

Introduction

"SOME PEOPLE say singletons are spoiled. Do you agree?" I asked a homeroom of college prep high school seniors in 1999. Because most of them were born after China's one-child policy began in 1979, all but three of the 48 students in the room were singletons.¹

"Yes, singletons are spoiled," said Tian Xin, a lively, friendly girl. "Singletons' parents don't eat anything, and they let their children eat everything, so children grow fatter and fatter!"

"That's right!" said Luo Jun, a boy known for his sense of humor. "For instance, this classmate here is a singleton," he said, pointing to Shen Na, a slightly plump girl sitting nearby. "So her parents let her eat too much, and that's why she's so fat!" He ducked as she tried to hit him over the head with a textbook, to the delighted laughter of their classmates.

"I don't think singletons are spoiled!" said Sun Pei, an outspoken girl. "We face pressure to get into good colleges so we can get good jobs to support our parents when they're old. We'll have to make a lot of money to support our parents all by ourselves! So our parents are always nagging us to study harder. How can we be spoiled when we're always being scolded for not studying hard enough?"

"My parents think I'm spoiled because I have good food and good clothes, while they had such a hard life, and were so poor while they were growing up," added Li Yue, a cheerful, energetic girl. "But I don't think I'm spoiled. Of course my life is better than theirs in material terms. But I also have to work so much harder in school than they did.

Even on Sunday, my one day off, I spend all day with the tutors my parents hired. I have to study constantly every day!"

"We may be spoiled, but younger children are worse," said Xu Wang, a boy wearing stylish, brand-name clothes instead of the school uniform he was supposed to wear. "We were born in the early 1980s. China didn't even have brand-name clothes or fast food when we were small! So there were limits to how much our parents could spoil us. But younger children have so many more ways to spend their parents' money, so they're even more spoiled than we are!"

"If you could have a sibling, would you want one?" I asked.

"No, because I wouldn't want to share my things," said Sun Pei.

"An older sister would be nice, but a younger brother would be horrible," said Lu Jie, a boy who sometimes played poker during lunch despite school prohibitions. "He would be favored, get all the good food, and leave none for me!"

"It's better for parents to have only one child," said Yu Xu, an earnest girl. "With a lot of children, they won't care about any of them."

"Many families favor one child over others, so I'm glad I don't have siblings," said Zhou Fei, a studious boy. "My family's poor, so they wouldn't be able to support two children."

"I'd like an older brother, because he could teach me about life, and help me out," said Tan Gang, a boy who was often teased for being oversensitive. "In times of failure, an older brother's encouragement would be even more effective than a parent's."

"I'd like an older brother, because he could help me support our parents when they're old," said Feng Yongqin, a girl who usually scored low on tests.

Children of the One-Child Policy

This is an ethnographic study of the consequences of the world's first state-mandated fertility transition. Because of China's one-child policy, the vast majority of urban Chinese youth born after 1979 are singletons. I spent 27 months between 1997 and 2002 examining the effects of near-universal singleton status on the subjectivities, experiences, and aspirations of teenagers in Dalian, a large coastal city in northeastern China.² I found 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. China's one-child policy was designed to create a generation of ambitious, well-educated children who would lead their country into

the First World. This strategy has succeeded, but at a price. Heavy parental investment enabled many singletons to attain First World living standards and educational opportunities. But singletons' ambitions often clashed with the limitations of their Third World parents and society. Children of China's one-child policy became First World people too quickly for their families and society to keep up. They faced intense parental pressure and competition for elite status in the educational system and the job market, as well as the accusation that they were spoiled because they had unrealistically high expectations. This situation was common among young people in many societies with declining fertility, but it was especially intense in Chinese cities because of the abruptness and near-universality of the fertility transition hastened by the one-child policy. My study of Chinese singletons highlights how the cultural model of modernization associated with the fertility transition is both a cause and an effect of the unrealistically high expectations often said to characterize modern youth worldwide.

Modernization is not only an economic program, but also a cultural model internalized by those hoping to rise to the top of the capitalist world system. When this cultural model is adopted by the bulk of a population, large families that invest little in each child are replaced with small families that invest heavily in each child. This process, which demographers call the "fertility transition,"³ has been documented in all First World societies⁴ and many Third World societies aspiring to join the First World.⁵ China, however, is the only society where the fertility transition was hastened by strictly enforced birth quotas. Rather than waiting for modernization to produce low fertility, the Chinese state has used low fertility as a means to accelerate modernization. In 1970, when population control policies began, China's total fertility rate⁶ was 5.8 births per woman; in 1980, two years after the start of the one-child policy, China's total fertility rate was down to 2.3 births per woman.⁷ Rural residents had higher fertility than urban residents even before the one-child policy, and families with two or more children remained the norm in rural areas, where the need for sons to provide farm labor, protection from crime, and old age support made the one-child policy difficult to enforce.⁸ In urban areas, however, most children born after 1979 had no siblings.⁹ Many urban Dalian singletons were the grandchildren of rural migrants. These singletons' parents were not only the first generation in their families to be constrained by the one-child policy, but also the first generation to be subjected to the modernizing forces of urban life. The combination of these factors created a

stark contrast between the large families of those born in the 1950s and the small families of those born in the 1980s. Among the high school and junior high school students I surveyed in 1999, 94 percent¹⁰ of respondents were singletons, while 81 percent¹¹ of respondents' fathers and 82 percent¹² of respondents' mothers had at least three siblings.

Most studies of China's one-child policy have focused on its demographic effects.¹³ While such studies present powerful portraits of the scale and scope of China's state-mandated fertility transition, they provide little insight into the lives of the singletons that transition produced. Studies of the one-child policy's social effects have explored parents' responses to the one-child policy,¹⁴ compared the personalities of singleton and non-singleton children,¹⁵ and detailed particular aspects of singletons' childhood consumption patterns.¹⁶ Missing, however, is an ethnography that examines the subjectivities and experiences of Chinese singletons as they come of age. In this book, I address the question of what it is like to grow up as a singleton in a society used to large families.

Research Methods

I could have conducted my study in just about any Chinese city, since the rate of compliance with the one-child policy was high in most urban areas of China. I chose Dalian because its local dialects were very similar to Mandarin Chinese (my native dialect, as well as China's official dialect), and because it had an extensive bus system that allowed me to get around quickly despite my inability to ride a bicycle and my unwillingness to rely on taxi rides that could prevent me from traveling with people who could not afford them.

My research methods consisted primarily of a survey and participant observation in homes and classrooms. I worked in Dalian as an unpaid English conversation teacher at a vocational high school, a junior high school, and a non-keypoint college prep high school in exchange for the opportunity to survey students and observe their classes and other activities. In the case of the junior high school and the college prep high school, I simply walked in and introduced myself to school administrators, who were convinced of my legitimacy after seeing a letter from the office of Harvard University's Dean of Students that certified my enrollment at Harvard, and after asking their English teachers to verify that I was fluent in English. In the case of the vocational high

school, I was introduced to administrators by a friend who had been the college professor of some of the school's teachers.

Held during periods that were normally used for study hall, the English conversation classes I offered consisted of English language games and lively discussions of whatever topics the students wanted to discuss. I visited some homerooms (*banji*) once a week, some once a month, and some once a year. I also spent several days each month sitting in homerooms, observing students' activities throughout the day. Each homeroom consisted of 40–60 students who sat at their desks during the bulk of the school day, while different teachers came in to teach different subjects.

In 1999, I conducted a survey of most of the homerooms in grades 10–11 at the vocational high school and all of the homerooms in grades 8–9 at the junior high school and grades 10–12 at the regular college prep high school. I received completed surveys from most of the students attending the schools where I taught. A comparison of my survey sample with school enrollment lists shows that 9 percent¹⁷ of students in the homerooms I surveyed either refused to fill out my survey or were not in class at the time I conducted the survey. In each homeroom I surveyed, I explained my research, distributed the survey, had students fill it out, and answered questions about the survey questions and my research. Whenever I refer to findings from “my survey” or “the author’s 1999 survey” in this book, I am referring to this survey, which asked 2,273 students about their attitudes, educational histories, consumption patterns, family structures, socioeconomic backgrounds, and interactions with their parents. Each survey question had a different number of respondents, since not every respondent wrote a legible answer to every survey question, and since 191 students received incomplete surveys because of photocopying errors. I have excluded missing data from all percentage calculations based on my survey.

According to my survey results, all respondents were between the ages of 13 and 20, 94 percent¹⁸ of them had no siblings, 5 percent¹⁹ had one sibling,²⁰ and 98 percent²¹ were Han, the ethnic group that comprised 92 percent²² of the Chinese population and 84 percent of Liaoning Province²³ in 2000. The average age of survey respondents was 16.²⁴ The average age of survey respondents' mothers was 43,²⁵ and the average age of their fathers was 45.²⁶ Each school contributed about a third of the respondents to my survey.²⁷ The junior high school and college prep high school had balanced gender ratios, while respondents from the vocational high school were 71 percent²⁸ female because their

school specialized in female-dominated majors such as business and tourism. Thus, my total survey sample is 58 percent²⁹ female. I break my statistical findings down by gender or school only when dealing with survey responses that vary significantly by gender or school.

The first people I got to know in Dalian were teachers, students, and administrators at the schools where I taught, and random staff members, businesspeople, and fellow customers I met at shops, markets, malls, parks, restaurants, bus stops, post offices, internet cafes, and photocopying service centers. After these initial contacts introduced me to their friends, relatives, and acquaintances as a "Chinese American doctoral student," I received many invitations to go to teenagers' homes to tutor them in English or provide information about how to go abroad. I received even more invitations after several Dalian newspapers and television stations publicized my work as an unpaid English teacher. During the bulk of my fieldwork, I lived with a junior high school student I tutored, his factory worker father, and his mother, who invited me to live with her family after several long conversations at the small shop where she worked as a salesclerk after retiring from her factory. I also lived with eight other families for periods ranging from a few days to several weeks.

In response to the questions that most people asked me when we first met, I gave answers that highlighted how I fit Chinese cultural models of the kind of life story someone like me should have: "I was born in Taiwan. I'm a singleton. When I was three years old, my parents took me to America, where I attended primary school, junior high school, college, and a graduate program in anthropology. Now I'm here to do research for my doctoral dissertation." I explained that I was doing "social research" (*shehui diaocha*), a term made respectable by a tradition of Chinese sociology identified both with academic professionalism and with the Chinese state's efforts at social reform.³⁰ While I told the truth about my autobiographical details, I did not present them in the same way I usually did to people in the United States, in terms of a series of choices made in an idiosyncratic quest for a unique personal identity. Rather, I packaged my background into the same kind of narrative commonly used by urban Dalian people my age to describe their own life stories, and presented myself as a successful conformist who followed what was widely recognized as a laudable academic path to upward mobility. I tried to be very non-committal about my ethnopolitical identity. I was called everything from "American" (*meiguoren*) to "foreigner" (*waiyuoren*) to "foreign

student" (*waiguo liuxuesheng*) to "imitation foreign devil" (*jia yangguizi*) to "banana person" (*xiangjiaoren*) to "Chinese with U.S. citizenship" (*meiji huaren*) to "Chinese descendant" (*huayi*) to "patriotic overseas Chinese" (*aiguo huaqiao*) to "Taiwan compatriot" (*Taiwan tongbao*) to "Chinese student returned from study abroad" (*zhongguo liuxuesheng*). When asked to choose between these labels, I said that I would accept any label my questioners deemed appropriate. When asked, "Are you Chinese or American?" I replied, "Both." When asked, "If there were a war between China and America, who would you support?" I replied "Neither, because I would not support war." When pressed further, I explained that I adhered to a concept of identity as fluid, shifting, subjective, and fragmented, and expounded on anthropological theories of ethnicity and nationalism. With this explanation, I usually managed to change the subject, either to further discussions of anthropological theories and case studies from all over the world for those who were interested, or to something unrelated to my ethnopolitical loyalties for those who were bored.

While many urban Dalian residents seemed fascinated with my academic and ethnopolitical background, it was primarily my role as an English teacher that led them to invite me into their homes, schools, and lives. Most people addressed me as "Teacher Fong" when we first met. English was vital for success in the educational system, the job market, and efforts to go abroad. College and high school entrance exams included difficult foreign language tests. Though students were allowed to take these tests in Japanese or Russian instead of English, few schools offered courses in languages other than English, which was taught as a core subject at the college, high school, junior high school, and elementary schools attended by most urban Chinese students born in the 1980s and 1990s. Many instruction manuals, research materials, scientific textbooks, and Internet websites were available only in English. As the dominant language of the First World, English was seen as the most versatile foreign language, since even foreigners from non-Anglophone countries were likely to have studied English. Most employers gave preference to applicants with a good command of English. Non-Asians living in Dalian told me that they were often approached by strangers who wanted to practice speaking English. Teenagers used the term *waiyu*, which means "foreign language," as a synonym for "English" (*yingyu*), and sometimes said things like "He speaks both *waiyu* and Japanese."

Most tutors were local high school teachers or college students. As a

doctoral student from an American university, I was considered better qualified than most other English tutors, and my refusal to accept payment was icing on the cake. I was swamped with requests for tutoring. I granted those requests that seemed most likely to contribute to my goal of having equal numbers of teenaged boys and girls from a wide range of achievement levels and socioeconomic backgrounds represented among the students I tutored. Over the course of my fieldwork, I was invited to the homes of 107 young people, usually to provide tutoring or advice about how they might get opportunities to study or work abroad. Because of time constraints, however, I lost touch with most of them after one or several visits. I maintained long-term friendships only with the 31 families that developed the strongest rapport with me. The rapport that transformed members of these families from acquaintances into friends was based on intersubjective factors (such as trust, emotional compatibility, and a shared sense of humor) that did not seem to correlate with quantifiable variables like income, occupational status, or educational attainment. Thus, the sample of 31 families that I ended up befriending was about as socioeconomically diverse as my original sample of 107 families. I visited these 31 families on a regular basis, and still keep in touch with them by telephone and e-mail. All but two of them were single-child nuclear or stem families. Most of their children were teenagers at the time I met them, though the youngest was 10 and the oldest was 28.

To avoid commodifying my friendship with students and parents and to prevent them from feeling that they could not afford my company, I refused payment for my tutoring. I explained that their teaching me about Chinese life was more than enough compensation for my teaching them about American life and the English language. Most students readily accepted this explanation, but most parents did not. Often, when I tutored a student for the first time, I had to fight off parents who tried to give me money by shoving it in my pocket or backpack. One mother chased me down the street and threw money at me; another dropped money from the window of her fourth-floor apartment once I had reached the street below. When forced to take money, I returned it or presented its equivalent in gifts of fruit, chocolate, or study materials at my next visit. Gradually, parents realized that my refusal of money was genuine, and not the usual pretense required by courtesy norms. They became comfortable with this once we had established long-term relationships of generalized reciprocity. I accepted gifts such as books, clothes, souvenirs, and hair accessories that were presented as

tokens of friendship, and reciprocated with tokens of similar economic value and social meaning on later occasions. Meals created superb research opportunities and warm commensal sentiments, so I accepted invitations to eat whenever possible, and sometimes brought fruit or chocolate as my contribution to holiday feasts.

Students at the schools I studied did not want their classmates to know that I tutored them in their homes, for fear of being perceived as recipients of favoritism in the English conversation classes I taught. They asked me to maintain the same discretion that was expected when they received private tutoring from their regular teachers. Powerful cadres wanted me to be discreet about the fact that I tutored their children, and thus prevent my less powerful friends from asking them for favors by invoking my name or asking me to request favors on their behalf. Many people wanted me to spend more time with them and less with others. Some elite parents disapproved of how I “wasted time” associating with non-elite families. Some non-elite students and parents suspected me of providing greater assistance to families that might be able to give me valuable gifts and favors. Many people told me that it was fine for me to write and publish about their perspectives and experiences as long as they were not personally identifiable, but asked that I avoid talking about them with anyone who knew them. To minimize jealousies, indiscretions, and gossip, I told people as little as possible about my relationships with others in Dalian.³¹ By cultivating a habit of discretion about my social networks, I also made it less likely that they would be affected if I got into trouble.

I always carried a small notebook in my pocket, and frequently took notes. I spoke with people in Chinese if they had no ability or desire to practice English, and in a combination of English and Chinese if they had some English ability and wanted to practice it. Dalian people almost always spoke to each other in Mandarin Chinese or Dalian area dialects, regardless of their knowledge of foreign languages or other dialects of Chinese. In this book, I have translated everything that was said in Chinese, broken English, or a combination of Chinese and English into fluent American English.³² Quoted dialogues represent conversations that I jotted down either while they were spoken or several hours afterwards.

Some adults became nervous, and many teenagers made fun of me, the first time they saw me take out my notebook. Businesspeople feared that I might be an undercover journalist or official trying to expose their illegal business practices. I explained that my constant note-taking was

part of my dissertation research, offered to stop taking notes if it made them uncomfortable, and promised that I would never identify them by their real names or easily identifiable details in anything I published (except for the names of public figures that I never met, and the names of authors whose published work I cite, all names in this book are pseudonyms). After they got to know me well enough to feel that I was harmless, most people got used to my note-taking, and ignored it.

The sample of students I surveyed or befriended did not contain enough non-singletons to provide an adequate basis for extensive comparisons with singletons. Therefore, this book is primarily about the experiences of single-child families. My observations and surveys of the small number of two-child families in my sample led me to believe that two-child families experienced many of the same pressures and dilemmas that one-child families experienced, with slightly less intensity. While a comparison of singleton respondents with respondents who had one sibling indicated that singleton status correlated with greater freedom from household chores and respondents' belief that parents spoiled them, the correlations were small (see Table 1). The difference between having one sibling and having no siblings was incremental rather than absolute. Parental pressure and investment were diluted when shared by two children, but still considerably more intense than when shared by four children. The key issue I explore in this book is therefore not the difference between one-child families and two-child families, but rather the difference between the small families of late 1990s teenagers and the much larger families of their parents.

A City of Migrants

Dalian is young by Chinese standards. Previously the site of small, sparsely populated fishing villages, Dalian's existence as a port city began when Russia started building Dalian's harbor in 1899, after acquiring the area that became Dalian as part of the Liaodong Leasehold in 1898. This area was transferred to Japan in 1905 as a result of the Russo-Japanese War of 1904. The Soviet Union took the area from Japan in 1945, and returned it to China in 1954. Almost all the Japanese and Russian colonizers left by the time China regained official control over Dalian, which developed into a center of heavy industry, attracting migrants from the nearby countryside and from throughout northeastern China and Shandong Province. The population of the three urban and

TABLE 1

Household Chores Done by Singleton Respondents and Those with One Sibling

	Singleton	One sibling
Percentage who indicated they cooked	13% ($N = 2,030$)*	20% ($N = 118$)*
Percentage who indicated they cleaned	45% ($N = 2,032$)*	55% ($N = 118$)*
Percentage who indicated they did laundry	37% ($N = 2,027$)**	51% ($N = 118$)**
Percentage who indicated they were "spoiled" (<i>guan</i>) by at least one parent	67% ($N = 1,992$)**	54% ($N = 114$)**

SOURCE: The author's 1999 survey.

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

two semi-urban districts of Dalian increased from 559,010 in 1949 to 1,977,214 in 1999.³³ In addition, the population of the rural counties, small towns, and semi-rural areas³⁴ under the jurisdiction of Dalian's government increased from 1,943,176 in 1949 to 3,455,199 in 1999.³⁵ Archives maintained by Dalian's governmental bureaus usually classified Zhongshan, Xigang, and Shahekou (the three completely urban districts) and Ganjingzi and Lushunkou (the two partly urban, partly rural districts) as the urban center (*shinei*) of the Dalian area. I use the term "urban Dalian" to refer to these five districts (where I did most of my research), and the term "Dalian area" to refer to the administrative area known as Dalian City (*Dalian Shi*), which lumps the five districts of urban Dalian with the rural and semi-rural areas of Jinzhou District, Kaifa District, Wafangdian City, Pulandian City, Zhuanghe City, and Changhai County. While urban Dalian occupied 1,062 square kilometers (roughly the size of Hong Kong), the Dalian area occupied 12,574 square kilometers (roughly the size of the Bahamas).³⁶

Many urban Dalian residents were sent to nearby rural areas (often their own natal or ancestral villages) during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), but most returned to urban Dalian by the 1980s. Dalian's urbanization intensified after China's economic reforms began in the

late 1970s. Dalian's government invested heavily in an extensive, efficient bus system that connected every part of urban Dalian, and in the replacement of farmland, wilderness areas, and decrepit housing with modern high-rise apartment buildings. When real estate developers demolished a building, they had to give its residents payment or new housing in exchange for their old homes. Many residents welcomed such deals, which enabled them to move into newer, more comfortable housing. Because of its short history, ethnic homogeneity, extensive bus system, and rapid housing development, urban Dalian had no slums or ghettos. Some wealthy company managers lived across the street from impoverished workers they had recently laid off.

In 1999, urban Dalian ranked as the second most populous urban area in Liaoning Province, and the fourteenth most populous urban area in China.³⁷ Dalian had much in common with other large Chinese cities. Because of their migration histories, though, many Dalian families experienced even more rapid modernization, urbanization, fertility decline, and upward mobility than their counterparts in older Chinese cities. In the 1990s, when the Chinese government started dismantling policies that had protected state enterprises from global market forces, many cities—particularly those in the northern industrial “rust belt”—began to suffer widespread unemployment. Geographically and economically part of the “rust belt,” Dalian was not spared the blows of economic restructuring; 34 percent³⁸ of the respondents to my survey indicated that they had at least one parent who was laid off or retired. Still, as a port city with pleasant parks and beaches, strong trade networks, a well-developed transportation infrastructure, and ambitious, progressive officials, Dalian weathered these blows better than most of its inland counterparts.

To attract foreign and domestic investment, trade, and tourism, Dalian officials dubbed their city the “Hong Kong of the North,” and spent the 1990s transforming Dalian from a center of heavy industry into a “city of soccer and fashion” by aggressively expanding the service sector to compensate for unemployment in the industrial sector. Dalian's government invested heavily in the development of malls, hotels, parks, squares, beaches, sports, schools, paved roads, communications, entertainment, tourist attractions, public transportation, and high-rise office buildings.³⁹ The government's efforts succeeded in keeping the local economy relatively strong despite the factory bankruptcies that caused many middle-aged people to lose their jobs, pensions, and health insurance. Thus, even while their parents became un-

employed and unemployable, young people were able to find work in rapidly expanding, high-paying service sector fields such as tourism, hospitality, education, commerce, catering, finance, trade, business, and communications.

Most urban Dalian residents were children or grandchildren of migrants from less developed areas of China. Among respondents to my survey, 7 percent⁴⁰ had at least one parent born in the countryside, 92 percent⁴¹ had at least one parent who had lived in the countryside, 43 percent⁴² had at least one grandparent who had worked as a farmer,⁴³ and 66 percent⁴⁴ indicated that their *jiguan* (paternal grandfather's hometown) was not in urban Dalian or any of its surrounding rural areas. Like rural residents, migrants from the countryside were likely to have high fertility rates. Unlike families in older cities that began their transition from high to low fertility as soon as birth control technologies became widely available in the 1960s, most urban Dalian families did not start their fertility transitions until the 1970s, when population control policies began. The fertility transition was thus even more abrupt in urban Dalian than in older Chinese cities.

The Capitalist World System and the Cultural Model of Modernization

The ambitions of students I knew in urban Dalian derived from their internalization of the cultural model of modernization (*xiandaihua*). Cognitive psychologists⁴⁵ and psychological anthropologists⁴⁶ have proposed that human motivations arise from cultural models (also called "schemas" or "scripts") that create narratives, expectations, and goals out of the chaos of experience. As Claudia Strauss and Naomi Quinn have argued,⁴⁷ cultural models can be embodied and taken for granted, like what Pierre Bourdieu called "habitus";⁴⁸ unlike habitus, however, cultural models can be consciously perceived. An individual's actions are motivated by interactions between countless cultural models with varying degrees of psychological force. These cultural models can promote, contradict, or invoke each other. Failure to attain the goals generated by particularly powerful cultural models causes suffering, while the attainment of those goals causes happiness. The content and motivational force of any given cultural model is determined by a combination of cultural meanings and individual experiences, and subject to change in response to changing circumstances. Meanings, experi-

ences, and circumstances are in turn shaped by social, political, and economic forces.

The political and economic forces that have made the cultural model of modernization salient for many individuals worldwide can best be understood with reference to Immanuel Wallerstein's analysis of the "capitalist world system."⁴⁹ Beginning with the emergence of capitalism in Western Europe during the fifteenth century, this system spread until it encompassed almost every area of the world. The capitalist world system is based on an international division of labor that divides the world into "core," "peripheral," and "semi-peripheral" regions. Core regions dominate, extracting raw materials and cheap labor from peripheral regions. Declining core regions and rising peripheral regions are considered "semi-peripheral"; they exploit peripheral regions, but are also exploited by core regions. Peripheral regions sometimes become core regions and vice versa. There can also be core and peripheral areas within each country.⁵⁰ Despite the historical variability of various nations' ranking within the capitalist world system, however, this system is ultimately defined by the inequalities that structure relations between regions. By the end of the twentieth century, the core regions (now known as the First World) had used a combination of military force, imperialism, colonization, and trade to incorporate just about all other regions into the capitalist world system.

This system promotes the cultural model of modernization, which motivates people to desire First World affluence and believe that participation in a modern economy will enable them to attain that affluence. A modern economy is characterized by high-density urban living conditions, long hours of work away from home for women as well as men, a system that prevents children from engaging in economically productive labor, a competitive job market that demands a long and expensive period of formal education, and constant growth in the production and consumption of goods and services. These factors promote low fertility by making the rearing and education of children extremely costly to their parents. These factors are also promoted by low fertility, which improves children's ability to compete in the capitalist world system by enabling them to get a heavily concentrated dose of parental investment. While the conditions of a modern economy are designed to maximize the efficient production and control of the labor power needed by capitalism,⁵¹ the development of a modern economy can also be the goal of regimes with strongly anti-capitalist ideologies (including socialism, communism, and Maoism) that nevertheless aim to compete

with capitalist regimes. Though the development of a modern economy does not guarantee success in the capitalist world system, it is a condition that must be met before a society can even have a chance at attaining the dominant position enjoyed by core regions. Most individuals worldwide want to attain that dominance because it will help them attain prestige, pleasure, security, affluence, and good health, all of which are goals of powerful cultural models that existed even before the establishment of the capitalist world system. Individuals living in a society isolated from the capitalist world system could attain those goals by following local cultural models of religion, politics, kinship, and economic production. But once a society is incorporated into the capitalist world system, standards of prestige, pleasure, security, affluence, and good health are redefined and inflated, so that modernization becomes the best, and sometimes the only, means of reaching these goals.

Max Weber wrote that "A man does not 'by nature' wish to earn more and more money, but simply to live as he is accustomed to live and earn as much as is necessary for that purpose."⁵² Marshall Sahlins has argued that the capitalist world system makes people feel poor by convincing them that they have "Infinite Needs."⁵³ Though not as care-free as the hunter-gatherers that Sahlins called the "original affluent society," most Chinese people at least did not desire the rapid technological growth that the cultural model of modernization could bring until they were confronted with the superior military and economic power of First World countries during the nineteenth century.⁵⁴ China was first integrated into the capitalist world system during the Opium War (1839–1842), when The British government forced the Chinese government to allow the sale of opium in China. Beginning with its defeat in the Opium War, the Chinese government made a series of concessions of money, territory, sovereignty, and trade rights to a variety of foreign countries, including Austria, England, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia, Spain, and the United States. The social, political, and economic problems caused by these concessions led to the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1911. The Nationalist-dominated government that replaced the Qing dynasty was in turn replaced in 1949 by Mao Zedong's Communist government, after a bitter civil war. Under the Maoist government, China joined the Soviet bloc, which tried to establish a socialist world system separate from the capitalist world system. Despite its Marxist ideology, however, the socialist world system bore many similarities to its capitalist counterpart, including a hierarchy based on the extent to which member societies had adopted a modern economy. Disillusioned,

Chinese leaders promoted autarky during the 1960s in an attempt to remove China from all world systems. Mao Zedong's government (1949–1976) severely restricted foreign trade, travel, and information that might cause yearnings for First World living standards. In their introduction to a volume on the role of Western European and North American imports as status symbols in Latin American societies, Benjamin Orlove and Arnold J. Bauer argued that, unlike Latin America, Eastern Europe, and some parts of the Middle East, China had escaped the allure of European and North American goods by avoiding the “strong Europeanization of elites and other groups.”⁵⁵ Maoist leaders hoped that autarky would keep Chinese people from internalizing a cultural model of modernization that would make them feel impoverished.

This strategy worked on some parents I knew in urban Dalian, who bitterly contrasted their 1990s “poverty” with their 1960s “affluence.” At first I found this perplexing in light of the fact that they were materially much better off than they had been prior to the post-Mao economic reforms. When Li Na's mother told me, “I never thought I would be this poor. I'm glad we weren't allowed to have more than one child because as it is we can barely support the one we have,” I pointed out that her family now had a color television, a telephone, a washing machine, their own bathroom, and meat at nearly every meal, all of which she had on other occasions told me were unimaginable in her own childhood. She replied,

Of course we didn't have these things, but no one else did either, so we didn't even think about them. My Pa was the only one working, and he had my Ma and the three of us children to support, but we were still better off than a lot of families that had more children. Now both my husband and I are working, but we can barely support one child. When I was a child, schooling was almost free. Now Li Na comes home asking for more money for school fees every few weeks. She sees a friend with name brand clothing and wants it too. Our neighbors have home theater systems, and it's embarrassing that we don't. I never felt this poor when I was small.

Yet Maoist attempts to maintain autarky ultimately failed because Maoist leaders were themselves motivated by the cultural model of modernization. This cultural model made them want to “catch up” with the industrial and military standards of the First World by implementing drastic policies like the Great Leap Forward, which caused three years of devastating famine (1959–1961). After Mao Zedong's death in 1976, Chinese leaders stopped resisting integration into the capitalist world system. Instead, they sought to raise China's position

within this system by developing the same modern economy that propelled the core regions to dominance. While the selling of cheap labor to the First World was a major source of economic growth, Chinese leaders did not see it as the ultimate goal of China's integration into the capitalist world system. Rather, they saw it as a short-term means to their long-term goal of having China gain a dominant position in the capitalist world system, not as a purveyor of cheap labor, but as a center of finance, technology, and highly educated, well-paid professionals able to compete on an even footing with their First World counterparts. Though they have managed to transform China from a peripheral region to a semi-peripheral one, Chinese leaders will not be satisfied until China joins the First World as a core region. Instead of allowing the Chinese population to keep producing cheap labor by maintaining high fertility patterns, the Chinese state enforced a rapid fertility transition designed to cultivate a generation of "high-quality" people with the resources and ambition to join the global elite. While this strategy was most effective in urban areas, it was also targeted at the countryside, where fertility limitation policies clashed sharply with rural cultural models that emphasized the need for sons to work the land, provide protection from crime, and support their parents in old age.

Though the state-controlled media continued to encourage patriotism, they also presented glamorous images of the First World, partly because such images were popular with the audience, and partly because learning from the First World was a state-sanctioned modernization strategy. Magazines, newspapers, and television programs featured First World experts, First World sports and entertainment news, positive reports about how things were done in the First World, and news about successful Chinese projects modeled on similar projects abroad. Teenagers focused on the positive aspects of life abroad, such as the luxuriousness of cars, housing, and commodities, even when the media also presented negative aspects, such as crime, poverty, and racism.

"You see, not all Americans are rich," I told vocational high school student Liu Yang as we watched a news segment about an American slum in 1998.

"Really? Then why are there so many cars parked in that slum?" he rejoined. "In China, not even well-off families can afford a car."

Commodities and name brands produced by companies from the First World were perceived to be of higher quality than those produced by Chinese companies, and even those that were not of higher quality

basked in the halo effect of those that were. Chinese businesses tried to enhance their appeal by emphasizing the foreign connections (real or fictitious) of their products by putting the flags, maps, place names, and historical figures of developed countries on their signs and advertisements and on the products themselves. Some wealthy people bought products with foreign name brands rather than Chinese ones whenever possible, even though foreign brands were more expensive than Chinese brands. As vocational high school student Zheng Yi said to his parents in 2000, "Why would I want a Chinese brand when all Chinese brands are just poor imitations of foreign brands?"

The fanciest department stores, supermarkets, malls, hotels, and eateries in urban Dalian were at least partly owned by foreign companies. Because salaries abroad were many times higher than salaries for similar work in China, those who returned from working abroad were extremely wealthy by Chinese standards, as were those who received remittances from family members who lived abroad. Many students and parents told me that "anyone who returns from abroad is coated with gold." They often saw foreign tourists, businesspeople, and even students spending money freely at the fanciest stores, hotels, and restaurants. First World money was prestigious because of its stability and high exchange value, because of its association with an alluring world of foreign wealth, and because of the legal and economic obstacles that kept it out of the hands of ordinary people.⁵⁶ Unable to obtain real U.S. dollars, some teenagers bought clothing, pens, posters, and decorations with images of U.S. dollars on them. Chinese people who worked in at least partially foreign-owned companies or in fields such as shipping, trade, travel, translation, and tourism had much higher salaries than their counterparts working for Chinese employers who did not deal with the First World. Those fluent in First World languages got the best jobs, and those who returned from study abroad got much better jobs than they would have gotten with comparable Chinese education.

Bombarded by images of First World lifestyles, teenagers often talked about the inferiority of their lives in comparison with the lives of people in the First World. Urban Dalian people were much better off than most Chinese people, and China was better off than many other Third World societies. Yet even relatively wealthy urban Dalian people complained about being "poor," and lamented that China was "hell" compared to the First World, which was "heaven." They judged their own socioeconomic conditions not only by comparison with those of

others around them, but also by comparison with those of the First World. Everyday conversations in urban Dalian were peppered with references to the gap between life in China and life abroad. At first I thought this was because of my presence, but after a while I noticed that even strangers in buses and shops who did not know about my American identity talked to each other about how “Chinese people are poor, unlike foreigners,” and “This is just how Chinese people have to live.” Some teenagers also admitted that they made invidious comparisons between life in China and life abroad even when I was not around. After centuries of conflict and negotiation, the core regions of the capitalist world system had finally succeeded in forcing Chinese people to internalize the cultural model of modernization.

Chinese leaders presented mandatory low fertility, rising inequalities, and the loss of jobs, pensions, and medical insurance as sacrifices that Chinese people had to make for the construction of a modern economy that would eventually bring First World affluence. Many teenagers and their parents complained that such sacrifices were excessive or unfairly distributed. No one, however, questioned the desirability of First World affluence itself. The people I knew in urban Dalian had internalized the capitalist world system’s tendency to rank all places by their respective levels of modernization. Within China, urban areas ranked above rural areas, and wealthier cities ranked above less wealthy ones. Dalian ranked above most other places in China, but still below Shanghai, Beijing, and many cities in the fast-developing South. All developed countries ranked above China, and were conflated under the term *waiguo*. This term literally meant “foreign countries,” but its use in everyday conversations approximated the English term “First World,” lumping together all societies more developed than China, and excluding all those with development levels less than or equal to China’s.⁵⁷ Despite the Chinese government’s friendly relations with many Third World countries, the existence of countries less developed than China was ignored in popular discourses on “foreign countries.”

French demographer Alfred Sauvy coined the term “Third World” (*tiers monde*) in 1952, when he published an article in the leftist French newspaper *L’Observateur* that drew an analogy between the non-industrialized countries and the “Third Estate” (*tiers état*), which in pre-revolutionary France referred to commoners (the “First Estate” consisted of clergymen, and the “Second Estate” consisted of the nobility).⁵⁸ By the 1970s, the term “Third World” was widely used in Western discourse to

refer to the peripheral regions of the world.⁵⁹ During the Cold War, the term “Third World” referred especially to peripheral regions that were not aligned with either the capitalist bloc (“First World”) or the socialist bloc (“Second World”). China was sometimes considered part of the “Second World,” but that term and the alternative world system it implied disappeared with the collapse of the Soviet Union.

I use the term “First World” to represent the prestige, affluence, and core region status that people I knew in urban Dalian desired, and the term “Third World” to represent the poverty and peripheral region status that they saw as characteristic of China. Though they themselves did not use these terms, they frequently talked about how China was a “poor” (*qiong*), “backward” (*luohou*) “developing country” (*fazhanzhong guojia*) that needed to “develop” (*fazhan*) and “modernize” (*xiandaihua*) in order to “catch up to” (*ganshang*) “rich / developed countries,” (*fada guojia*), which were also known as “advanced countries” (*xianjin guojia*) or simply as “foreign countries” (*waiguo*). These classifications did not necessarily coincide with geopolitical boundaries. When talking about “foreign countries” (*waiguo*), they seldom mentioned African, South Asian, Latin American, or Pacific Islander societies, but sometimes drew examples from Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan (territories that they adamantly maintained were part of China). As terms that refer more to living conditions than to specific geographical areas or political entities, “First World” and “Third World” are the English phrases that best capture popular Chinese ideas about the “haves” and “have-nots” of the world.

As a globally widespread dream of orderly progress toward First World conditions, the cultural model of modernization differs from “modernity,” a term which anthropologists⁶⁰ have used to describe the diverse, unpredictable, often undesirable situations various individuals and societies experience in the capitalist world system. Though different modernities vary in the degree to which they adhere to the ideal path outlined by the cultural model of modernization, this cultural model is still perceived as a program with clear goals and predictable outcomes. Studies of many impoverished areas worldwide⁶¹ (including some rural areas of China)⁶² have reported despair and disillusionment with the promises of modernization. Most people I knew in urban Dalian, however, still believed in those promises. Rather than attributing the suffering caused by the Great Leap Forward famine (1959–1961), the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), and the growing inequalities of the post-Mao era (1976–present) to the cultural model of mod-

ernization itself, they perceived such suffering as the result of Chinese people's failure to adhere closely enough to the path that First World societies took to the top of the capitalist world system. Despite the problems it caused, the cultural model of modernization remained credible because it did seem to be delivering on its promise of upward mobility, particularly for residents of relatively prosperous cities like Dalian. Unlike societies that experienced more widespread disillusionment about the cultural model of modernization, China has enjoyed high economic growth rates since it adopted this model in the 1950s.⁶³ Ironically, the fact that China managed to maintain its upward mobility in the capitalist world system even while many other Third World and postsocialist societies experienced devastating declines was due at least partly to the Chinese government's autarkic tendencies, which protected China from neocolonialism, economic dependency, and the "austerity," "shock therapy," and "structural adjustment" modernization schemes imposed by organizations like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.⁶⁴

People I knew in urban Dalian defined "modernization" in the same way First World modernization theorists⁶⁵ did: as progress toward the adoption of a modern economy that is likely to improve a society's position in the capitalist world system. Such progress could be measured objectively by statistical indicators of health, education, living standards, and per capita Gross Domestic Product, and subjectively by the degree of a society's cultural resemblance to the core region countries widely acknowledged as "developed" and "modern." Anthropologists have criticized terms like "development," "modernization," and "the postsocialist transition" for promoting pernicious and erroneous assumptions about a desirable, inevitable, universal, and unilinear evolution toward the conditions of the First World.⁶⁶ But these were the very assumptions that people I knew in urban Dalian embraced in their quest to join the First World. Though they resented the fact that China was far behind the First World according to the cultural model of modernization, they accepted this cultural model as the only reality possible. As David Harvey has argued, global capitalism has managed to convince many people worldwide that "There is no alternative."⁶⁷ In China, as in many societies caught in the capitalist world system, the cultural model of modernization enjoyed the status of what Pierre Bourdieu called "doxa," the "self-evident and natural order which goes without saying and therefore goes unquestioned."⁶⁸

Representations

Chapter 1 of this book focuses on how the cultural model of modernization affected the lives of eight teenagers, while the other chapters explore how political, economic, and demographic factors have made that cultural model salient for many teenagers and parents in urban Dalian. Chapter 2 examines the role of the fertility transition as an integral part of the cultural model of modernization. Chapter 3 shows how the educational system became a crucible of competition for the elite status singletons were socialized to expect. Chapter 4 explores the implications of low fertility for cultural models of love, filial duty, and parental investment. Chapter 5 discusses how singletons were accused of being “spoiled” and “unable to adjust” when their high expectations clashed with the limited opportunities available to them.

My portrait of the demographic patterns prevalent among single-child families in urban Dalian is based on statistical records published by Chinese governmental bureaus⁶⁹ and on the results of my survey. My portrait of the individual lives that helped produce these demographic patterns is based on participant observation. Demographic statistics are useful for characterizing the broad patterns that emerge from the diverse strategies of individual agents. Ethnography is useful for providing glimpses of the agency, emotions, and cultural models of individuals. By combining qualitative and quantitative approaches, I hope to capture the nuances of individual experiences and subjectivities without losing sight of the patterns that structure and constrain them.

The schools where I conducted my survey enrolled students from a wide variety of socioeconomic backgrounds, though the most disadvantaged teenagers (such as those who were disabled or lacked urban registration) and the most elite teenagers (who were more likely to attend private schools, keypoint high schools, or study abroad programs) were underrepresented. Because of the mid-level statuses of the schools where I conducted research, demographic findings based on my survey did not differ drastically from those based on census data and official records published by Dalian’s government.⁷⁰ Dalian’s educational system divided high schools into six ranks of prestige. The non-keypoint college prep high school I surveyed belonged in the second most prestigious category, and the vocational high school I surveyed belonged in the fifth most prestigious category. The junior high school I surveyed had the widest range of achievement levels and socioeconomic sta-

tuses, since it admitted all primary school graduates in its neighborhood without considering their exam scores or ability to pay. It was generally considered an average junior high school.⁷¹ Almost all urban Dalian teenagers attended primary and junior high schools, and most went on to secondary education as well (see Chapter 3 for more about Dalian's educational categories and school enrollment rates).

The tutoring and information I provided was only useful to those who believed they had some chance of going abroad, scoring high enough on an entrance exam to get into colleges or high schools (most of which required foreign language skills), or getting work that required English skills. I suspect that this belief was widespread among urban singletons, since 66 percent of respondents to my survey⁷² indicated that they had been tutored in a foreign language at some point in their lives, 88 percent⁷³ indicated that they took private afterschool classes or were tutored by people other than their parents at some point in their lives, and I seldom heard of urban singletons who considered it futile to study English. Still, I cannot claim to have known families from all areas of China's socioeconomic pyramid. Like my survey sample, my ethnographic sample does not include youth from the hyper-elite top or the impoverished bottom of that pyramid.

Teenagers frequently talked about wanting to become "wealthy" (*fuyü* or *you qian*), "big money" (*dakuan*), "cadres" (*ganbu*), "officials" (*guan*), "managers" (*jingli*), "white collar" (*bai ling*), or "intellectuals" (*zhishifenzi*). I use the term "elite" to refer to people in any of these high-status categories, and the term "non-elite" to refer to everyone else.⁷⁴ Though some families I knew were wealthy by Chinese standards, none were wealthy by First World standards. I was told that a small number of high officials, high-level employees in foreign companies, and owners of extremely successful Chinese companies had incomes that would be high even by First World standards, but none of them happened to be part of my social network.

Almost all the students I knew had urban residential registration (*hukou*) by the time I met them. A few had been born in rural areas, but inherited urban registration from their mothers, who gave birth to them while living in rural areas during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). As Aihwa Ong has observed,⁷⁵ states grant different kinds of citizenship to different categories of people. In China, rural citizens had far fewer rights to good living conditions than urban citizens.⁷⁶ Since 1962, Chinese cities have strictly enforced China's 1958 Regulations on Household Registration, which were designed to keep rural migrants

from flooding cities.⁷⁷ Urban registration was reserved for those living in cities in 1954, those whose mothers had urban registration, those whose employers were willing and able to secure urban registration for them, and those who received urban registration as part of special deals with the government (such as those that occurred when rural land was requisitioned for urban use).⁷⁸ Migration was heavily restricted because each city's government provided food, clothing, health care, housing, schooling, pensions, and work only for its own citizens. By the 1990s, however, it was possible to obtain these things from the private market, and some state enterprises were also willing to hire rural citizens for jobs that urban citizens were unwilling to take. Still, rural citizens were severely hindered by their ineligibility for state subsidies and good jobs. Prior to the 1990s, children inherited the registration of their mothers, and not their fathers. Neighborhood committee cadres told me that the purpose of this law was to discourage rural women from marrying urban men to gain urban registration for themselves and their children. Because of strong traditions of patrilocality, particularly in the countryside, rural men were not as likely as rural women to practice this strategy. As part of broad nationwide reforms,⁷⁹ however, the rules were changed in the 1990s to allow children to inherit either parent's residential registration, and to allow rural citizens who purchased urban housing to apply for urban registration. Still, most of the rural citizens living in urban Dalian could not attend school, but rather worked in fields shunned by urban citizens, like construction and housekeeping. Since the 1980s, rural citizens have been estimated to constitute 10–30 percent of the people living in major Chinese cities.⁸⁰ Rural migrants tended to be working-age men and unmarried working-age women; children, elderly parents, and wives were left behind to tend farmland. Many migrants retained land rights in their home villages, and returned to their land during long holidays, planting and harvest seasons, and periods of unemployment. Most rural citizens could not afford to send their children to urban schools, since even the least expensive urban schools (primary schools, junior high schools, and college prep high schools) demanded extra fees from students who lacked urban registration. In addition, many rural schools did not teach students enough to enable them to compete with urban students on high school or college entrance exams. When I visited the natal villages of some students' parents, I met rural teenagers who talked about going to urban areas much as urban teenagers talked about going abroad. Though many of the urban citizens I knew were just a generation or

two removed from their rural origins, their world was vastly different from the rural world inhabited by the villagers they left behind. Even urban citizens with rural relatives usually limited their interactions with those relatives to a few visits per year. My arguments about the experiences of urban citizens do not necessarily apply to the experiences of rural citizens, who constituted 64 percent⁸¹ of the Chinese population in 2000.

My survey results were useful for providing a broad portrait of the socioeconomic and demographic characteristics of the people I studied. This portrait served as a reality check against what I learned from participant observation. Many students I knew, for instance, claimed that “everyone else” had cellular phones and computers when trying to persuade their parents to purchase these goods. Yet only 33 percent⁸² of respondents to my survey indicated that their families owned cellular phones, and only 13 percent⁸³ indicated that their families owned computers. Ethnographic research also served as a reality check against my survey findings. For instance, I learned by talking with students that the income data I had collected with my survey was largely false, since wealthier respondents tended to under-report their parents’ incomes by excluding gifts, bribes, and illegal business profits, and respondents with unemployed parents tended to report the incomes their parents earned prior to becoming unemployed. Some respondents admitted to me after I befriended them that they had felt embarrassed about reporting unusually high or low parental incomes, and therefore left the survey question about income blank or reported inaccurate but socially appropriate figures.

As many critics have pointed out, statistics and ethnography are both flawed methods of representing reality.⁸⁴ Because they are flawed in different ways, though, statistical and ethnographic representations can complement each other and provide a better provisional understanding of a reality that will always be too complex, varied, and subjective to be fully captured on paper. The cultural models and material circumstances of respondents to my survey and the people I knew seemed to be shared by the majority of their counterparts in urban Dalian and other large Chinese cities.⁸⁵ By no means, however, should my account of the experiences and subjectivities of people I knew in urban Dalian be seen as representative of the entirety of Chinese social life. The stories I tell here cannot even be representative of the whole of any individual’s subjectivity. Rather, they merely represent fragments of life that I glimpsed at particular moments during the course of field-

work. Still, while these stories should not be seen as representative, they can be seen as illustrative of the everyday dilemmas and concerns that tend to produce and be produced by a modern economy. While the hopes, fears, and experiences of each family and each individual are unique, they also resonate with the perils and possibilities faced by many others in similar positions throughout the capitalist world system.

Global Processes, Local Experiences

By exploring the social, economic, and psychological consequences of China's one-child policy, this book reveals how parents and children are affected by the fertility transition, a process that has taken place in most societies worldwide. Because it was unusually sudden and extreme, the fertility transition caused by China's one-child policy presents an especially stark example of how the cultural model of modernization can shape individual lives. While they bear particularities unique to China, to urban Dalian, and to the families I got to know, many of the experiences portrayed in this book are also shared by low-fertility families worldwide. The fertility transition is an integral part of the cultural model of modernization that has been adopted by all First World societies and most Third World societies. While the Chinese state is unique in the ruthless effectiveness of its direct efforts to create a fertility transition, other states have promoted fertility transitions indirectly, by adopting the modern economy necessary for success in the capitalist world system. As David Harvey has argued, individual and national "choices" about reproduction and family life in the capitalist world system are actually determined by the political economy of capitalism, which "continuously strives to shape bodies to its own requirements."⁸⁶

Each individual's relationship to the capitalist world system is shaped by the interactions of a unique set of subjectivities, experiences, and cultural models. Still, the degree and range of individual variations are limited by the mutually supportive forces of the fertility transition, the cultural model of modernization, the modern economy, and the capitalist world system. These forces enjoy what Antonio Gramsci,⁸⁷ Pierre Bourdieu,⁸⁸ and Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff⁸⁹ have called "hegemonic" power. Most people caught in the capitalist world system pursue strategies that end up reinforcing the hegemony of these forces,

which pervade their consciousness so deeply that they take it for granted. This does not mean that they lack agency; it just means that their agency is shaped and constrained by the capitalist world system. People I knew in urban Dalian sometimes resisted the demands of that system by refusing to study hard, limit fertility, invest in education, or seek high-paying work, but such resistance was too infrequent, self-defeating, and disorganized to result in social change.⁹⁰ Most of the time, they followed the cultural model of modernization: They studied hard, limited fertility, invested heavily in education, and sought high-paying work. Some of them achieved their goal of upward mobility, and the sum of their actions helped to achieve their goal of raising China's status in the capitalist world system. Successful students and parents saw themselves as highly effective agents who bent circumstances to their will; the fact that their will was in turn shaped by the cultural model of modernization perpetuated by the capitalist world system does not nullify the fact of their agency.

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, most people worldwide were motivated by the cultural model of modernization. Societies now known as part of the First World had a head start in the establishment of the modern economy that helped them become core regions, and peripheral societies now known as part of the Third World are struggling to catch up. This pattern has caused many people worldwide (including people I knew in urban Dalian) to assume that modernization was an inevitable process of unilinear evolution. Yet there was nothing inevitable about the rise and spread of the modern economy, which became globally dominant because of a particular set of historical circumstances. These circumstances were rooted not only in invention of industrial technologies, but also in the practices of conquest, colonialism, imperialism, exploitation, and impoverishment perpetuated by the societies that modernized early on the societies that modernized late. Recognizing modernization as the only way to avoid being trampled by the First World, Third World people have struggled to become like First World people as quickly as possible. Chinese officials hoped that the fertility transition produced by the one-child policy would hasten the establishment of a modern economy that would improve China's position in the capitalist world system.

When Little Emperors Grow Up

Small families tend to socialize children to accept the cultural model of modernization. Chinese leaders promulgated the one-child policy in order to produce a generation with First World consumption and education patterns. Unlike a child who must share family resources with many siblings, a singleton enjoys a heavily concentrated dose of parental investment. Consequently, Chinese singletons have been socialized with the same high expectations, consumption demands, and educational aspirations as youth in the First World. However, because of the extraordinary abruptness and universality of the fertility transition that was hastened by the one-child policy, Chinese singletons also face unusually high levels of parental pressure and competition for elite status in the educational system and job market.

In contrast, Chinese parents who had large numbers of children during the 1950s and 1960s socialized most of their children with neither the aspiration nor the resources to win elite status. Inequalities between the elite and non-elite were smaller in the political economy of socialism, so fewer students and parents felt that trying to win elite status was worth the effort. It was also not essential for every child to win a high-paying job, since the cost of providing parents with old age support would be shared by many siblings, and poorer siblings could get help from wealthier siblings during hard times. While some elite families practiced low fertility and high parental investment, most non-elite families did not. While some parents focused heavy investment and aspirations on one or two especially talented sons, they still allowed daughters and less-talented sons to grow up with the expectation that they would not become part of the elite. While some talented sons of elite, low-fertility parents experienced the same kind of pressure and investment common in single-child families, most people born in the 1950s did not. Thus, competition for elite education and work was not nearly as intense in the 1960s and 1970s as it was in the 1990s.

Most urban Chinese youth born in the 1980s were singletons socialized to become part of the elite. In addition to being the sole focus of parental love and pride, singletons were expected to be the main source of their parents' post-retirement income, medical payments, and nursing care. Many of them will also have to support children, grandparents, parents-in-law, and grandparents-in-law. In a modern economy that promotes increasingly large inequalities, only an elite job can supply enough income to enable one person to provide so many depen-

dents with a respectable lifestyle. Thus, just about all singletons aspired to win elite jobs, usually through academic achievement. The universality of singletons' aspirations for elite status produced rapid diploma inflation and fierce competition in the educational system and the job market. Parents invested the bulk of family resources in their singletons in order to give them every possible advantage in the race for upward mobility. Teenagers talked about how "society is a contest where people eat people." The stakes are especially high because, if singletons lose out in the competition for socioeconomic status, their parents will have no other children to fall back on, and a singleton who falls into poverty will have no siblings to turn to for help.

The population aging caused by the fertility transition has outpaced China's efforts to develop a social security system to provide support for its elderly. Singletons are likely to bear alone the burdens of elder care that were once shared by many siblings. On top of that, these burdens have intensified because of post-Mao economic reforms, which caused 25 percent of survey respondents' mothers⁹¹ and 12 percent of survey respondents' fathers⁹² to lose their jobs. State officials assumed that retired people would be supported primarily by their children rather than by medical insurance and pension plans, which were reduced, eliminated, or allowed to lag behind inflation as part of efforts to make state enterprises more competitive in the capitalist world system. Since the highest-paying, most prestigious jobs were reserved for graduates of the post-Mao educational system, many singletons were their families' last best hope for upward mobility.

Chinese adults created a lexicon for expressing their discomfort with the high expectations of the rising generation of singletons. Singletons (*dushengziniu*) were "little suns" (*xiao taiyang*) because their parents' lives revolved around them. Parents "doted" (*chong*) on them, "drowned them with love" (*ni'ai*), and "spoiled them till they were bad" (*ba tamen guan huai le*). Singletons developed such high expectations that they "lacked the ability to adjust to their environment" (*meiyou shiying nengli*). They became haughty, demanding "little emperors" (*xiao huangdi*). This last term was especially popular in both the Chinese and the international media, as it conjured up the comical image of a small child lording it over worshipful adults. It was assumed that singletons were spoiled because they got a more concentrated dose of parental attention than children with siblings. Yet parental attention did not consist solely of love, support, and pampering. It also consisted of discipline, demands, and expectations.

Chinese singletons were called “little emperors” because their parents spoiled them just as the imperial court once spoiled its emperors. But there were strings attached to the good living conditions singletons enjoyed. Chinese emperors were pampered, but they also had a duty to bring glory and prosperity to their empire. So it was with the “little emperors” created by China’s one-child policy.