Communities Crossing the Globe:  
Similarities and Differences the China Experience  
Family Life and Gender Roles

Kimberly Mathes
My topic of study includes marriage and the importance of family in Chinese culture. Family is the center of life in China and comes first when making important decisions. Living quarters are often shared between generations. It is very typical for children to take in their parents and offer them a place to live. A typical Chinese household will include grandparents, parents, and children. Traditionally the husband’s parents will move in with a family, as it is the son’s responsibility to take care of his parents. Nursing homes and retirement communities are almost unheard of in China for this reason.

When in China, we toured a typical Shanghai family home. It included a room for grandparents, parents, children, a kitchen, and a shared living space. The home definitely showed how important it is for families to stick together.

Families in China also have distinct gender roles. Men are seen as the head of the household. They are typically given decision-making power in the home. Men are also responsible for living expenses and educational expenses of their children while they remain unmarried and living at home.

Although men are still seen as the ones with the most say and power in the home, women are beginning to have more say in household due to western ideas. Women are also beginning to have careers of their own, although they still rely on their husbands financially. A woman’s responsibilities include cooking, cleaning, and childcare. Men take responsibility of bringing in income.

Gender roles in the family are very similar to gender roles in the US. Although modern families in both China and the US are beginning to steer toward a
partnership between husband and wife, both countries still rely heavily on men heading the household.

Children are held to a very high degree in China. It is important for them to carry on tradition and the family name. There is a limit to how many children a Chinese family can have. This is called the One Child Policy. The policy began in the late 1970’s. It mostly applies to families in cities due to larger populations. Due to lower rural populations and families needing more help on farms, rural families are often allowed to have more than one child.

The One Child Policy helped at first with the population boom in China, but negative affects are beginning to show. There are now more boys than girls in China. Boys are more valuable to Chinese culture because they are able to carry on the family name and care for their parents as they age. Men are having a hard time finding wives due to the lower population of women.

Children are also more spoiled than in the past due to the policy. Parents give everything they can to their child, as it is their only chance to have a child. Grandparents only have one grandchild to focus their attention on. There is also a generation of children without aunts, uncles, or cousins.

Lastly, marriage is important in Chinese culture and expected in families. Parental approval of a child’s decision to marry is very important. In a traditional marriage the woman leaves her family and takes care of husband's family. Boys are favored over girls due to the son’s responsibility to care for his parents. Divorce is very taboo (unlike in the US).
References
