

The Only Child Declaration: A Content Analysis of Published Stories by China's Only Children

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Abstract

The largest scale of birth control movement in China, which began in 1979, has produced a generation of only-children in urban and suburban China. The only-child generation has received much attention from scholars in and out of China for quite some years now. Researchers have used quantitative and some qualitative methods to investigate the issues regarding the only-child. This is a study which analyzes published stories written by the only-children themselves about their lives, as artifacts. The source of data is in a published book edited by Danyan Chen (1997) entitled "The Only-Child Declaration." As a radio talk show host for three years, Chen collected hundreds of letters from the only-children, from which she selected 97 and edited into the book. These stories reveal the life of the only-child with an *emic* point of view and express in the child's voice how this generation lives and how these children relate to others. The study utilizes these secondary data to show patterns in the only-children's lives in terms of what they think of themselves, their relationship with others, and their unique behaviors and values.

Background

The family-planning policy (also known as the only-child policy, or one-child policy) in the People's Republic of China was implemented in the late 1970s. By 1998, the only-child family rate in major cities was about 90% (*Population and Birth Control Handbook*, 1999). Today in urban and suburban China, almost every child in the elementary and secondary school classroom is an only-child. In fact, it has been suggested that over 30% of college freshmen are only-children and the percentage is rising each year.

China's overpopulation problem since the 1950's was what triggered the only-child policy and led to the current phenomenon. The strict implementation of the policy began in 1979 and it has been in place to the present. According to Aird (1990), 1983 saw the peak of coercion in the implementation of the policy. China is admittedly the first country in the world to endorse such a large scale of birth control policy and with the remarkable result after 20 years, is recognized as being very successful in its implementation.

Han first coined the term “China’s Little Empires” in 1986 to describe this generation and warned the society, “Above their parents, in the near future, there will be a ‘Little Empire’ in every single household in China” (Zhang, 2003, p. 8). The very first generation of only-children (born around 1980) has graduated from college and entered the workforce. The number of them in the workforce will grow in the years to come. As they become the pillars of the country, it will become more and more pressing to study and understand this generation.

For centuries, Chinese culture is considered collectivistic, of large power distance (Hofstede, 1980) and high-context (Hall, 1976). If a culture is defined as a group of people sharing a common set of norms and values over time, I argue that because of the unique upbringing, China’s only-children form a culture that is unique from their previous generations. What are they really like? Past research has used mostly quantitative data or interviews. This study is to look at what the children are saying about themselves through their own writing. “The Only-Child Declaration” is a published collection of letters written by only-children in Shanghai, China about their lives from their own perspective, compiled by Danyan Chen (1997). They were letters she received from her listeners when she was a radio talk show host. I used them as my artifacts to analyze and highlight patterns in the writings with special attention to the only-child phenomenon.

Literature

I elected to use the term “only-child” in this study after reading many sources with various terms. The Chinese term literally means “only born son/daughter.” In English, early publications have used “single child” to refer to the phenomenon. It has slowly faded out because of the confusion of “single” to mean “one” or “unmarried.” As well, there have been uses of “one child,” but it also creates confusion when used in place to mean “only” or the number “one” child. Finally, “singleton child” has been used in some publications, but it is very rare to see it in a compound adjective phrase such as “singleton child policy.” Due to these concerns, I chose to use “only-child” in this study. All of the above-mentioned terms were kept in direct quotes from the literature.

Interests about the only-child issues in China began soon after the first generation was born. Research in China started in early to mid 1980s and initially centered around infant development and early childhood education issues. There was somewhat a lag after the mid 1980s and then more research has been published after early 1990s to the present, perhaps due to the more intense interest from scholars as the generation undergoes puberty years and becomes young adults. The social implications of the only-child phenomenon are not to be overlooked. As birth order is a related issue to the only-child research, literature on both topics are reviewed in order to give this project a foundation.

Birth Order Research

Birth order research is relevant because only-children are comparable to first-born children, at least for the first few years before a sibling comes along. Adler (1958) argued that the interactions of parents and siblings tend to develop traits that are specific to the individuals in certain birth order group. The significance of a child’s place in the family cannot be denied but must be included in connection with all other factors that influence development (Sperber, 1974). One assumption of birth order research revolves around the understanding that an individual’s view of the self and his/her position in the family will

develop corresponding behaviors related to that position. That is how similarities in birth order positions can be noted (Manaster, 1977). This, of course, is also relevant in only-children's self-concept and worldview.

Altus (1966) suggested that birth order characteristics can be explained by differences in parental expectations. Parental expectations are typically very high for conscience development, adherence to adult standards, and levels of achievement for firstborns (Altus, 1966). Only-children are firstborns and expectations for them especially in China, are extremely high in all respects.

Ernst and Angst (1983) explained that birth order effects might be stereotypical adult expectation. These expectations function separately from the child's actual behavior thereby shaping the behavior and perhaps creating a self-fulfilling prophecy (Baskett, 1985). Baskett (1985) determined that adults hold specific beliefs about children of particular birth order groups. For example, oldest children are expected to be leaders, outgoing, dominant, obedient, and responsible. The same may be true of the only-children.

Only-Child Research

One of the most prominent scholars in only-child research in China, Professor Xiaotian Feng, in his interview with the intellectual "Guan Ming Daily" newspaper (Wang, 1998), gave an overview about this area of research. According to Feng (1990), only-child research in China is mostly in the fields of psychology, education, sociology, and population studies. He maintained that the only-child phenomenon in China is a time- and region-specific one. The differences between onlies and non-onlies vary along with ages and communities. Feng argued that generally, in the age of 3 - 18, the younger they are when studied, the more differences they showed. In terms of community, the two groups differ more in rural areas than in urban areas. He reviewed that in the first 18 years of research on the issue, it appears that those that reveal differences between the two groups (only- vs. non-only) were mostly published in early 1980s (1980-1984). Their targets were mostly 3 - 6 years of age. On the other hand, those that found no differences between the two groups were published in late 1980s and throughout 1990s. Their targets are mostly at the age of 7 - 12, with some 13 - 18 or older. He explained that the more differences in younger age are attributed to the raring environment and the stronger influence of parents. As the children grow older, they are influenced more by school and the society. These common sources of influences lead to more commonalities in children.

Two groups of research findings are recognizable in my survey of literature about China's only-child generation, although not as clearly divided by publication time as Professor Feng indicated. The first suggests that there are no differences between only- and non-only-children; or that only-children have advantages over non-onlies in terms of resources and achievements. A leading scholar in China, Mao (1984, 1987) found no difference between only and non-only children in early age in terms of their ability to adjust to kindergarten, and no difference in their behavioral characteristics. Poston and Falbo (1990) justified that the reason for no difference is that Chinese children have more interactions with other children, compared to their counterparts in the U.S., for example, due to the living arrangement in multi-generation families and close neighborhoods. That, however, is changing, as more Chinese are moving away from the traditional one-story, quad-style residential buildings to the more contemporary skyscraper residential apartments. This new living arrangement prevents close interactions among neighbors, and ultimately, children.

Additionally, Chen (1985) reported that irrespective of age, gender, or residence (rural or urban), only-children were as likely as their peers with siblings to show socially desirable levels of collective orientation.

Meanwhile, some research findings indicate a favorable trait of only-children over non-only-children in their academic performance and skills (Poston & Falbo, 1990; Poston & Yu, 1985; Yang, Kao, & Wang, 1980; Xiao & Zhang, 1985). Poston and Falbo (1990), in particular, found that urban only-children have higher achievement than non-only-children, while no significant difference was found in rural areas between the two target groups. Feng and Zhang (1992) pointed out that some only-children are high achievers in certain areas such as artistic skills and are weak in other areas such as life skills and independence. Zhang and Qian (1991) reported that only-children's intelligence, curiosity, and flexibility are significantly higher than non-only-children, albeit less balanced than the latter.

Even in terms of personality, which most people are concerned about for the only-child generation, Zhang and Qian (1991) found that only-children tend to be much more outgoing/extraverted than non-only-children. Moreover, only-children can focus more, yet not as steady as non-only-children. They found that only-children are significantly more independent but have less self-control, more persistency, and more determination.

On the other hand, others found significant differences between only-children and their non-only counterparts. The most prominent character of the only-child group is self-centeredness. This extreme self-centeredness of the only-child is reflected in many aspects in life, from family relations to consuming patterns. In terms of relationships in the family, Chinese children are traditionally very dependent and obedient to the parents. Ma (1992) noted a shift in family relationship in China from a focus on father-son to that of a more democratic husband-wife with more equality and simplicity, but still indicating that parents run the household. Through examples, Chen (1997) argued that the present power distribution in the Chinese nuclear family is "child first, wife second, husband third," completely reversing the power structure in traditional Chinese families.

Based on Professor Feng's assessment, the gap between only- and non-only children tends to narrow, as they grow older. A longitudinal study by Tao and Qiu (1999) lends support to this tendency. This ten-year-long study revealed that as only-children grow older, their behavioral problems decreased. At the same time, however, their findings show that only-girls show significantly more introverted behavioral problems than non-only-girls.

Li, Wu, and Zhang (1998) also compared only- and non-only-child students across four universities in terms of their adaptability in college and reported mixed results regarding only-child college students. Among the 14 most troublesome items in college adaptation, only- and non-only-child students showed significant differences on nine items. They discussed that only-children had better studying skills and concentration ability but were more likely to feel unsatisfied, lonely, and dependent. It did seem that each group showed advantage in different areas, nonetheless, the study indicated that differences exist and the uniqueness of the only-child generation was undeniable.

Only-Children in China

By comparison with other countries, two characteristics are prominent about China's only-child generation. First, whereas parents elsewhere choose to have an only-child because of financial conditions, career concerns, or due to divorce, the decision for having an only-child in China is made by the government and it is mandatory for all couples. It has been

reported that given choice, over 80% of Chinese parents would prefer to have a second child (Chen, 1997). This leads to different treatment of the only-child in China and elsewhere.

Another important characteristic of China's only-child generation is its uniformity. Because of the strict policy, especially in urban China, almost the entire population of this generation consists of only-children. Ma, Wang, Sheng, and Masami (1994) reported that the average size of the family in Beijing was 3.2, and in Shanghai was 3.1. These numbers included the exceptions of the first-born children with birth defects or minority nationality groups in which cases parents were permitted to have more than one child. Whereas only-children in other countries recognize their unique condition compared to their peers in non-only-child families, this generation of Chinese only-children considers only-child families "the norm."

Overall, while research provides a foundation for understanding the only-child generation, most of them focus on academic performance and some personality traits and social behaviors. As a communication researcher, I am interested in how they view themselves, and how that view is reflected in their communication behaviors. Therefore, how the only-children perceive themselves and how they interact with their parents and peers will be highlighted in this analysis.

Research Questions

- RQ1: What are the views of the only-child by the only-child, as manifested in their writings? This is the self-reflection of the only-child.
- RQ2: What are the relationships like between only-children and others?
- RQ3: What unique behaviors and values emerge about these only-children?

Method

The purpose of this study is to present a collective story of the first generation of only-children in China by recognizing patterns that emerge from the stories they wrote about themselves. Because the analysis utilizes secondary data from published material, I elected to use a content analysis method in this project. Content analysis is a quantitatively oriented technique by which standardized measurements are applied to metrically defined units and these are used to characterize and compare documents (Berelson, 1952; Kracauer, 1993). Manning and Cullum-Swan (1994) maintained that content analysis has been most popular in cultural studies of which this project is.

By examining 97 pieces of writings by only-children in order to tell a whole story about a group of individuals, this is similar to the "collective case approach" suggested by Stake (1994). The case of these only-children is presented in terms of their specific and generic properties as appeared in their own writings.

Data

The artifacts are the writings of 97 children in the book "The Only-Child Declaration" edited by Danyan Chen (1997) and published in Chinese. Each only-child wrote about his/her own life at a certain point, or expressed an attitude about a particular subject. The letters were directed to Chen, who was a radio talk show host of a youth program for three years prior to the publication of this book. As that, the unsolicited writings took place naturally without any lead or pressure, such as possibly in face-to-face interviews. Therefore, the writings represent their true feelings about themselves and their views of others. Judging

from the storylines, most of them range from 14 to about 20 years of age; from eighth grade to early career years, with the majority of them in high school.

Many children expressed that their parents belong to the “intellectual youth” generation who is known for being deprived of normal education during the infamous “Cultural Revolution” which took place during 1966-1976. Their secondary education was interrupted and many of them were sent to the countryside to be “re-educated by the poor peasants.” Because of this unfortunate background, these parents are known for their extraordinarily strong desire for their children to succeed in education, hence adding to the pressure on the child.

Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis in this study is a complete sentence, or a paragraph with a coherent meaning or about a particular issue. Sometimes, it may take several paragraphs to elaborate on the story in which case each of the stories is considered a unit. The unit of analysis takes the form of expressions of personal feelings, attitudes, and opinions about the self and others, descriptions of relationship with parents, peers, and relatives, and stories about interactions with others. If an idea was repeated in the same letter, then it was only counted once because it represents one child’s thought on that issue. On the other hand, a paragraph which contains more than one message is counted for both categories. For example, many children wrote about the feeling of loneliness by citing a behavior that they often talk to themselves. This was counted as one unit for “loneliness” and one unit for “behavior.” However, if they only mentioned about being lonely, then it is only counted as such. Issues not related to the only-child topic were overlooked in order to keep this study focused on the topic. For example, one child’s entire letter was about her story of falling in love with a boy. While it did reflect on the child’s life, which was the reason it was included in Chen’s book, it did not lend interest in the topic of this study. On the other hand, another child wrote about how her parents interfered with her dating and she felt as if the entire family was dating her boyfriend, was included as a unit regarding her relationship with her parents.

The writings are typically short, one or two pages each, with the exception of three chapters which contain a number of short passages by different children. The editor grouped them together under three themes. Chapter 65 is on the “Ideal life,” chapter 66 is titled “About death,” and chapter 67 is about “The position of money in my life.” The regular chapters each contains one child’s writing and typically bears a couple of thoughts and feelings on which they use stories to elaborate.

Intercoder Reliability

A coding protocol was developed by the author in which general categories were named based on patterns emerged from the first two rounds of reading. First, units were sorted as they pertained to each of the research question, namely self- perception, relationship with others, and behaviors. Then under each research question, subcategories were created based on the patterns that emerged from the artifacts. For example, under self-reflection, subcategories include self-centeredness, loneliness, independence, pressure, and thoughts of death. Under relationship with others, excessive love from parents, extreme pressure from parents, relationship with peers, and pressure from teachers were recognized. Finally, under behaviors and values, rude behavior to parents, talking to the self, controlling, indifference, and extreme behaviors, were the subcategories. Then, I went over each piece of the writing

and coded recognized units according to the protocol categories (see appendix A for a copy of the protocol).

The author is a bilingual communication scholar fluent in both Chinese and English and did the primary coding for all 97 writings. Then, a second bilingual individual with a Ph.D. from a U.S. university helped re-code 30 of the writings. Both coders were born in China and have a keen understanding about the only-child phenomenon and the Chinese culture. We both did it directly from the Chinese reading. After coding was completed, the author transcribed the coded units into English. Of the 30 writings we both coded, total agreement was achieved on eight of them. The overall intercoder reliability was 93% for the 30 co-coded pieces.

Results

After the coding process, numbers of units were gathered for each category. A few stories that focused on special cases or issues unrelated to the only-child phenomenon were deleted from the coding results. For example, a letter regarding a suicide in the family based on infidelity, a much older only-child who was not the result of the only-child policy and therefore with a different mindset, and a letter that recorded the exchange of letters between a single-mother and her daughter about a particular family issue, were eliminated. The intention of this study was to focus on these particular first generation only-children and their thoughts and behaviors. The results are presented in terms of the three research questions which ask about only-children's self-reflection, relationship with others, and unique behaviors and values. In the discussion that follows, examples are included under each category in order to present the children's own voices and analyze their meanings.

Self-Reflection

In Chinese, one word is used most to describe the only-child generation – *du*. The word can mean only, self-centered, predominant, unwilling to share, lonely, as well as independent. By reading the stories in context, it is clear which meaning one focuses on. Three subcategories of self-reflection are related to this concept: self-centeredness, loneliness, and independence.

Ten of the writings explicitly expressed an assessment by the children themselves for being self-centered. Some of them used the term “self-consciousness” which is a more euphemistic term for “self-centeredness.” The two terms are more similar in meaning in Chinese than they appear in English.

On the notion of loneliness, 17 children wrote about their feelings using the word “lonely.” This is typically in association with a unique behavior, talking to the self, which is regarded as a behavior in the third research question as well.

The third issue related to *du* is independence. This includes their feelings about being too dependent on their parents in life and their desires to be independent of them. Among the writings, 18 stories specifically addressed this issue.

A large category is about living under pressure and a sense of helplessness. Thirty-five children wrote about their feelings of being under tremendous pressure to study hard and obtain good grades, to be obedient, to be responsible, to behave well, and to succeed in everything they do. In many writings, the tone is rather blue and helpless, contrary to what a teenager is expected to feel about life.

A final subcategory that caught my attention is the number of children who wrote about death. The editor of the book grouped 11 passages (each is considered a unit of analysis) under the topic "About Death," but the notion about death appeared in other children's writings as well. Together, 17 units were found regarding death.

Relationship with Others

Most of the units recognized regarding relationships with others fall under relationships with parents and peers. Two subcategories about relationships with parents show the complex feelings these children had toward their parents, and vice versa. The first category is excessive love from the parents. There are 16 vivid descriptions about how the parents take care of them in detail, and often with great sacrifices. Many children specifically admitted that their parents really loved them and were indeed take very good care of them.

Meanwhile, more children wrote about the enormous pressure to succeed in school from their parents. This pressure was associated with two related notions: guilt from being cared for with tremendous love by the parents, and a sense of responsibility to the parents because he/she is the only-child. Thirty-four units were categorized as pressure directly from the parents. Therefore, it is safe to say that these only-children's relationships with their parents are controlled by these two bipolar forces: one is a loving feeling from being cared for by the parents, the other is the unwanted pressure from the parents.

In terms of relationships with peers, the general assessment was that it was very difficult to make friends. This was partially resulted from the parents constantly teaching them not to trust anyone as they grew up, coupled with the fact that they all grew up feeling alone and very much kept to themselves, hence, they simply did not have the skills to effectively interact with others. Quite a few children specifically admitted that they could not get along with others. I coded 28 units that expressed concerns about relationships with peers. Twenty-four of these were about having difficulties in making friends, while four of them indicated the desire to be with the group and peers.

Then there was the pressure from teachers. Several children expressed that some of their teachers treated them differently based on their test scores. Eight children told stories about how some teachers made them feel bad about themselves. Some were rather strong feelings of mutual disapproval.

Behaviors and Values

The third research question asks about recognizable behaviors and values as reflected in the children's writings. Perhaps because these children wrote to the radio host as they had feelings to express, the focus was not so much on behaviors except when they used stories to make the point.

Related to the love-hate relationship with their parents, six children mentioned that they were often very rude or mean to their parents and, occasionally to other relatives. Their own analysis was that no matter what they said to the parents, the parents would love them just the same. Furthermore, the parents seemed to agree with whatever they had to say in order to please them, that is, as long as they study hard.

I recognized that along with the notion of loneliness, several children mentioned that they were used to, or enjoyed talking to the self. Six children told stories about growing up talking with the self and playing by the self, or looking at the self in the mirror on a regular basis. This was used to justify their loneliness and "strangeness." As many children

mentioned that they had or might have psychological problems, some stories obviously indicated borderline multiple personality syndromes.

The next subcategory is about controlling behaviors. Five children discussed that the reason they did not get along with others was that they always wanted to be the anchor of any interaction. They simply could not stand it if someone disagreed with them.

Along with the above behaviors, some behaviors are rather disturbing. Two children described incidents in which a classmate was in danger and yet, the rest of the classmates were simply indifferent. One of these incidents resulted in the death of a classmate. It is difficult to fathom that a classmate was dying on the running track while most of her classmates just jogged away without stopping. Three other abnormal behaviors were coded as they showed the aptitude of disturbing problems in these children's lives. Table 1 provides a summary of the results.

Table 1

<i>Research Question</i>	<i>Subcategories</i>	<i>Number of Units</i>
Self-reflection	Self-centeredness	10
	Loneliness	17
	Desire for independence	18
	Living under pressure/helplessness	35
	Thoughts of death	17
Relationship with others	Excessive love from parents	16
	Pressure from parents	34
	Relationship with peers	28
	Pressure from teachers	8
Behaviors and values	Rude to parents/family	6
	Talk to self	6
	Controlling	5
	Indifference	2
	Abnormal behaviors	3

Discussion

Several patterns emerged as I was reading these writings. Although most of the writers were teenagers, they display a level of maturity that is seemingly beyond their age. Most of the writings are very clear and use adult-like language. This coincides with Bayrakal and Kope's (1990) observation that only-children exhibit a "pseudo-adult quality" in their attitudes, conversation, and manner of relating to adults.

Many of the children showed great analytical skills when discussing their thoughts and feelings. Furthermore, the writing style and ability were also very impressive. It was clear that the children were very honest in revealing their feelings due to the nature of these letters; they wrote them based on their own feelings and without solicitation. The children wrote these letters in privacy without coming face-to-face with the radio host, so there was no threat of any kind. This was the reason I chose to utilize these stories as my data in this study.

In general, the writings have a common blue tone in them. Stress and pressure are a main theme throughout the book. By a look at the summary in Table 1, it is obvious that these children are feeling a great deal of pressure. The pressure/helplessness category has 35 units, pressure from parents has 34 units, and pressure from teachers has eight units, not to mention that the 17 units of the thought of death category are typically related to the pressure they felt.

This is undoubtedly the largest among all categories. It is possible that the very action of writing the letters to the radio show suggests a need to express themselves and their feeling of stress and depression.

The plan in this discussion is to use examples in each subcategory in order to show the thoughts and behaviors of these only-children. All stories mentioned in the discussion are from Chen's (1997) book. Specific page numbers are cited as the stories or units appeared in the book. Then analyses are applied in the hope to understand and explain such thoughts and behaviors.

Self-Reflection

The first research question asks about the only-children's view of themselves. This includes how they defined themselves, what they were thinking, and how they were feeling about the self.

Self-centeredness. Ten of the writings were explicit about love for the self and the focus on the self in their lives. A girl who revealed how she just couldn't get along with her schoolmates wrote, "I started analyzing myself and I discovered that I really am a person who is very self-centered" (Chen, 1997, p. 185). She went on to analyze, "This self-centeredness has strong consequences in my self evaluation and attitude about the self. I always think about myself first, and believe all the good things are mine. I cannot stand if anything should be different. It really is because I love myself too much" (p. 185). Other comments also include, "I wish to be the anchor point for all people" (p. 79); "I only live for my own future" (p. 120); "I only see things from my own point of view" (p. 143); "I think we are all too self-centered. . ." (p. 155).

In her commentary, the editor of the book pointed out that the only-child is very much focused on the self because that is what they learn from those around them. They recognize how adults care about their well-beings. A girl stated, "What I love most in this world is my life" (p. 323). This is very much contrary to the other-centered, altruistic traditional value education in China.

Obviously, being an only-child provided the condition for this generation to feel this way. If all a child heard growing up was how important he/she was, then that is what the child would believe. At the time these letters were written, few realized the problem that while each child was the center in his/her family, when they all came together, all of them wanted to be the center, and that is, of course, impossible. Yet, self-centeredness is difficult to change, so these children honestly reported how they felt.

Loneliness. Twenty-three children expressed loneliness as a major feeling in their lives. While some directly pointed out that they were lonely, others used descriptions that are more concrete by telling stories. Quite a few children mentioned that they talk to themselves all the time because of growing up alone in the family. It should be noted that most Chinese parents both work during the day leaving the child home alone when they finish school. One child wrote "I like playing by myself, talking to myself, and looking at myself in the mirror" (p. 84). Another child wrote, "Everyone is lonely and that's why everyone keeps a diary" (p.

86). Several children wrote about not being able to get along with other only-children in particular. One girl described how she would fight fiercely with her cousin who was also an only-child, that she felt lonely. But then, when the cousin was taken away she felt even lonelier (p. 184). One child noted that only-children preferred to befriend with non-only-children, supposedly because they were not as self-centered as only-children themselves.

Overall, the notion of loneliness was represented by three positions. One child wrote “I like being by myself because no one can be my friend forever; people are bound to part” (p. 241). At the same time, several children wrote, “I’m very afraid of being by myself,” “I really want to have a good friend.” Yet another child wrote, “I like to be by myself and away from personal relationships; I prefer to watch people from afar” (p. 301). These comments showed a strong feeling of loneliness.

Desire to be Independent. I found 15 units focusing either on the desire to be independent or complaining about how dependent they were in life; both showed their consciousness about independence. Many children expressed the desire to be independent, to escape the overly generous care and overwhelming interference in their lives by their parents. Some of them realized that they never do any housework at home, but when they volunteered to share some housework as a break from the heavy schoolwork, their parents would not allow them. Parents would rather they use the time to study. With the small size families, typically there is not a great deal of housework to do anyway. Because of the extraordinarily close bond between the parents and the child, there is a strong sense of mutual emotional dependency between them. Parents demanded total obedience when it comes to schoolwork. Only when a child made good grades would the parents feel that their love was paid off.

Nevertheless, the children desired freedom and wanted to break from the safety nests. As the title of one letter indicates, “Opportunity is where my parents are not.” In the letter, the child expressed that the parents were constantly bothering him about studying and that he felt if he was to do anything, it would be when he moved away from his parents. The letter showed a strong desire to be independent.

Even though many children had a strong desire to be independent, they acknowledged that they were very dependent on others when it comes to doing things in life. One child wrote, “One day, our teacher told us we should learn to do things by ourselves. I don’t like it, I don’t like service type work, including serving myself. The teacher asked me what I would do in the future if I don’t like to do things. I said I would be successful and rich, and I would hire someone to do these things for me” (pp. 226-267).

Living under pressure/helplessness. A big subcategory is a feeling of depression as manifested in the letters, 35 units to be exact. Specifically, the children wrote about living under tremendous pressure in general and there was a sense of helplessness in these letters. Most of them expressed a feeling of frustration from the “shapeless pressure” they felt, and about how difficult it was to get ahead in schoolwork; yet, that was what was always expected of them. Some of the suicide thoughts were tied with these feelings. Some children mentioned that they believed they had psychological problems due to the seemingly endless stress and pressure.

Many of the children wrote about being unhappy, feeling lost, being aimless in life, and lack of confidence. One child wrote, “I really don’t know who I am and really don’t care to know” (p. 222). The tone in these letters was commonly blue. I could feel the heavy feelings they had when they wrote these letters.

Thoughts of death. Another subcategory that is rather striking is the number of children who wrote about their thoughts of death. This was least expected because of their young age. Some of the children wrote that they thought about death from time to time, some even mentioned that they had planned their suicide, but the reason they did not commit was that they were afraid of the pain before death. Others stopped because of the responsibility they assumed to the parents. One of the letters was titled "Suicide note." One child wrote after a lengthy analysis of her feelings and concluded "I will live on, only because I'm ordinary" (p. 206). If this indeed reflects the reality of these children, it is alarming and could have terrible implications.

Relationship with Others

Because there is only one child per couple, parents pour all of their love and hope onto this child. Very often, it is not just the parents, but also the entire extended family, especially when the only-child is the only male heir in the family clan. The children were very aware of their special place in the family. While they enjoyed the attention and care, they also realized their obligations and responsibilities due to their special status.

Excessive Love from Parents. Parents of only-children typically are very conscious about raising the child. Because there is only one child in each family, parents can afford to attend to all details in the child's life. The attention can be described as excessive, as they appeared in these writings. Meanwhile, they do anything they can to satisfy the child's needs, including making some great sacrifices. One girl's father said to her that he would let her go to college even if it meant for him to sell blood. On an everyday basis, a girl described the days when she moved out from home to her college dormitory. "Since I moved out, my parents only shop for grocery once a week [Note by author: Normally people shop for fresh foods and vegetables everyday] - the day I come home. They would get up early that day and buy all the foods I like, fish, shrimps, mussels, and expensive vegetables. Then they would start preparing for dinner from early afternoon, and wait for me to come home in the evening. When it is time to eat, they sit on both of my sides, and watch me eat. They would pick out the best part of the fish - like the part with no bones - and give it to me. And then, when I return to school, they would eat the leftovers for the rest of the week, until I come home again the next weekend" (pp. 6-7).

A boy who is the only male heir in his extended family recognized how much the entire family focused on him, not just his parents, but grandparents and aunts and uncles. After he moved in a dorm in college, "my mother became a 'commuting student.' Every morning she would cross the city to my dorm room. She would bring my breakfast, make my bed, and when it's my turn to clean the room, she would do that for me too. Then she goes to work" (p. 22). "Before long, my roommates became upset because they're not used to having a woman in the room as they get up [Note by author: A college dorm room in China typically holds six to eight students]. What's more, my roommates, and later on, all my classmates gave me a nickname, 'baby' and called me as my mother does with a long inflection at the end" (p. 22-23).

Although the children did appreciate their parents' love and sacrifice, many were also embarrassed by it or even frustrated when it turned into guilt for them along with responsibility to the parents. The side product of the parents' love was the unwanted pressure.

Pressure from parents. The parents of this only-child generation are typically deprived of their systematic education because of the infamous “Cultural Revolution.” When the Cultural Revolution broke out in the mid 1960s, they were typically in their high school or junior high. Their regular education was interrupted and many of them were either sent to the remote countryside or worked in factories, only to be “re-educated” by peasants and workers. Because of this, many of them never had a chance to complete their secondary education, much less a college education. They felt that their dreams were crashed and the only hope to realize those dreams was through their only-child. There was a sense of urgency for them to push their child toward success, and in every possible aspect. This is the reason that many parents enrolled their child in all kinds of extra-curricular classes such as piano lessons, English classes, math classes, golf classes, journalism classes, etc. This phenomenon is very much like what previous researchers had termed as the “super child syndrome” (Newman, 1990).

All only-children today must shoulder tremendous pressure from their parents. Being the only-child, and being loved so much unconditionally by their parents, these children understood clearly, what they needed to achieve in return to please their parents. A boy wrote, “Not a single only-child wants to disappoint his/her parents. When you realize that you’re the hope for the two people who love you the most in this world, if you cannot realize their hopes, then you can never live peacefully in your lifetime” (p. 14). Another child agreed, “Our generation of only-children is very self conscious. For historical reasons, we must shoulder all of our parents’ goals and their ever-bigger dreams. Compared to previous generations, we don’t have our independent future, but rather, re-walk the path that our parents didn’t finish; we live for it and struggle for it.” (p. 186).

A young boy wrote, “I love my parents very much, but I didn’t know how to show them that I loved them. Then I discovered that there is one thing I can do; that is to study well. When I get a good grade, my parents’ faces would light up as if their hard work is finally compensated. For this reason, I’ve always treated my grades as my life” (p. 190).

Yet, although the child is eager to please the parents, the parents set the bar very high, often unrealistically high. A girl described her frustration when she realized that she could never reach the goal her father set for her by citing a childhood story. When she was just starting to walk, her father would put his hand above her head and ask her to reach it with her hand. She would jump in order to reach her father’s hand. However, each time she was close to reaching it, the hand would rise higher. She could never really reach her father’s hand. When she grew up and talked about school achievements, her parents could always come up with a colleagues’ child’s name and told her how much better he/she did. Thus, she was in this game of persistently trying to chase her parents’ goals while knowing she would never be able to reach them. Such a sense of hopelessness was evident throughout many writings.

Relation with peers. Relationship with peers is overwhelmingly about how difficult it was to make friends. One child summarized three reasons that only-children cannot make good friends: “First, only-children are generally more introverted. They have learned to talk to themselves and think for themselves. Therefore, they are not inclined to share their thoughts with others. This may lead to the perception that they are not sincere. Second, only-children have strong self-centered consciousness. They have grown up in the home being the center and they only know to receive but not to give. Once others do not treat them as the center, they become upset or angry. If two friends are both only-children, then one of them has to give in. Otherwise, the relationship cannot last for long. Yet, it’s not easy for the only-child to

loose the self-centered consciousness. Therefore, only-children cannot keep long-lasting friendships. Third, because only-children grow up talking to themselves and thinking for themselves, they tend to be rather perceptive and sometimes overly sensitive. When anyone does anything, says anything, or just displays an expression, they would catch it and over-analyze it. This mentality could build walls around them” (pp. 123-124). This child also revealed that typically, an only-child and a non-only-child would be good friends. When the only-child could not find a real friend, he/she would pair up with someone as “meal partners,” which means they would walk to school and cafeteria together without really talk about personal topics as friends do.

Throughout the reading, it seemed that most of the children longed for close relationship with their peers, while at the same time, lacked the skills to build such relationships. Many of them described how distant they felt toward their peers while others appeared not flustered by it.

Pressure from teachers. A few children wrote about pressure from sources other than their parents or the society in general, but from teachers. They told stories about how some teachers treated them well when they got a good grade, and then turned cold when their scores dropped after another exam. Some also mentioned the rough language teachers used that hurt their feelings and self-confidence. Obviously, this is not because the teachers pick on only-children necessarily, rather, it indicates that these only-children are sensitive and defensive to the teachers’ criticism.

Behaviors and Values

It was rather difficult to categories specific behaviors and values as they pertain to or reflect the only-children’s thoughts and feelings. Yet some stories did focus on certain communication behaviors and their interactions with others, which could be detected distinctively from feelings and ideas. Rude to parents/family. In order to get a sense of how these only-children behave and what are some values they base their behaviors on, specific acts were coded. One behavior that was evident in their writings is that some of them were rude or “mean” to their parents. The feelings came from being pressured all the time by the parents to perform well in school. Another possible reason, as one girl mentioned, was that they knew about the unconditional love of their parents and felt assured that regardless of how badly they treat their parents, the parents would love them just the same. In one of the previous studies about conflict in the only-child family, a father revealed that he and his wife rarely have any conflicts with their 11-year-old daughter because normally, they are able to satisfy whatever the daughter desires. The only trade-off is that they check and push the daughter in her schoolwork to make sure that she is doing well (Zhong, 2002). One of the girls in this book also mentioned how she was mean to her other family members including her cousins.

Talking to self. As a related issue to feeling lonely, a communication behavior some children revealed was that they had a tendency to talk to the self a lot. Because most parents both work in China, the child is typically alone after school. Also, due to the fading arrangement of the traditional quad-style housing being substituted by high-rise skyscrapers, children today do not have the benefit of playing with neighbors’ kids. Therefore, the children learned to entertain themselves by talking with and playing by themselves. For some children, they developed multiple voices when they play by themselves. A child wrote, “I never deny that I talk to myself. When I was small, I talked to myself because I had no one to play with.

So I played with a bunch of toys and pretended to use different voices for each toy. It sounded happy when I heard so many voices, as if I were playing with many other kids. When I got older, I was still alone most of the time . . . Sometimes, I would say to myself, 'Well, brother, you can have a drink now.' Sometimes, when I talk to someone at school and feel that I didn't express myself well, I would practice how I should have said it by myself . . ." (p. 219). Several of these descriptions seemed to go beyond the normal behavior of occasionally talking to the self. This was a common and frequent practice for the children. One child called it the "ability to self-entertain."

Controlling. Just a few children wrote about their tendency to control others in their interactions. A girl suggested that she simply could not stand it when someone did not agree with her. The reason was that she was used to being praised for anything she said at home. This behavior is connected with the children's feeling of difficulty in making friends and is based in the notion of self-centeredness as well.

Indifference. It was disturbing to find two stories that underline a sense of indifference toward others. One boy described about how a classmate fainted on the running track one morning and no one stepped up to help. Then when several girls gathered to care for the sick classmate, most other classmates, including the boy himself, just kept on jogging away. In his explanation, he mentioned that they were afraid that the physical education teacher might be watching them and he would not want them to be diverted from their exercise. The story ended with the sad news that the classmate died later in the hospital. The boy wrote the letter because he was feeling terrible about the fact that he did not do anything, especially upon finding out that the girl's life could have been saved had she been rushed to the hospital an hour earlier. The boy reflected with his conscience and questioned the education system for pushing so hard for academic success while placing no emphasis in teaching students how to make correct judgments in life. Even though this is a rare case, it shows the level of indifference and confusion with this generation.

Abnormal behaviors. Several children reported some rather disturbing abnormal behaviors. One of them wrote, "Sometimes I feel I was raped by this world. One day in class, I yelled out to my friends, 'I'm a rape victim!' They all turned and stared at me as if to say I was crazy" (p. 223). Another young girl who believed that she had lost her best friend to another classmate threatened and eventually cut the classmate's face with a knife. She could not deal with the jealousy and ended up in the mental hospital, where she sent the letter with her story. These kinds of behaviors are certainly alarming and call for attention from scholars and the society alike.

Conclusion: A Collective Story

The purpose of this content analysis is to tell a collective story about these 97 children who belong to the first generation of only-children in China. Through the study, patterns emerged as they related to the lives of the particular group of children who lived in the Shanghai area in China. Based on the patterns summarized above, it is evident that these only-children were very concerned about the self. They admitted that they were self-centered and had strong self-consciousness. Meanwhile, they revealed a strong feeling of loneliness. They expressed a desire to break away from their parents' excessive care and interference in their lives. This showed a tendency for independence. It was overwhelming that most of them exhibited such heavy thoughts about living under stress and pressure that they felt hopeless

and helpless. This was related to a number of notions about death, disconcerted with their young age.

In terms of relationships with others, there was no denial that the parents provided extremely good care for the child and made tremendous sacrifices while doing so. On the other hand, because of the high hopes parents placed on the child, they tended to push the child very hard in their school as well as extra-curricular performances. The two directions in which the parents pulled the children in with their love and pushed them away with pressure created a remarkable tension and a complex, love-hate relationship between the child and the parent.

As for relationships with peers, one essential issue was that the only-children found it exceedingly difficult to make friends with their peers. Much of this was because of the fact that each child was raised alone and they lacked the skills to associate with others, especially this implies the loss of the central role in their lives. Despite this difficulty, the children cried for friendship.

In addition to the overall pressure and the pressure from their parents that these children felt, there was the pressure from teachers. The teachers' mistreatment of the less-than-super students contributed to the big cloud of pressure under which these children lived.

Finally, in terms of behaviors and values unique to these children, as manifested in their writings, it was evident that some of them were rude and mean to their parents and family in their communication and interaction. They had a tendency to talk to themselves, therefore, led to the lack of desire to associate with others. Some of them projected controlling behaviors when they interacted and communicated with others, which was based in the self-centeredness notion. A few incidents were reported where some children exhibited indifferent attitude and abnormal behaviors.

Limitations and Suggestions

This study is an analysis of published stories by 97 only-children in a particular area in China. While the value for using these artifacts is that these are naturally occurring, unsolicited writings, and are a true reflection of these only-children's lives, it is limited by the small number of subjects and short stories; they at most represents snapshots in these children's lives. While the purpose of this study was not to generalize, future studies could take a larger scale to test the categories emerged from this analysis.

Moreover, all children who wrote the stories were residing in Shanghai, making it a restricted area rather than representative of the generation in the entire country, or in the world. Furthermore, the fact that these children wrote to their radio show host could indicate that they had some unsettling feelings and thoughts to share. Therefore, the stories of these 97 children may not be that of the average only-children in China.

Finally, the artifacts of this study are published stories; as such, they are secondary data. Primary data could be obtained by interviews and observations which would solicit direct responses from these children. Ethnographic method may be a good choice for future studies.

This is a small step to analyzing the only-children in China. As the only-child phenomenon is to last for many years to come and more only-children will become the pillar of the country, I believe it is of significance and urgency to study and understand this generation.

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Appendix A**Coding Protocol**

<i>Research Question</i>	<i>Subcategories</i>	<i>Unit Definitions</i>
Self-reflection	Self-centeredness	Units that focus on concerns for the self, love for self, self-centeredness, self-consciousness.
	Loneliness	Units that express the feeling of being alone, afraid of being alone, etc.
	Desire for independence	Includes units that described desire for being independent, away from parents, or that pointed out the dependence on parents.
	Living under pressure/helplessness	Statements about feeling pressured, the endless worries, hopelessness, and helplessness.
	Thoughts of death	Notions about death; either when they thought of suicide or comments about death in general.
Relationship with others	Excessive love from parents	Stories they tell about parents' loving care, their sacrifices for their child, their over-protection, etc.
	Pressure from parents	Pressure directly from the parents either based on the guilty feeling toward the parents or on the responsibilities they face for the parents.
	Relationship with peers	Statements about how they feel about peers and strangers, how it is difficult to make friends, to trust anyone, or to get along with peers. Also, several indicated their strong desire to be with peers.
	Pressure from teachers	A few stories about how teachers treat students based on test scores; sometimes teachers can be harsh in their statements.
Behaviors and values	Rude to parents/family	Behaviors described about being rude when talking to parents and relatives.
	Talking to self	Related to the feeling of loneliness, several children wrote about growing up talking to the self a lot. Some cases appeared extreme.
	Controlling	Statements about how they want to be dominant in conversations with friends and peers.
	Indifference	Two stories about being indifferent about what happens around them showed a lack of love and care for others.
	Abnormal behaviors	A couple of stories were about extreme behaviors, such as violence.