

# Lesson Three: Daughter. Wife. Mother.

**Big Idea:** How societal expectations and norms for girls and boys influence their lives.

**Guiding Question:** How have more than three decades of China’s one-child policy transformed the lives of girls, women and families?

**Our Challenge:** To reveal and examine ways in which people’s cultural beliefs, social climate and government policies shape gender expectations and, in turn, how those lead to generational family patterns.

**Guiding Activities:** This lesson guides students in learning about current gender roles in China through exploring the changes set in motion after three decades of its one-child policy. In the story, *Daughter. Wife. Mother.*, teen girls who were abandoned as infants in China and adopted by American families return to their “hometowns” to discover what it’s like to be a daughter in rural China. Girls their age who grew up in these two towns are their guides. The girls’ cross-cultural encounters offer students contemporary glimpses of what it’s like to be a daughter, a wife and a mother in rural China today, and this lesson plan provides probing questions and supplemental sources to stimulate their learning.

## Setting the Scene

Read the opening section of [\*Daughter. Wife. Mother.\*](#), including the resources found at the various hyperlinks. Stop at “My Name” subtitle.

Discuss with students new information they learn from the opening section with these prompts in mind.

- What conventions do Chinese families follow in naming their female and male children?
- What different words are used in naming female and male children? What roles, wishes or expectations do these words reflect?
- In what ways do names signify different gender roles in Chinese society?
- Reflect on how names change over the course of a life for women and for men.

Following this discussion, ask students to continue reading *Daughter. Wife. Mother.*, stopping at the subtitle “Left Behind Child.” Remind them to watch the [video](#) in which Maya’s Chinese friends in Xiaxi Town – Yuan Mengping, Chen Chen and Yujiao Yan – explain the meaning of their names and those of their male family members.

Have students talk about their reactions to what they learned in these videos and any new information they learned.

Transition by explaining to students that among parents’ first responsibilities is choosing a name for a child they give birth to or adopt. This name might be the same as another family member or be selected because of the family’s religious or cultural traditions.

Our names give us an enduring connection to our family as they become part of our identity. With this in mind, ask students to write what they know about why they were given their name along with its meaning, if they know. Ask them to share this in class. When students do not know this history, suggest that they talk with family members and record the story in writing and share with their class the next day.

## Setting the Foundation

Students will use this *Daughter. Wife. Mother.* story and [curated resources](#) to explore ways that different societal expectations for girls and boys shape an individual’s sense of identity and the potential structure of his or her life’s possibilities. By sharing stories about their experiences with gender, Maya and Jennie, the six Chinese girls, their mothers and grandmothers help us to understand better how cultural traditions shape their lives in America and China.

The students’ opening exercise engages them in thinking about how societal expectations of girls and boys affect their lives. Begin by asking them to draw their responses to the prompts, below, given to the girls in [the video](#). (The boys respond to the prompts as boys.)

- When was the first time you knew you were a girl (boy)? What was your reaction?
- What is a difficulty that you overcame (because you were a girl/boy)?

- What is your dream? Or what do you imagine about your future – your personal life or your career?

Students can share their drawing in pairs or small groups after finishing their pieces. After sharing, ask students to write reflectively for a few minutes on how they learned what it means to be a boy or a girl, and how those stereotypes impact their own actions, decisions and dreams for the future.

Transition to asking students to finish reading the story *Daughter. Wife. Mother.* As they read the story, remind them to take note of gender expectations in China, including how they are learned, how they are changing over time, and the influence they have on individuals' lives.

## Engaging Our Challenge

In *Daughter. Wife. Mother*, Maya and Jennie learn how their lives might have unfolded as girls growing up in China. Each was adopted as a baby into an American family. Like other Americans raised in well-off, highly educated families, Maya and Jennie will encounter few constraints in choosing their life path. For the [six Chinese girls](#), all of whom are only-child rural daughters, their life choices are likely to be more constrained by societal and family expectations of the roles they are expected to assume as a wife, mother and elder caregiver. Even among the girls whose higher educational attainment opens up new career pathways, the pressures placed on them to conform to conventional gender roles intensify as they reach their late 20s.

This Challenge Based Learning lesson builds on the experiences of three generations of Chinese women – the daughters, who are peers of Maya and Jennie, and these rural daughters' mothers and grandmothers – to reveal how girls', women's and families' lives are being transformed in contemporary China. By observing the generational shifts in women's lives, students reflect on the lesson's Guiding Question: **“How have more than three decades of China's one-child policy transformed the lives of girls, women and families?”**

Divide the class into four discussion groups – or more groups, based on class size – with roughly five students to a group. Assign each student to one of the four groups aligned with sections of this story - “Only Child Daughter,” “Becoming a Wife,” “To

Be a Mother,” and “Voicing Discontent.” Direct each group to the [curated resources](#) to explore ways that different societal expectations for girls and boys shape an individual’s sense of identity and sketch possibilities. To foster discussion, encourage students to share insights and ask each other questions based on their reading, viewing and listening. Remind students that what they discover in their small group interactions will be used in the work they do on their culminating Reflection and Action Project.

Each group will explore its topic using the general principles of [Challenge Based Learning](#) with the following directions in mind:

- Assign a facilitator and a recorder (note taker) for each group. These roles can rotate among students.
- Individually, or as a small group, students will read the informational material assigned to each group and talk about how each story or article speaks to their theme and the story told in *Daughter. Wife. Mother.* As they read students should also consider how their learning connects to their own lives. Each group should discuss and note their findings, as well as write down questions that arose for them in thinking more deeply about this topic.
- Have students share any unanswered questions and unresolved connections that they explored in their discussions. Students should hold onto their questions and connections logs to use in their Reflection and Action Project.
- Invite students to make use of the [curated resources](#) selected for each group using the tab for Lesson Three.

### **Group A: Only Child Daughter**

For centuries in rural China families raised daughters with the expectation that once she becomes a wife she belongs to her husband’s family. A daughter upheld the honor of her own family by fulfilling the obligations of her husband’s filial piety for his parents. China’s one-child policy, which began in 1980, combined with the country’s fast-paced economic growth during the 1990s, brought about changes in how rural Chinese daughters are raised and how they think about marriage and motherhood. For many only-child daughters, the generational changes have been dramatic, mostly due to the family’s investment in their education.

As students revisit the story's sections "Left Behind Child" and "Only Child Daughter," they will do additional reading and research these topics using the [curated resources](#) to prepare to discuss these questions:

- How has being a daughter in rural China changed due to the one-child policy?
- Why are many children in rural China raised by their grandparents or other relatives? What is the customary experience of left-behind children in China?
- In what ways are changing gender demographics in China affecting traditional practices of Chinese families?
- How are older generations in China affected by the one-child policy? What does it mean for China to become a nation of 4-2-1 families?

Click [here](#) to explore the curated resources for Group A.

### **Group B: Becoming A Wife**

China's one-child policy led to higher educational attainment by many only-child daughters. But societal and family pressures combine to push these same daughters to become wives by their mid-to late-20s, and then mothers soon after. Well-educated women who chose to remain single are stigmatized and labeled "leftover women." In this group, students will re-read the section "Becoming a Wife" and research the topic using these [curated resources](#) to prepare to discuss these questions:

- Why do families push their daughters to be married before they are 27 years old?
- How and why did the label of "leftover women" come to define women who are single in their late 20s?
- Why do traditional roles for women remain so entrenched in rural China?
- What seems different about becoming and being a wife in rural China from what this might be like for a young woman in the United States?

Click [here](#) to explore the curated resources for Group B.

### **Group C: To Be a Mother**

Becoming a mother during China's one-child policy era could mean having to relinquish a child born outside of the locally enforced regulations governing family size and composition. At times, this wrenching decision was not the mother's to make; often the husband's family members made this decision. Sometimes families in rural China left a child with relatives to raise mothers and fathers went away as migrant workers. Today, the pressures on younger women are different as the Chinese

government is encouraging them to have and raise two children. In this group, students will re-read the section “To Be a Mother” and research this topic using the [curated resources](#) to prepare to discuss these questions:

- How are China’s population policies affecting women in their roles as mothers?
- How is being raised as an only-child daughter influencing young Chinese women’s thinking about what their lives might be like as mothers?
- How are women’s situations with work outside the home related to their decisions about having children?
- What similarities and differences do you find between mothers in America and those in China when it comes to the lives they lead and the expectations society has of them?
- What is the same or different about being a single mother in China and America?

Click [here](#) to explore the curated resources for Group C.

## Group D: Voicing Discontent

At a time when many families in China are raising only-child daughters due to the country’s longtime one-child policy, many more girls are becoming highly educated than in prior generations. Higher education offers the young women wider exposure to on-going gender inequities – from their experience with university admission quotas favoring boys to the exclusion they confront in enrolling in certain academic disciplines, from the discrimination they encounter as women entering a competitive job market to the harassment some endure at work and on public transportation. As a result, a women’s rights movement has emerged among younger Chinese. The government’s arrest and jailing of five prominent women activists in the spring of 2015 now means that public protest about such discrimination needs to be less publicly displayed. Instead, women turn to the courts to redress discrimination in the workplace and work out of public view to advocate for strengthening laws such as those regulating domestic violence. In this group, students will reread the section “Voicing Discontent” and research the topic using the [curated resources](#) to prepare to discuss these questions:

- What cultural forces in rural China conflict with girls’ ambitions to break out of the expected cycle of marrying young and having children soon?
- Describe what difference it can make to be a girl in rural China who is raised in a family that does not have a son.

- What role, if any, are China's courts and judges playing in addressing gender discrimination?
- Describe how the trajectories of the lives of the six Chinese girls, whom Maya and Jennie come to know, are likely to differ from their American friends. Explain why.
- What is it like for young women in China to challenge the status-quo when it comes to trying to change how girls and women are treated? What forces do they confront?

Click [here](#) to explore the curated resources for Group D..

## Reflection and Action Project

A critical element of this curriculum involves students completing this culminating project to assess and demonstrate their learning. In doing this Reflection and Action Project, students will think critically about the gender roles they explored in their groups.

Assign students to new groups; each group will have in it at least one representative from each of the four Engaging Our Engaging the Challenge topic groups – “Only Child Daughter,” “Becoming a Wife,” “To Be a Mother” and “Voicing Discontent.” Have each group pick a card with one of the following descriptions listed:

1. One-child rural daughter raised by her parents
2. One-child rural daughter of migrant workers (left-behind child)
3. Rural daughter with a younger brother, raised by her parents
4. One-child rural daughter whose father dies or her parents divorce
5. Urban one-child daughter raised by her parents

Relying on what the students learned in the various topic groups, they will work together to describe the most likely pathway this girl will take in her life. This will require that students share information they learned in their earlier group discussions with each other so they can make informed decisions at each juncture of her life. This pathway exploration should include her experiences of being a junior high school student, a senior high school or vocational student, and a college or vocational student. Then, the girl's likely occupation should be determined, followed by what is likely to happen to her as she approaches the age of marriage, along with what

motherhood and caregiving are likely to be for her. At each step, the group will be asked to provide a brief explanation of why it made the choices it did for this girl.

To chart this girl's life course, each group will create a pathway map – a roadmap of this girl's life – in which they visually represent and mark the girl's significant junctures with images or symbols and words. If time permits, each group will present its pathway map to the rest of the class. A visual gallery of these maps, showing life courses for girls in China as they assume the roles ascribed to women, can be displayed on classroom walls. Or, if the class is technically savvy, ask students to recreate their maps digitally and develop a presentation on a class website.