

Editor's note: The first generation of the only child in China were born at the turn of the 1970s and 80s, when China began its rigorous efforts to slow down the population growth for sustainable social and economic development.

By the end of 2002, there were altogether 80 million only children in China as national census showed. In the past two decades, this generation has been the focus of not only their parents and grandparents, but also society as a whole.

Now, the "little emperors" and "little princesses," as dubbed named by the media, are moving onto the stage of serious commitment. Faced with a unique subject matter — the marriages of single children — sociologists have expressed both their concerns and hopes based on research in China's major cities, as China Daily staff reporter YU NAN found out.



LJIANHUA/China Daily

Cosseted from the cradle but what of the future?

A study into China's only-child generation as it comes of marriageable age

Approaching the first anniversary of their wedding, Zhong and her husband Tian realized they have cooked at home less than 10 times. The restaurants nearby and their parents' homes are where they are usually to be found at meal-times.

"Mum was in charge of all the cooking and I had no chance to practise," said Zhong, 26, the only child in her family and now a high school teacher in Beijing. "I'm trying to learn how to cook, but I find cooking just too tedious and annoying."

The newlyweds have bought a 120-square-metre apartment near Shangdi Information Industry Base in northwestern Beijing, where Tian, 30, works in a software company.

"I think our married life is nothing but wonderful," he said. "But," he admitted, "we often quarrel because of trivial things such as who should clean the floor, wash the clothes, or make the bed," said Tian, the youngest in his family.

The case of Zhong and Tian was one of hundreds that Wang Jie has studied. As a professor at the Institute of

Sociology with the Tianjin Academy of Social Sciences, Wang is one of the first sociologists to have conducted several years of research into the marriages of only children, particularly those in big cities.

Because of all the attention, and perhaps indulgence they have had, the first generation of only children in China lack many basic living skills, argues Wang. This leaves their married life short on tolerance and the day to day needs of housework a much heavier burden for them than for their parents generation. It is for these reasons that tiny conflicts between young couples are common, said Wang.

In a recent tracing survey on dozens of newly-weds in Tianjin, Wang found that 20 per cent employ domestic help, 80 per cent never cook at home but eat with their parents, and 30 per cent take their dirty washing to their parents' homes. Around half the couples interviewed had had serious disagreements for two main reasons — each blamed the other for not doing the housework or the complaint that their spouse does not know how to take good care of their partner.

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Wang classifies an only child marriage as those where either or both has no siblings.

"This will be a main marriage pattern in the coming years in China, and an area which requires more attention in the field of sociology," said Wang.

She said that because of the better growing-up conditions of only children and the very different social and economic environment in which they now live, their marriages will be different from those of previous generations. "Some traditional Chinese customs and thoughts about marriage will be unavoidably changed, too."

The later, the better?

People who know Yang and Wu think they should get married — everyone that is except the young lovers themselves, who have been dating for nearly 10 years.

"Both of us will feel weird if we tell people that we are married because most of our friends haven't tied the knot yet," said Yang, 25, an attorney with a big law firm in Beijing.

His girlfriend Wu is a programmer with a software company also based in the capital. They both grew up in Beijing, and are both only children.

Wu complains that her mother is continually pressing her to marry. "You are already 25, an age that 50 years ago in China, any girl would have already been a mother with several babies," is the often repeated remark of Wu's mother.

But she and Yang, who have lived together for two years in a

rented city centre apartment, see no immediate need to commit to marriage.

"I'm not well prepared to be a wife and I think we are both like children now, needing more time to grow up," Wu frankly admitted.

And they are not alone. Marrying later is becoming more and more of a trend for China's urban young, said Wang. Society has become more tolerant about young lovers' living together without being married, something very much condemned just more than a decade ago.

A recent survey conducted in Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou about young people's attitudes towards family and marriage showed the average preferred marrying age for women is 25.5, and for men, 28.6.

More and more young people are ignoring the traditional "rules" about marriage, such as "obeying the family choice," "the age that one should get married," or "two people cannot live together before their wedding," explained Wang.

The only-child generations have more freedom in their marriage choices, agreed Wang Zhenyu, 50, vice-director of Family and Gender Section at the Institute of Sociology with the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

She has noticed the phenomenon of unmarried couples living together in big cities in China in the last few years.

"It is a pattern which mostly occurs in those who are not local residents but young people who have migrated from elsewhere and want to settle down in big cities," said Wang Zhenyu. "I found in most cases, they would rather wait until their mental and economic circumstances are right to get married."

Lavish marriages

A recent survey on marriage expenses around Tianjin, an hour's drive from Beijing, show the average cost of a marriage, including the purchase and decoration of a new home with furniture and modern electrical appliances and the actual wedding ceremony and reception, is 191,100 yuan (US\$23,100), more than a hundred times that in 1978.

The figure, although astonishingly high, does not surprise Wang Zhenyu at all. She said she and her students have been carrying out their research for some considerable time. In 1999, the cost had already risen to between 100,000 - 300,000 yuan (US\$12,100 to US\$36,200) in Guangzhou, Beijing, Shanghai and Tianjin.

"People are no longer satisfied with a 'television, refrigerator and washing machine,' the three most popular initial demands of a marriage in the 1980s. Now a well-decorated apartment has become a young couple's first demand in urban centres," she said.

What really concerns Wang Zhenyu is not the increasing cost of marriage, but who is going to foot the bill.

She said in most one-child families, parents usually want to do everything for their offspring, in part to prepare a perfect life for their only "hope." Most parents have been saving for their son or daughter's education and marriage ever since their own marriage.

If an only child wants to get married soon after he or she graduates from college, he or she naturally wishes their

marriage starts at a relative high living standard. And to this end most parents are unhesitant in giving their children financial help, she added.

Wang Zhenyu hopes that this sort of situation can gradually change as more and more only children learn how to live independently.

"Most of the only children demonstrate some lovely characteristics — they are open-minded, smart and full of confidence. But they also have an obvious weakness, over-reliance on their parents," she added.

"But as competition in society becomes more open and fierce, reliance on parents is not going to secure a happy life for most only children. This in turn will force them to be more independent."

Wang Zhenyu was happy when she heard that a daughter of one of her good friends had refused the offer of support from her wealthy family to get married.

"The young girl said she and her boyfriend would wait until they could afford the apartment and the wedding themselves," said Wang.

"I don't mean that parents love and support of their children is bad or wrong, but to let their children be more financially independent will benefit the development of the young as well as the whole society."

"4-2-1" family pattern

In addition to the research on "marriage expenses" in big cities in China, the "4-2-1" family pattern has been a strongly debated subject for many sociologists since the early 1990s, Wang Zhenyu said.

"The '4-2-1 pattern' is a name to show a relatively simple family pattern — a couple, if both are single children, need to take care of four parents, and their single child, or maybe two," she said. "The family's number of immediate relatives will sharply decline and the family relationship will become more simple compared with the large and complex family relationships that used to exist among extended families with brothers and sisters in China."

The country's Law on Population and Family Planning, which took effect on September 1 last year, upholds the policy to encourage one couple to have one child. But the same policy allows couples who themselves are only children to have up to two children. No matter "4-2-2 or 4-2-1," said Wang Zhenyu, the family burden for the only-child generations, after they marry, will be the heaviest if a well-established social security system is not in place.

"It's financially unrealistic for a couple to take good care of four aged parents at the same time unless you expect that all the couples are millionaires," she said.

Even if only children have enough money to take care of their parents, the elderly will still have a sense of isolation and loneliness because of the absence of not only their child, but the traditional big family, she added.

One answer, according to Wang Zhenyu is: "More and more 'homes for the elderly' should be built in cities to meet the future demands of society."

The names of the couples have been changed to protect their privacy.



LUZHONGQIU/China Daily

Above: A newlywed couple in Beijing joyfully release a "love lock" made up of 99 balloons.