to understand. Chairs missing one leg do not function normally, but they do when they are together.

This sculpture is to convey the idea that siblings play an important role in each other's life. The government should not interfere with individual family structures by restricting the number of children each family can have.

Yumeng D

I woke up and turned off my alarm clock as usual, grabbing my phone before fully awake, opening social media to see what's new in my friends' feeds. There it said, "China has ended its one-child policy." I scrolled down without looking at it further, as I usually do when I see a boring joke. There it was again, on another friend's timeline, but I scrolled down again, believing that it is impossible to be true. And there it said again, "China has ended its one-child policy." I finally clicked on the link to see what's going on. It was from BBC, so there's no way that I can doubt it any longer. That was when I understood the importance of this news. On October 29, 2015, the Chinese government announced that each Chinese family would be allowed to have two children, which means future families would not necessarily be single-child families. Kids will have other direct relatives other than their parents, and they'll start to talk about their siblings. I'm glad to hear this good news for the new families because they no longer live under the limit of one-child policy, while I also feel sad for my peers and myself, because the impacts that one-child policy had on us are irreversible.

The one-child policy was introduced between 1978 and 1980 in mainland China. It was part of the family planning policies that aim to decrease consumption of natural resources and promote economic growth by controlling population growth. According to the one-child policy, each family can adopt or give birth to one child, and couples that have more than one child face fines and dismissal from jobs in public corporations. Some exceptions are made for non-Han ethnic groups and rural families whose first child is a girl. On October 29, 2015, the Chinese government announced that the existing one-child policy would be replaced by the two-child policy, which allows families to have two children, instead of one. Other family planning policies include encouraging marrying late and having babies at an older age.

The one-child policy has direct influences on many aspects of Chinese society, both in the big-picture and on the individual levels. First, it contributed to the imbalance of male-female ratio in China. According to Wangyi News in April 2013, In 2012, China's male-female ratio was 117.12:100, which is much higher than the range of normal male-female ratios set by the United Nations, which is less than or equal to 107:100. This is a problem when one thinks about the missing female population from the data. A big reason for such imbalance is that in rural China, due to gender discrimination, families want at least one male child to inherit family properties and businesses. They urgently want their only child to be a boy, so if they find out that the child is a girl before she was born, they may abort her; if they only know she is a girl after she's born, they may either abandon her or hide her away. They would then give birth to another child, as if their first child, the girl, never existed. An artist in New York made a sculpture, "Terracotta Daughters" (see Image 1), to criticize this phenomenon. She sculpted many Chinese schoolgirls to represent the missing females, who would have been at this age if they were not aborted or abandoned.



Image1: Prune Nourry, Terracotta Daughters, 2013

The one-child policy also gradually reshaped the society's structure by causing population aging. As the previous generations retire, the new generations bare big pressure to feed their families. According to a study, "Population Aging in China," conducted by Maryland Population Research Center, the median age of China increased from 24 in 1950 to 33 in 2005, indicating that older people are making a bigger fraction of the total Chinese population. The retired old people burden the younger generations for economic and health reasons, and while the younger generations used to have siblings to share the duty of taking care of their retired parents and grandparents, now they have to do so independently. Moreover, when the oldest only children have their own babies, the new babies will have the pressure to feed their two parents and four grandparents. This is unfair to them when compared with families that have two children each generation, where each child only has to earn to support one parent and one grandparent on average.

More important, the actual influences of the one-child policy are much more complicated than the superficial ones listed above, because the one-child policy, more or less, affected the only children's personalities and ways of thinking by not allowing them to have siblings. According to a collaborative questionnaire-based research study (Liu, Munakata & Onuoha, 2005) conducted in two high-schools in Heilongjiang, China, only children in the family have significant negative mental health tendencies, especially neurosis and depression tendencies, and such phenomenon is more obvious in urban areas than in the countryside. Contrary to many people's belief that only children in families are more beloved than those who have siblings because they have all the attention from their parents, only children also reported lack of love and care from parents more often than others. This research showed that not having siblings has negative psychological impact on children. In fact, there are other psychological effects of the one-child policy on children, because only children may bear pressure since their childhood, may have fear of adventure, and may lack certain social skills that usually develop during interactions with siblings.

Since the youngest Chinese people are mostly the only children in their families, they carry all their parents' hopes and expectations, resulting in huge mental pressure to succeed. From the parents' perspective, since they only have one child, they have to make sure that this child has to earn enough in order to sustain his or her own life and also support them in return. The parents are desperate, because they have no "back-ups." They invest all they have on their children, in most cases by means of education. The parents believe that once their children do well in gaokao<sup>1</sup> and are admitted to a good college, they're able to change the family's fate. In China, it is very common for parents to sacrifice their quality of life or even dismantle the nuclear family structure in order to earn opportunities of education for their children. For example, when parents see jobs far from home with higher pay, they may leave their kid at home and go out to work in order to earn enough tuition for their children. In this case, they may only see their children during breaks and national holidays. In some other families, one parent – usually the mother – leaves her job and moves to a rented apartment near the best school in the city with her child, taking care of the child who pays all attention to academics. From the children's perspective, as a result, they have greater pressure to succeed in school and career. Moreover, the sacrifices for education caused the nuclear family structure to further breakdown and be separated into different households, resulting in even less opportunities of interaction

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<sup>1</sup> Gaokao is the college entrance exam in China that can be taken once a year. Usually, the gaokao score is only factor considered by colleges when admitting students.

between family members. Those children, therefore, lack the normal family fun and communication. In some extreme cases, not only can't children have any non-academic related hobbies, but also have to do well in every homework assignment and test, or otherwise be punished harshly by their parents. Under such pressure, many children are unable to fully enjoy their childhood.

Second, the only children may lack courage to adventure, after being overly protected by their parents for most time of their lives. In a research on behavioral impacts of China's one-child policy (Cameron, Erkal, Gangadharan, & Meng, 2013), an experiment to test people's attitude towards risk showed that only children under China's one-child policy tend to take safe approaches instead of taking risks for possible greater benefits. Such risk-averse attitude is caused by parents' over-protection. There's a Chinese saying that precisely describe the parents' protection of their only child as if he or she were a precious stone, "Afraid it will melt when it's carried in the mouth, and afraid it will drop when it's held in the hands." The parents worry about their only children's safety so much that they don't want them to take any risks. The only children are discouraged to participate in adventurous activities and are discouraged to travel or live alone, because if they lose their lives – although the chance is tiny – their families' heritages end. According to the same research mentioned above, without courage to take risks in life, children appear unconfident and may miss career opportunities for not willing to take on creative and challenging projects.

Third, the only children may lack certain social skills that can only fully develop during interaction with siblings. Not having any siblings is one of the biggest and most direct results of the one-child policy. From interviews with people born before and after one-child policy was introduced, the only children of the family sometimes compared themselves to their peers who have siblings; but after more than thirty years of one-child policy, children no longer question their family structures because all their peers are their families' only children. Many of them don't realize that, compared to children in earlier generations and in other countries, a big part of family life and socialization is missing. The interviewees who are only children often feel lonely because they don't have any peers to talk to at home. They may beg their parents to stay with them and tell stories when they were still young, but as they grow up, they get used to spending time on their own in evenings, only contacting friends through text messages or social media. As a result, only children don't have as much experience in socializing with peers as children who have siblings. A psychological consultant, Houzhi Fu, further explained that when compared to children in other countries who have both older and younger siblings, single Chinese children are even more of a disadvantage because children with older and younger siblings switch their social roles between "care givers" and "care receivers" when interacting between different siblings or parents, while only children only have one role to play in family interactions, since they only receive care from their parents but seldom do the inverse. Therefore, single children may be disadvantageous in society when they need to adapt to different social roles in order to build up a diverse social network.

However, the impacts explained above are just generalizations and therefore do not apply to every individual. There are certainly exceptions that more or less avoided these outcomes. I am very fortunate to have such wonderful parents who raised me in certain ways that compensated most negative influences of the one-child policy. For instance, I was never given too much pressure and was never compared to other kids. They never told me, "You could have done better than this," or, "Why are you playing games instead of studying?" Nor did they point at other children and tell me to learn from them because I'm "not as good." They told me I could

always give up on what I'm doing if I'm too stressed, although I never did. My parents encouraged me to take on challenges, even in situations that most parents consider too risky. They let me walk to school by myself since first grade, encouraged me to skateboard, climb trees and take unusual, steep trails when we went hiking. When I was in middle-school, having permission from my parents to travel without adults, I made a detailed plan of a one-week vacation to Shanghai, Hangzhou and Suzhou with my best friends. My plan didn't turn into action only because my friends' parents thought we were too young to travel by ourselves. I wasn't too lonely at home either, since my dad is one of my best friends. We had some great times together, having fun and sharing stories. We went skateboarding together and discussed gaming strategies. In my mom's words, my dad "acts like a child" when he is with me. From my perspective, he's more like a grown-up companion and a trustworthy tutor. Under my parents' influence, I was never overwhelmed by the fact of not having any siblings. I grew up happily and became confident and independent.

Moreover, not having any siblings doesn't mean that we cannot imagine that we have some. Imagination has always been the wings of children's wild dreams. In this particular case, children without siblings used their imaginations in different ways to fill in what's missing. It is very common in elementary schools and middle schools to hear students calling each other "jie-mei" or "xiong-di."<sup>2</sup> When they do so, they act like real brothers or sisters, too, sharing secrets and hanging out together. This is one of the ways children imagine each other to be siblings. Sometimes this game may even expand further, with a whole class of students calling each other by family relationship titles like mom, dad, aunt, uncle, etc.

Another use of imagination is to invent a "virtual sibling." Some artists use their artworks as their means to bring their imagination to the public. They usually use themselves to represent their siblings, because most people agree that siblings are close to each other and physically similar, and artists themselves apparently qualify. Fan Shi San, a young Chinese photographer, represented his alter ego through a series of photographs entitled *Two Of Us* (see Image 2). He depicted the ways he would interact with someone he grew up with if he had met him in real life. Painter Li Tianbing painted different versions of himself and his imaginary friends in the same house that he lived in during



Image 2: Fan Shi San, *Two Of Us*, 2009



Image 3: Li Tianbing, *Bookshelf in the Backyard*, 2013

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<sup>2</sup> "jie-mei" means sisters and "xiong-di" means brothers.

his childhood (see Image 3). The imaginary fun time contrasts with the lonely reality in which children cannot have fun with siblings.

As an only child, I have also had similar imaginative experiences. I often imagined a younger sister who doesn't exist in real life. In my imagination, she is two years younger than me, more outgoing than me, and very kind and energetic. When I was in middle-school, I even kept an online blog as a place to write letters to her, talking about school and social life, happiness and worries. She never truly existed, but she supported me mentally and made me not feel lonely even when I was at home alone.

Although the results of the one-child policy are irreversible (since most of the only children have grown past their childhood), it is still worth analyzing, as it provides inspiration for parenting and family interactions. On the big picture, since apparently some aftermath of the one-child policy was unexpected, the negative effects of one-child policy should have also warned the government of the importance of careful research before making any major decisions. On individual levels, even when future families are allowed to have two or more kids, parents and schools are still responsible for providing the best education for children in order to have them grow up healthily and happily.

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