

Vanessa L. Fong.

Only Hope: Coming of Age Under China's One-Child Policy.

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Only Hope provides a fascinating look at the social world of China's "singletons" – the first generation to grow up after the one-child policy was instated, triggering the fastest demographic transition in history. As an exercise in social analysis, it has its flaws, but the flaws are integral to what makes this book so compelling.

This study was based in Dalian, a northern coastal city weathering the transition from being a center of heavy industry to a center of services and white-collar administration, with data collected over 27 months between 1997 and 2002. Fong surveyed 2,273 students at a vocational high school, a college prep high school, and a junior high school. Her qualitative data came from her own work as a volunteer English language teacher, which, crucially for her research, led her into the homes of 107 students and their parents who invited her to provide extra tutoring. She developed a strong rapport with 31 of these families, whose lives form the basis for this book. There are clearly issues of sample selection here, as she may have associated mainly with the most ambitious students who sought out extra academic advantages. However, Fong's fluency in Mandarin, her survey, and her accounts of discussions in the classes she led in the schools, which were populated by a broad cross-section of students, balance the potential bias in her sample of 31 families.

Fong's decision to use modernization theory as her main analytical framework was not a great choice. Reading the introduction and conclusion, I found too much uncritical acceptance of the idea that there is one central dynamic operating in the world: the convergence on wealthy-country standards of consumption and capitalist forms of social organization. This foregrounding of modernization is epitomized by Fong's conclusion that Chinese singletons are, in the words of one chapter title, "first world youth in the third world". This emphasis on a first world/third world split produces a kind of tunnel vision, as Fong focuses on the aspirations and efforts of the Chinese middle-class towards joining a global consumer elite, ignoring the ways these ideals may be transformed or questioned in Chinese localities. The emphasis results in a theoretically impoverished view of the lives of singletons, whose experiences are presented as the result of only one political dynamic. For a more complex, less unidirectional view of modernization and its discontents, Fong would do well to consider James Ferguson's *Expectations of Modernity*.

However, this theoretical weakness doesn't obliterate what is most fascinating in Fong's work: her ethnographic exploration of the lives of singletons. Through formal interviews with adolescents and their parents, participant-observation in schools, and the time-honoured methodology of just hanging around, Fong explores altruism, ambition, duty, independence – themes more often developed in novels and poetry than in social sciences. Her vignettes of the lives of Chinese youth left me wanting to know more – did the threatened rift between X and her wealthier friends grow once they left their school? Was Y ever able to recover from the humiliation of not being accepted into the top college? Did Z manage to pull her parents and grandparents into the upper middle class after devoting her

youth to studying? Because of the wealth of detail and the humanistic appeal of the themes developed, this book would be excellent for classroom use, in undergraduate courses in the sociology of families or the sociology of youth.

Despite its broad appeal, *Only Hope* will most likely be influential within sociology for its portrayal of transition in regimes of intergenerational relations, situating this book within ongoing conversations. This influence situates the book within fertility transition theory. Classical demographic theory holds that the past few hundred years of declining fertility in Europe and North America both result in and are produced by a shift in intergenerational bonds. This shift sees relationships between parents and children moving from a state in which parents have to raise many children in order to guarantee their own future sustenance and security to a state in which parents have fewer children (but invest more parental resources in each child) because they don't have to rely on children for old age support. In most cases, this shift has taken more than a generation to accomplish. Fong, however, describes a historically unique situation in China, in which parents with very few children make enormous investments in each child, but at the same time rely on children for future security. This regime of heavy investment and heavy expectations for filial duty to parents has profound emotional consequences for both the parents and the children involved, and Fong, to her credit, does not shy away from introducing emotions into the study of demographic change.

Her book also functions as a sort of anthropology of expectations. The parents and children of *Only Hope* seem to live almost obsessively in the future tense – focused on the next examination, the next academic competition, the next opportunity to excel and so to get a foothold in the upwardly mobile middle class. Adolescents who do not devote themselves to this imagined future, who are more preoccupied with day-to-day matters such as fashions, boyfriends/girlfriends, and parties are viewed with worry and concern by parents who see their own, as well as their children's, future security in jeopardy. Much recent North American coverage of China's singletons has focused on the "little emperor" syndrome; and the Chinese adults in *Only Hope* do indeed seem to regard their singleton children as spoiled and indulged. However, Fong goes beyond this simplistic portrayal of singletons as the recipients of too much parental largesse to explore the expectations and anticipations which make the future so powerfully present in the lives of singletons, and which result in so much investment in this generation.

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