

ASIA PACIFIC

# End of China's One-Child Policy Stings Its 'Loneliest Generation'

By JAVIER C. HERNÁNDEZ and AMY QIN NOV. 13, 2015

BEIJING — By many measures, Wang Hailei, 36, belongs to one of the most privileged generations in Chinese history. Raised without siblings under China's "one child" policy, he was lavished with attention and pampered with gifts like computer games, martial arts novels and music lessons.

But these days, he does not consider himself fortunate. As he wandered around a bookstore here one recent Saturday in a fur coat and suede shoes, he described his generation as "pathetic" and "miserable," ignorant of family love and exceedingly self-centered.

"We were sacrificed because of a political mistake," said Mr. Wang, the founder of an Internet start-up. "We were used."

Many people in China celebrated the decision by the Communist Party last month, after more than three decades of the one-child policy, to allow married couples to have two children, calling it a rare human rights victory in a country where freedoms are tightly restricted.

But for some of the more than 150 million young people who grew up as only children, the announcement has reawakened feelings of isolation and regret, according to interviews with more than two dozen of them.

The Chinese media are already calling them "the loneliest generation."

"They are lucky and unlucky," said a recent article on Sina.com, a Chinese

news website. “The ‘one-child’ policy ended in 2015, but this generation’s loneliness never goes away.”

Some have reacted with frustration as they confront the reality that their generation will be a historical aberration, a 37-year blip. Others are struggling to draw meaning from their unwitting participation in one of humanity’s largest social experiments.

“In 5,000 years of Chinese history, we will have been the only generation made up of almost all only children,” said Wang Yunpeng, 35, an engineer living in Xi’an, a city in northwest China. “The policy has caused so many problems.”

Liu Zhe, 33, a cashier at a supermarket in Shanghai, said, “Our lives were dictated by an arbitrary policy in circumstances that were entirely out of our control. Sometimes I wonder whether it is fair.”

Those entering adulthood now will form the backbone of Chinese society at a pivotal moment, as the ranks of the elderly grow rapidly and as the economy faces new strains, including a shortage of workers.

In interviews, members of the one-child generation said they grew up hearing that they were among the most blessed generations in Chinese history, having avoided the poverty and brutal conflicts experienced by their parents and grandparents, only to realize later that they would have to shoulder the burden of taking care of aging parents, in-laws and children without the support of siblings.

“We were told we were spoiled little emperors,” said Zhang Cheng, 22, a university student in Beijing. “But they didn’t tell us we would be the only generation that would have to face these obligations alone.”

After the change to the one-child policy was announced late last month, only children revived a familiar thought experiment: What would life be like with a brother or sister?

Li Luo Chen, 26, who works in marketing for a video game company, said that as a child she enjoyed receiving undivided attention from her parents. But now that she is an adult and her parents are urging her to have children, she wishes she had a brother to turn to.

“Being a female only child is too much pressure,” she said inside a Beijing cafe. “Every girl wants to grow up with a big brother.” Several people mentioned that an older brother would come in handy if you got into a fight.

In social media posts, some Chinese have called on the government to offer an apology or compensation for the fact that they were denied a sibling. Others said nothing could be done to alleviate the hardships.

Some experts still defended the policy, which was begun in response to concerns about the impact of overpopulation on natural resources.

“It’s true, it was a big social experiment,” said Tang Kun, 33, an assistant professor of global health at Peking University. “But what else could we have done?”

China’s one-child generation is far different from the generations that have preceded it. It is unusually well educated, with more than 85 percent of children born in the 1990s having attended high school. They generally have more intimate relationships with their parents, who doted on them for much of their lives but also imposed high expectations.

They also tend to exhibit traits not as prevalent in children who have siblings, such as selfishness, pessimism and risk aversion, according to a 2013 study by Australian researchers.

In 2008, a political advisory committee to the Communist Party suggested that the one-child policy be scrapped, saying it had created “social problems and personality disorders in young people.” Among the better known such cases were the 13-year-old girl who threatened to kill herself because she did not want her pregnant mother to give birth to another child, and the teenage boy who threatened suicide because his mother would not make his favorite dumplings.

Chinese leaders and social scientists are closely watching the reaction of the one-child generation to the “two-child” policy. A sharp rise in births could help replenish the national labor supply and pay for pensions and benefit packages for retirees, who will make up a third of the population by 2050.

But some analysts say the one-child policy had become redundant: As China

developed and urbanized, families were choosing to have fewer children anyway. When the government relaxed restrictions on the one-child policy in 2013, allowing couples to have two children if one of the parents was an only child, the reaction was tepid; only about 14 percent of eligible couples took advantage of the change.

Now that many of the one-child generation have reached prime childbearing age themselves, they are struggling to decide whether to have that second child, given the high cost of raising children in Chinese cities. They worry that the economy might force them to inflict on their children the same loneliness they endured because of policy.

“I can’t give my son a sibling, it’s too expensive,” said Liu Jia, 27, a nail salon worker in Beijing. “But I can try to make up for it by giving him more love, spending more time with him and taking him out more often, to make him feel less lonely.”

Others said they were eager to have two children so that their offspring would not experience the isolation they had felt in their youth.

“I wanted a sibling so much when I was a kid,” said Shi Jiandong, 22, a student at Fudan University in Shanghai. “I don’t want our kids to experience the loneliness that we felt.”

Huang Haitao, 30, a planning executive at Xinhua, a state-run news agency, in Beijing, said he worried that his children would feel even more isolated than his generation, since they would lack aunts, uncles or cousins.

“I had a dozen cousins to play with when I was a kid who were like my brothers and sisters,” he said. “My daughter is going to be much lonelier than me. She will have none of that.”

Mr. Wang, the Internet company founder, said that many Chinese families had forgotten that having a large family was a natural part of life. A Chinese proverb says that having a son and a daughter makes a family complete.

“A family is supposed to have more than one child; kinship should be like this,” he said. “My daughter doesn’t know what an aunt or an uncle is. I don’t want her not to know what brothers or sisters are.”

Li Jingyuan and Yingzhi Yang contributed research.

A version of this article appears in print on November 14, 2015, on page A4 of the New York edition with the headline: A Fresh Sting for the 'Loneliest Generation'.

---

© 2016 The New York Times Company