



Only Hope: Coming of Age under China's One-Child Policy. Vanessa L. Fong. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press. 2004. 242 pp. ISBN 084749612

YI CHE

Arizona State University

yi.che@asu.edu

In her book *Only Hope: Coming of Age Under China's One-Child Policy*, Vanessa Fong presents us with rich insights into the social, economic, and psychological consequences of China's one-child policy after more than two decades of its implementation. In the early 1970s, the Chinese government initiated the world's first state-mandated fertility policy, which constrains families in China to having only one child. Its implementation was later followed by an enforcement policy. The outcome has been that the vast majority of urban Chinese youth born after 1979 are "singletons"--a considerable group of people who have attracted many researchers from within and outside of China. Fong's in-depth ethnographic study had three primary research questions: What are the subjectivities, experiences, and aspirations of China's first generation of singletons? What kinds of relationships do they have with their families and peers? And above all, what are the social, economic, and psychological consequences of China's state decision to hasten the fertility transition?

To gain access to the massive cohort of young urban Chinese singletons, Fong spent 27 months between 1997 and 2002 as an unpaid English teacher at three secondary schools in Dalian, a large coastal city in northeastern China. Primarily based on a survey and participant observations in students' homes and classrooms, this study collected vivid qualitative data and analyzed its statistical data in a comprehensive way. Basically, it reveals that China's one-child policy has largely succeeded in its goal of accelerating the pace of modernization, but with unintended consequences. Specifically, it reveals concerns about heavy parental investment and increased stress and competition in the educational system; unrealistic expectations in the pursuit of an elite status clashed with the limitations in the job market; neither valuable economic investment nor unconditional love from the parents could guarantee the singletons' fulfillment of their filial duties; and, finally, the widespread image of a "spoiled" generation disturbed the older generations in China who themselves grew up under Third World conditions. In sum, as the sole focus of all their parents' love, investment, and hope, Chinese singletons were entitled "the vanguard of modernization," believing that they deserved to live in First World conditions but frustrated by the Third World realities in their families and society.

One of the significant contributions of this book is that it provides the most recent and vivid descriptions of Chinese teenagers' lives in a contemporary global context. Different



from most studies of China's one-child policy that focus on providing demographic portraits and comparison patterns between singleton and nonsingleton children, this ethnography study provides an in-depth picture of these young singletons and their families through their genuine voices, ordinary life experiences, and authentic fears and conflicts. The combination of qualitative and quantitative data, rich and dramatic description and comprehensive theoretical analysis, support the author's arguments coherently; they capture the readers' interests and attentions, as well. For example, the widespread complaints that many Chinese singletons are "unable to adjust to their environment" and have been "spoiled," pointed out by the author, sound reasonable only in the Chinese local conditions, but not in comparison to the standards and lifestyle existing in the First World. Supported by the survey data of singletons' consumption patterns, their family incomes, stories collected from the fields, and other studies done by many Western scholars, one of the conclusions drew by the author is that "what mattered most was not their singleton status per se, but rather the fact that they were singletons in a society used to large families" (p. 2).

Without a doubt, the "both-insider-and-outsider" identity of the researcher enabled her to understand the nuances of the daily experiences in the field and to bring fresh contextual insights to the issues. This enables Fong to conduct a successful ethnography study. Fong takes advantage of her own ethnic identity as a Chinese who grew up under First World circumstances. This dual identity, plus her bilingual proficiency, allowed her not only easier access in the field, but enabled her to develop a comprehensive theoretical lens through which readers from the West are able to comprehend the firsthand data. Of course, it is never an easy task to integrate these two roles/identities in one study. Yet I am delighted to see the author's effort to develop an integrated picture of young Chinese singletons' lives. However, in several sections, this effort is weakened by detailed personal narratives without ample in-depth analysis. This is more obvious in the last two chapters, which focus on issues of children's filial duty, parental investment, and the concept of a "spoiled" generation.

©2004 American Anthropological Association. This review is cited and indexed in the December 2004 issue (35:4) of *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*.