

A Longitudinal Study of Childbearing and Childrearing Preferences and Outcomes in Two Chinese Cities

Principal Investigators: Vanessa L. Fong and Hirokazu Yoshikawa

Abstract

Because of China's one-child policy, the vast majority of urban Chinese citizens born after 1979 are only-children. Our study will be the first to examine the long-term implications of the one-child policy for childbearing and childrearing among young adults who were themselves born under that policy. We aim to examine patterns, predictors, and consequences of childbearing preferences and outcomes and childrearing goals, practices, and outcomes among the first generation of young adults born under China's one-child policy. We will explore these factors by linking two longitudinal studies of families—one in Dalian that has been ongoing since 1999, and one in Nanjing that has just begun. Together the studies provide a unique opportunity to examine the long-term consequences of China's one-child policy in two contrasting cities.

Our study will ask three questions: 1) What factors cause childbearing preferences and outcomes associated with low fertility? 2) What factors cause son preference and skewed sex ratios at birth? And 3) What effects do discrepancies between childbearing preferences and outcomes have on childrearing goals, practices, and child outcomes?

A grant from the Harvard China Fund would enable us to conduct a project in 2008-2010 that will link two larger longitudinal studies: Vanessa Fong's study about the relationship between socioeconomic conditions and family dynamics among 2,273 Dalian residents born between 1979 and 1986, which has been ongoing since 1997, and a collaborative study by Vanessa Fong, Hiro Yoshikawa, and a team of American and Chinese psychologists, sociologists, and medical researchers about the relationship between socioeconomic conditions, childrearing, and child development among 416 Nanjing families who have babies born between 2006 and 2007, which has been ongoing since 2006. The project funded by the Harvard China Fund would add to the Dalian project a focus on parental career trajectories and cognitive and psychological assessments of child development that it is currently missing, add to the Nanjing project a focus on demographic patterns, childbearing decisions, and family size that it is currently missing, and enable comparisons between Nanjing and Dalian that may shed light on how differences between the histories, cultures, and political economies of different cities may affect childbearing and childrearing.

In Nanjing, we will administer surveys about their past and present childbearing preferences and childrearing goals to the 300 youngest couples from the Nanjing study (since the youngest Nanjing couples will be closest in age to those in the Dalian study, who will be between age 22 and 29 when the project begins in 2008). In Dalian, we will try to re-contact all 2,273 respondents to Vanessa Fong's 1999 survey, and administer to them the same demographic survey that was administered to the Nanjing sample. We estimate that 1,700 of them will be reachable and interested in completing the survey. After demographic surveys have been collected in Dalian, we will select 150 new mothers and 150 new fathers (matched by parents' ages, child's age, and socioeconomic conditions to the 300 in the Nanjing sample) and ask them and their spouses to complete the same survey administered to the Nanjing sample.

When their children are two years old, we will interview the same 300 couples in the Nanjing sample and the same 300 couples in the Dalian sample about relationships between their childbearing preferences and outcomes and their childrearing goals, practices, and outcomes, and conduct assessments that will enable us to measure their childrearing practices and their children's cognitive and psychological outcomes. By ensuring that children are all the same age at the time we do our assessments, we will maintain comparability within our samples.

We are seeking, and will continue to seek, grants from NSF to fund research assistantships for Harvard students to analyze the data that we collect in China, and to travel to China to assist in and supervise data collection. Our proposed study would create vital linkages between our two other studies, increase our likelihood of attracting large multi-year grants from outside Harvard. The training, collaboration, and capacity-building that this grant would provide for Southeast University and Liaoning Normal University will build long-term relationships between them and Harvard, and open up more opportunities for collaboration and research for Harvard students.