One-child policy a surprising boon for China girls

BEIJING (AP) — Tsinghua University freshman Mia Wang has confidence to spare.

Asked what her home city of Benxi in China's far northeastern tip is famous for, she flashes a cool smile and says: "Producing excellence. Like me."

A Communist Youth League member at one of China's top science universities, she boasts enviable skills in calligraphy, piano, flute and pingpong.

Such gifted young women are increasingly common in China's cities and make up the most educated generation of women in Chinese history. Never have so many been in college or graduate school, and never has their ratio to male students been more balanced.

To thank for this, experts say, is three decades of steady Chinese economic growth, heavy government spending on education and a third, surprising, factor: the one-child policy.

In 1978, women made up only 24.2 percent of the student population at Chinese colleges and universities. By 2009, nearly half of China's full-time undergraduates were women and 47 percent of graduate students were female, according to the National Bureau of Statistics.

In India, by comparison, women make up 37.6 percent of those enrolled at institutes of higher education, according to government statistics.

Since 1979, China's family planning rules have barred nearly all urban families from having a second child in a bid to stem population growth. With no male heir competing for resources, parents have spent more on their daughters' education and well-being, a groundbreaking shift after centuries of discrimination.

"They've basically gotten everything that used to only go to the boys," said Vanessa Fong, a Harvard University professor and expert on China's family planning policy.

Wang and many of her female classmates grew up with tutors and allowances, after-school classes and laptop computers. Though she is just one generation off the farm, she

carries an iPad and a debit card, and shops for the latest fashions online.

Her purchases arrive at Tsinghua, where Wang's all-girls dorm used to be jokingly called a "Panda House," because women were so rarely seen on campus. They now make up a third of the student body, up from one-fifth a decade ago.

"In the past, girls were raised to be good wives and mothers," Fong said. "They were going to marry out anyway, so it wasn't a big deal if they didn't want to study."

Not so anymore. Fong says today's urban Chinese parents "perceive their daughters as the family's sole hope for the future," and try to help them to outperform their classmates, regardless of gender.

Some demographers argue that China's fertility rate would have fallen sharply even without the one-child policy because economic growth tends to reduce family size. In that scenario, Chinese girls may have gotten more access to education anyway, though the gains may have been more gradual.

Crediting the one-child policy with improving the lives of women is jarring, given its history and how it's harmed women in other ways. Facing pressure to stay under population quotas, overzealous family planning officials have resorted to forced sterilizations and late-term abortions, sometimes within weeks of delivery, although such practices are illegal.

The birth limits are also often criticized for encouraging sex-selective abortions in a son-favoring society. Chinese traditionally prefer boys because they carry on the family name and are considered better earners.

With the arrival of sonogram technology in the 1980's, some families no longer merely hoped for a boy, they were able to engineer a male heir by terminating pregnancies when the fetus was a girl.

"It is gendercide," said Therese Hesketh, a University College London professor who has studied China's skewed sex ratio. "I don't understand why China doesn't just really penalize people who've had sex-selective abortions and the people who do them. The law exists but nobody enforces it."

To combat the problem, China allows families in rural areas, where son preference is strongest, to have a second child if their first is a girl. The government has also launched education campaigns promoting girls and gives cash subsidies to rural families with daughters.

Still, 43 million girls have "disappeared" in China due to gender-selective abortion as well as neglect and inadequate access to health care and nutrition, the United Nations estimated in a report last year.

Yin Yin Nwe, UNICEF's representative to China, puts it bluntly: The one-child policy brings many benefits for girls "but they have to be born first."

Wang's birth in the spring of 1992 triggered a family rift that persists to this day. She was a disappointment to her father's parents, who already had one granddaughter from their eldest son. They had hoped for a boy.

"Everyone around us had this attitude that boys were valuable, girls were less," Gao Mingxiang, Wang's paternal grandmother, said by way of explanation — but not apology.

Small and stooped, Gao perched on the edge of her farmhouse "kang," a heated brick platform that in northern Chinese homes serves as couch, bed and work area. She wore three sweaters, quilted pants and slippers.

Her granddaughter, tall and graceful and dressed in Ugg boots and a sparkly blue top, sat next to her listening, a sour expression on her face. She wasn't shy about showing her lingering bitterness or her eagerness to leave. She agreed to the visit to please her father but refused to stay overnight — despite a four-hour drive each way.

Fong, the Harvard researcher, says that many Chinese households are like this these days: a microcosm of third world and first world cultures clashing. The gulf between Wang and her grandmother seems particularly vast.

The 77-year-old Gao grew up in Yixian, a poor corn- and wheat-growing county in southern Liaoning province. At 20, she moved less than a mile (about a kilometer) to her new husband's house. She had three children and never dared to dream what life was

like outside the village. She remembers rain fell in the living room and a cherished pig was sold, because there wasn't enough money for repairs or feed.

She relied on her daughter to help around the house so her two sons could study.

"Our kids understood," said Gao, her gray hair pinned back with a bobby pin, her skin chapped by weather, work and age. "All families around here were like that."

But Wang's mother, Zheng Hong, did not understand. She grew up 300 kilometers (185 miles) away in the steel-factory town of Benxi with two elder sisters and went to vocational college for manufacturing. She lowers her voice to a whisper as she recalls the sting of her in-law's rejection when her daughter was born.

"I sort of limited my contact with them after that," Zheng said. "I remember feeling very angry and wronged by them. I decided then that I was going to raise my daughter to be even more outstanding than the boys."

They named her Qihua, a pairing of the characters for chess and art — a constant reminder of her parents' hope that she be both clever and artistic.

From the age of six, Wang was pushed hard, beginning with pingpong lessons. Competitions were coed, and she beat boys and girls alike, she said. She also learned classical piano and Chinese flute, practiced swimming and ice skating and had tutors for Chinese, English and math. During summer vacations, she competed in English speech contests and started using the name Mia.

In high school, Wang had cram sessions for China's college entrance exam that lasted until 10 p.m. Her mother delivered dinners to her at school. She routinely woke up at 6 a.m. to study before class.

She had status and expectations her mother and grandmother never knew, a double-edged sword of pampering and pressure.

If she'd had a sibling or even the possibility of a sibling one day, the stakes might not have been so high, her studies not so intense.

Beijing-based population expert Yang Juhua has studied enrollment figures and family

size and determined that single children in China tend to be the best educated, while those with elder brothers get shortchanged. She was able to make comparisons because China has many loopholes to the one-child rule, including a few cities that have experimented with a two-child policy for decades.

"Definitely single children are better off, particularly girls," said Yang, who works at the Center for Population and Development Studies at Renmin University. "If the girl has a brother then she will be disadvantaged. ... If a family has financial constraints, it's more likely that the educational input will go to the sons."

While her research shows clearly that it's better, education-wise, for girls to be single children, she favors allowing everyone two kids.

"I do think the (one-child) policy has improved female well-being to a great extent, but most people want two children so their children can have somebody to play with while they're growing up," said Yang, who herself has a college-age daughter.

Ideally, she said, China should relax the policy while also investing more in education so that fewer families will be forced to choose which child to favor when it comes to schooling.

While strides have been made in reaching gender parity in education, other inequalities remain. Women remain woefully underrepresented in government, have higher suicide rates than males, often face domestic violence and workplace discrimination and by law must retire at a younger age than men.

It remains to be seen whether the new generation of degree-wielding women can alter the balance outside the classroom.

Some, like Wang, are already changing perceptions about what women can achieve. When she dropped by her grandmother's house this spring, the local village chief came by to see her. She was a local celebrity: the first village descendent in memory to make it into Tsinghua University.

"Women today, they can go out and do anything," her grandmother said. "They can do big things."