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## **ABSTRACT**

The aim of this thesis is to investigate the negative psychological impact that first-born children experience when facing the impending arrival of younger siblings in their families and the factors of these problems in China. In addition, this thesis helps the children prepare for the process of fitting in the new family structure via relevant artworks.

Based on the unique situation, such as the only-child policy and culture of Chinese society, this thesis analyzes the factors affecting first-born children during the transition from being an only child to having siblings during the arrival of a second child within the family. Secondly, this thesis enumerates several typical negative psychological phenomena experienced by first-born children when facing the prospect of new siblings, along with some accompanying behaviors exhibited during this process. Finally, this thesis integrates and uses the analytical processes and conclusions from the written thesis to craft a children's book, serving as a visual thesis.

In summation, this thesis furnishes additional vantage points to aid the eldest child within a multi-child household. By dissecting the formative factors and manifestations of adverse psychological challenges faced by the eldest child, this study endeavors to explore avenues for offering psychological support to those in need.



MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS OF THE  
FIRSTBORN CHILDREN IN CHINA

by  
Jianye Zou

B.F.A., Zhejiang University, 2021

Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts in Illustration

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## INTRODUCTION

The One-child policy, enacted in 1980 in China, was a temporary measure to decrease rapid population growth and to facilitate economic development under a planned economy. However, after decades of rapid socioeconomic and cultural development, Chinese society faces a contradiction between the altered national development goal as compared to the past and continued low fertility rates. Commencing from the economic reforms and opening-up in the 1970s, China has rapidly embarked on a trajectory of strengthening economic and social development, but also found itself grappling with the challenges posed by an aging population and an employment crisis. The One-child policy, which was initially implemented to curb population growth, no longer suits the current democratic context. In January 2016, after three years of efforts made by the new National Health and Family Planning Commission, China officially implemented the Two-child policy that allowed all Chinese couples to have two children. Many parents began to have a second child, including those with an elder child who had reached adulthood, for many reasons. With the implementation of the policy, however, there has been increasing concern about children's mental health problems in two-child families in China. Adverse emotional responses encountered by the firstborn in families welcoming a second child are subjects of extensive discourse within the Chinese online community (Chen, 2017).

Such discussions are readily understandable to those who have experienced this. My parents had my little brother in 2016 without any advanced warning when I was 18 and preparing to take the national college entrance examination (I was living with my grandparents and uncle). The unexpected appearance of a newborn baby in the family shocked me, and it took a lengthy process to completely accept it and heal the anxiety disorder caused by it. During this time, I tried to find an emotional outlet. I saw many people discussing similar experiences of the process, which made me realize that many children face

the same psychological problems. Inspired by this shared experience, this thesis will focus on the psychology of firstborn children and the impact of these negative responses on their families. This thesis will explore the mental health issues suffered by the first child on second-child families and the potential contributing factors, such as changes in family dynamics, sibling relationships, and parental attention.

Based on my research, for my visual thesis I created a children's book about a little witch who went into the forest to see how sibling relationships could be, and met three different kinds of animal brothers and sisters arguing and fighting. She became worried about her future life with a younger family member, but then she met a magic mushroom who turned into a girl just like a mini version of Little Witch herself. The Little Mushroom helped Little Witch return to the forest and to see the positive side of sibling relations. This is not only an initial journey with an imagined sibling but also a process for the main character to prepare herself for the future after her family structure changes. Little Witch saw different challenges of getting along with a brother or sister happening on the animal siblings in the forest, but at the same time, found the reason that bound these family members together: love.

Children's mental health is a valid topic that can be addressed in children's books, and I hope that my story and illustrations can help children recover from their negative psychological problems in a more targeted way. Therefore, I depicted through this book an elder child, Little Witch, her view of life with a sibling, and the changes in family dynamics that can occur. The book is intended to help children who are either already or soon-to-be welcoming a new sibling: to help build confidence and a positive attitude towards the new siblings in their families, without seeing them as adversaries.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Only a few countries have had family planning policies at different times in world history. Many countries have intervened in their population (like the Birth Control Movement in England in the early 19th century (Glass, 1966), the anti-abortion decree in Romania in 1966 (Berelson, 1979), and population control in India from 2010<sup>1</sup>). Nowadays most countries let people choose their family size, and multi-child families are prevalent in much of the world.

However, the situation in China is unique. The government has enforced rigorous population control for longer time than other countries. The history of the One-child policy in China started in the 1980s after a long period of both war and natural disasters. It was a strict but effective population policy designed to promote economic growth and a better quality of life for the population who faced a shortage of resources and capital deficiency.<sup>2</sup> However, a rapidly developing economy and culture brought not only national power and sufficient social resources, but also contributed to common challenges across Asian countries, such as decreasing fertility, labor shortages, and an aging population. All these strongly associated problems point to the same issue: Chinese society no longer needs such strict population control. Furthermore, when the one-child policy was introduced, it was put in-place with the understanding that “this is applicable for the next 20-30 years.”<sup>3</sup> Therefore, in 2016, the two-child policy was officially implemented as a replacement after three decades. Every couple could have two children, without any fine or forced abortion. The policy has indeed allowed lots of families to expand their family size. Within the first 18 months of the policy,

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<sup>1</sup> From the website of India National Commission On Population.

<sup>2</sup> Feng, W., Gu, B., & Cai, Y. (2016). The End of China's One-Child Policy. *Studies in Family Planning*, 47(1), p83–84.

<sup>3</sup> Hsia, Tao-Tai, Constance A Johnson, and Issuing Body Library Of Congress. Far Eastern Law Division. China's Population Program: Law and Policy. (Washington, D.C.: Far Eastern Law Division, Law Library, Library of Congress, 1985), page 6: Shen Guoxiang, a spokesman for the State Family Planning Commission, has said the policy is only for the next 20 to 30 years. These exceptions to the one-child rule were incorporated into local regulations or directives by many provinces during 1984.



there were about 5.4 million new births.<sup>4</sup> According to the Statistical Communiqué of China released by the National Bureau of Statistics, the number of births in 2021 was 10.62 million, and the second child accounted for 41.4% of these births.<sup>5</sup>

Due to the increased number of two-child families, the problems these parents and children are facing have gained more attention and become a popular new topic. In addition to various kinds of data and research, news related to two-child families shows up more frequently (Chen, 2017). Different voices in society after the implementation of the second-child policy now can be heard, and not only the newborn babies but also the firstborn children in the families are gaining lots of attention.

Articles talking about firstborn children's mental health during their transition into siblinghood are numerous (Akhtar and Kramer, Volling, Pike, Dunn, etc.). However, existing theories of sibling influence on firstborn children based in China, especially after the 2016 second-child policy, need to be revised. Most of the previous vital articles on this subject were by Binbin Chen from 2017 to now,<sup>6</sup> but there are still many research topics that can be studied but have not been addressed yet. This thesis will analyze some of the psychological studies on firstborn children in the context of past Western societies and combine them with studies based on Chinese society, and it aims to provide answers for the mental health problems Chinese firstborn children generally encounter in multi-child households.

## **FACTORS**

While the reactions to the psychological problems suffered by firstborn children always differ from person to person, the roots of factors contributing to these issues can be unearthed.

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<sup>4</sup> This data is from a published research on BMJ in August 2019:

Li H, Xue M, Hellerstein S, Cai Y, Gao Y, Zhang Y et al. Association of China's universal two child policy with changes in births and birth related health factors: national, descriptive comparative study. BMJ 2019; 366

<sup>5</sup> This data is from Statistical Communiqué of the People's Republic of China on the 2021 National Economic and Social Development released by the National Bureau of Statistics on Feb 28, 2022.

<sup>6</sup> Binbin Chen is a PhD from the Department of Psychology, Fudan University, Shanghai China.

From a macro perspective, the changes brought by a new baby significantly impact family dynamics and parental issues, especially during the transition from being the only child to becoming a sibling, can all be valuable and worth discussion.

### **Impact of Changes in Family Dynamics**

According to survey data, nearly 80% of children in the United States have siblings (Volling, 2012). This means the transition from only-child to siblinghood is typical for American children. However, in China, the number of single-child families has already exceeded 150 million due to the one-child policy (Zhang and Wang, 2022). After the implementation of the second-child policy, the family structure for most families in China that have already had or are planning to have a second child is likely to bring about significant changes. This, in turn, has a significant and noticeable impact on the transition of the firstborn child into sibling relationships (Chen et al., 2016), which makes it a source of stress (Winicott, 2021).

Research on family dynamics changes after the implementation of China's two-child policy is minimal. However, a recent study just published in August 2023 (Tong et al., 2023) has indicated that in one-child families, children's personalities, family atmosphere, and dynamics tend to be better than those in two-child families (this study was conducted in China). This suggests that the changes in family structure in Chinese two-child families likely contribute to negative emotions in children.

#### **1. Changes in Status and Roles**

Dynamic family changes brought by new siblings will influence firstborn children's previous family status and roles. As the only child in the family before the introduction of new siblings, firstborn children used to be the center of family members. Parents usually

build overprotective and overindulgent relationships with firstborn children before introducing the younger siblings because they are the only (Fisher, 1952). After having a new baby, firstborn children will lose their status as the only child and the center of attention in the family. With the firstborn children no longer having their singularity and irreplaceability, they will feel negative emotions about losing their status.

Expanding family size is also another dynamic change in the family brought by new siblings. Some researchers found that the number of children in a family negatively correlates with family dynamics (White et al., 1994). Siblings mean rivalries, which lead firstborn children to reduced attention and family resources such as parents' money, time, and attention. According to resource dilution theory, the resources allocated to each child tend to decrease with an increase in the number of children in the family (Kim and Wang, 2021). Therefore, the older children transition from being recipients to competitors. Learning to cope with sibling competition is undoubtedly challenging for firstborn children (Volling, 2012; Chen, 2017).

Siblings must also navigate a shift in their family roles, which makes experiencing negative emotions inevitable. Additionally, experimental evidence shows that mothers intentionally cultivate the independence of firstborn children while raising their younger siblings (Young et al., 1983). Mothers saw fostering the independence and maturity of their firstborns before the birth of subsequent children as a way to give them the necessary time to care for their children and themselves after the birth of their children (Volling, 2012). Transitioning from being cared for to being independent is common for firstborn children, and can cause them to feel inadequate, seek to evade their responsibilities, or experience negative emotions during their journey towards independence, as they may perceive it as unfair treatment.

## **2. New Expectations and Pressures**

Compared with Westerners, Asians are more accustomed to suppressing their emotions (Schouten et al., 2020). This results from traditional cultural values that emphasize emotional regulation and self-restraint as desirable (Asuka Murata et al., 2013). Parents often pass on these values to their children. This is likely to have an impact on most Chinese children. However, the reality is that many children should be allowed to express their emotions. Following the traditional Confucian values of 'harmony in the family,' firstborn children must repress negative emotions and become 'good children.' At the same time, there is the pain of the adjustment phase and disconnection between being a "good child" and expressing one's true feelings.

### **Parenting Issues in Family**

Parents have inherent bonds with their children, both physically and psychologically. The relationship between the children will also be influenced by how parents behave towards them and deal with problems in siblinghood in the family. In addition to the changes in family structure, macroscopically, the specific, concrete behavior of parents should be considered another critical factor of firstborn children's negative mental manifestations.

#### **1. Parents' Differential Treatment**

Parents' Different Treatment (PDT) refers to variations in the warmth or negativity one child receives from a parent, which may be less or more than his sibling's experiences (Rolan and Marceau, 2018). Research indicates that adolescents with siblings who perceive their parents' treatment as unequal tend to report more negative emotional problems, such as low self-esteem (Dunn et al., 1985; Lindhout et al., 2003). This unfavorable sibling comparison can lead to negative self-evaluation, a decrease in overall happiness, and a decline in the

quality of sibling relationships (Shanahan et al., 2008). For firstborn children with younger siblings, whether due to parental favoritism or a conscious choice to favor the younger siblings, both situations are unfavorable for their adjustment to sibling relationships during the transition period (Chen et al., 2016).

According to some studies (Walz and Rich, 1983; Young et al., 1983), mothers may spend more time observing the firstborn child's reactions and adjustment after the second child's birth. This differential treatment increases mothers' fatigue and sadness, and negatively affects their intimacy with the firstborn child (Volling, 2012). On the other hand, mothers may reduce intimacy with the firstborn child after the second child's birth. Besides intentionally fostering the firstborn child's independence, mothers may impose more restrictions and strict constraints (Volling, 2012). This mixed pattern is complex, but according to research findings, either form of parental differential treatment can easily lead to unhappiness in firstborn children.

## **2. Gender Perspective :Son Preference**

A demographic study based on the China Family Panel Studies (CFPS) indicates that in two-child or multi-child families in China, the allocation of educational resources doesn't typically lead to sibling rivalry among male firstborn children due to the birth of their female siblings. In fact, they might receive more resources because of the birth of their sisters. However, female firstborn children may see their parents' expectations decrease after the birth of their younger sisters. Similarly, the expectations for male firstborn children might decrease to a similar extent. However, if the mother has received some education, the birth of younger brothers is less likely to reduce parental expectations for their elder siblings (Chen, 2020). This finding isn't surprising. Resource competition is more challenging for girls in multi-child families (Wang, 2005; Chu et al., 2007). It's evident that the gender composition

of siblings can also impact sibling relationships.

A preference for sons is still a widespread gender discrimination in patriarchal cultures, especially in China. The rapid economic development has not led to significant shifts in these traditional values (Wang, 2005). Firstly, parents are still influenced by millennia of agrarian civilization, continuing to value male labor more and perceiving males as the pillar of modern families. This attitude overlooks the value that girls can create and leads prospective parents to believe that having a boy is much better (Zhang, 2013).

Secondly, many parents who favor sons believe that only boys can continue the family lineage, which girls cannot do as women are expected to marry into their husbands' families, leaving their original families behind. A common saying likens married women to 'water poured out of a basin,' signifying their departure from natal families. In contrast, a man's marriage brings in new family members (his wife and children), thus expanding family size and increasing the labor force. Consequently, giving birth to sons is seen as a mother's success, and the parents with only daughters are likely to face discrimination (Wang, 2005; Zhang, 2011).

Lastly, in Chinese family culture, adult children who live with parents often bear the primary responsibility for elder care (Xie and Zhu, 2009). Due to the previously mentioned traditional gender norms where girls are disadvantaged, in a patriarchal family culture, it is normal for most parents to choose to cohabit with sons and expect them to provide for them in their elderly years, including financial support, housing, and companionship. For the future life, many parents still prioritize having sons.

If the firstborn child is a girl and has a boy as a younger sibling, she may suffer from that unfair gender perspective, like losing parents' attention and family resources (Zhang, 2011). Parents who favor sons due to traditional gender norms habitually allocate more family and educational resources to their sons (Zheng, 2013). The probability of the boys

receiving preferential treatment or even being spoiled is also higher. However, favoring the second child can harm sibling relationships (Feng, 2023). In this situation, there is a higher likelihood that the female firstborn children will be expected to take on part of the parent's responsibilities, such as learning how to care for the baby. This can lead to a higher probability of experiencing the negative emotions mentioned earlier, such as anxiety, depression, and anger. Such responsibilities may bring them a sense of being replaced, triggering jealousy and hostility toward the second child.

If the firstborn child is male and has a female sibling, the younger girl may have access to better educational resources. However, their parents' expectations will be lower because the elder brother will take on most of the pressure. Even though challenging expectations and strict demands are lowered, such as not requiring the younger daughter to achieve career success from the perspective of patriarchal family culture, this still constitutes subtle gender discrimination and a preference for sons. If parents do not expect a girl's future personal achievements from the beginning, they do not acknowledge the girl's intrinsic worth. This still does not seem right.

### **3. Marital Quality**

Parents' loving relationships usually create positive sibling relationships (Akhtar and Kramaer, 1999; Chen and Shi, 2017; Qu and Cao, 2021). According to family systems theory, parent-child relationships, sibling relationships, and parents' marital relationships are very close (Smith et al., 2009; Zemp et al., 2021; McGinnis and Wright, 2023). A good or bad family atmosphere built by parents in their home will allow children to mimic the interaction pattern, then turn out to influence sibling relationships: Positive marital relationships have a positive impact on sibling relationships. When facing conflicts between parents, children's feelings of insecurity can intensify, and they may come to view conflict as an acceptable way

to resolve problems, which they may then apply to handling conflicts with their sibling(s) (Zemp et al., 2021).

Disharmony and conflict between parents predict discord in sibling relationships (Van Eldik et al., 2020). When the second child arrives, both the firstborn children and parents need time to adapt to the new baby and changes in the family. During this adjustment period, the quality of the marriage may change, influenced by factors like shifts in financial investment for child-rearing and changes in parenting methods (Chen et al., 2016; Qu and Cao, 2021). If parental conflicts become prominent during this period, it will likely create stress for the firstborn child, leading to the negative emotions mentioned earlier (Kramer & Ramsburg, 2002).

For firstborn children, entering a new sibling relationship takes time to adapt to and requires active involvement from parents. If parents are in a positive marital relationship, as their relationship can directly influence sibling relationships, the firstborn children will be likelier to exhibit an open and inclusive attitude toward their siblings. Conversely, parents with issues may not meet the firstborn child's needs emotionally, and they are more likely to overlook the child's negative emotions. This can lead the firstborn child to imitate hostile behaviors and worsen sibling relationships due to the neglect towards their negative emotions (Zemp et al., 2021).

#### **4. Lack Awareness of Psychological Health Treatment**

All children's psychological health in China is still an issue that hasn't received enough attention, and both parents and schools may not provide sufficient assistance to children.

According to a report from UNICEF China,<sup>7</sup> an estimated minimum of 30 million children and adolescents under the age of 17 in China grapple with emotional or behavioral challenges.

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<sup>7</sup> From ADOLESCENT MENTAL HEALTH, UNICEF PRIORITY FOR 2021-2025, by UNICEF China, published in June, 2021.



Considering Li, Ai and Zhao's report (2023)<sup>8</sup> and Yin's speech (2021)<sup>9</sup>, some Chinese government officials and university professors have recognized that the psychological well-being of Chinese children, including adolescents, is receiving inadequate attention, particularly regarding specific interventions for individual children or students. Yin (2021) noted that parental and kindergarten training is still not enough. It is hoped that both families and schools can identify children's issues early and provide assistance.

However, while various local governments in China have conducted surveys and implemented policies regarding children's mental health, the actual effectiveness of these efforts is the most significant thing. Policies can only encourage and advise parents to be concerned about their children's mental health. However, most parents find it challenging to realize when their children need to see a mental health professional. They may also be too busy or unaware of the need to acquire knowledge in child psychology. According to some news (Chen, 2017), some firstborn children may resort to extreme measures to express their anxiety, anger, and other negative emotions, such as crying hard, pretending to harm themselves, or physically attacking their younger siblings as a way to reject the new addition to the family. Typically, it is only at this time that these issues grab parents' attention. In other words, if the firstborn children's reactions are not intense, parents may overlook their feelings or dismiss things such as quiet crying as average daily unhappiness.

### **Individual Factors of Firstborn Children**

The individual discrepancies of firstborn children must be considered when talking about the factors that affect their psychological well-being during the transition to sibling-hood (Volling, 2012; Chen, 2017). Most existing research has focused on families in

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<sup>8</sup> Li, Ai and Zhao are journalists from Economic Information Daily.

<sup>9</sup> Yin(尹立红) is a member of Jiangsu Provincial People's Political Consultative Conference and Dean of Southeast University School Public Health in 2021.

Western cultural backgrounds, and studies involving Chinese children or children from cross-cultural backgrounds are relatively rare. However, the approaches used in existing research are still worth considering. Personality traits like the temperament of firstborn children are worthy of being discussed in the context of this topic. These factors can lead to differences in how firstborn children perceive their new siblings and may contribute to psychological issues.

## **1. Temperaments**

Temperament refers to individual differences with a biological basis in behavior, emotional reactions, attention, and regulation; and different temperamental types have relatively stable characteristics (Rothbart and Bates, 2006). In general research, children's temperaments are often classified into three types: difficult, easy, and slow-to-warm-up. A child with a difficult temperament is generally considered to have features like stronger emotions, louder crying, poor interpersonal skills, and weak adaptability. At the same time, the easy type is thought to be easy-going, calm, adaptable, and have regular habits. Slow-to-warm-up temperaments fall between the other two (Thomas and Chess, 1977; Prokasky et al., 2017). In complex family relationships, a child's temperament plays a role in various relationships, and the temperament of the firstborn child is an essential factor affecting sibling relationships (Brody et al., 1996; Kolak and Volling, 2013; Chen, 2017). According to the characteristics of different temperament types, the contrasts between studies based on difficult and easy temperaments can be more apparent. For example, Brody, Stoneman, and Gauger's (1996) research shows that children with difficult temperaments can negatively impact the development of self-regulation and prosocial abilities, both of which influence the quality of sibling relationships. This can result in a worsening of sibling relationships because the firstborn children with a difficult temperament may experience

more negative emotions and behaviors, such as increased anxiety, stress, and even aggression, during the transition to sibling relationships (Kolak and Volling, 2013). Brody and his coworkers (1996) also found that easy-tempered younger siblings may not easily mitigate the adverse effects of the difficult-tempered firstborn on sibling relationships; instead, they need to rely on positive parent-child relationships to address this issue. Therefore, if the firstborn has a difficult temperament, they are more likely to bring the negative aspects of their temperament into sibling relationships, such as having difficulties in regulating sibling conflicts (Chen, 2017), which can result in negative emotional issues.

Moreover, when discussing the influence of children's temperament on sibling relationships, it's important to note that different studies may classify children's temperaments differently. For example, there are classifications such as over-controlled, under-controlled, and resilient types (Robins et al., 1996). The methods for categorizing children's temperaments may vary among different studies. Therefore, when theoretical research is applied to address real-world sibling relationship issues, it's essential to consider the specific behaviors and characteristics exhibited by individual children.

Research on the temperaments of Chinese children or cross-cultural comparisons of temperaments between Eastern and Western children is relatively rare. However, cultural values significantly impact temperamental traits. For example, studies have shown that the temperament structure of American and Chinese children is very similar. However, in China, children are more likely to develop calm temperaments, characterized by low externalizing emotions and self-restraint, due to cultural differences (Ahadi et al., 1993). This is influenced by the traditional Confucian values in China, which encourage self-restraint and emotional control. Still, this does not necessarily imply fewer conflicts among Chinese siblings. Although cultural values promote the display of calm temperaments, this may merely result from self-restraint rather than an effective regulation of sibling conflicts or improved

emotional issues when first born children face their new siblings. As mentioned earlier, Chinese parents are prone to neglecting the negative emotions of firstborn children during their transition to sibling relationships due to a lack of knowledge about children's psychological well-being and awareness of providing help for children with emotional issues. If firstborn children are required to restrain their emotions while their negative emotions are already being neglected, it could exacerbate their emotional issues.

## **PSYCHOLOGICAL PROBLEMS**

During the birthing and post-hospital process of bringing a new sibling into the family, firstborn children are likely to be considered clingy and aggressive for objecting to their parent's lack of attention and care (Field & Reite, 1984). In the process of transition to siblinghood, the arrival of a new sibling is beyond the older children's control, bringing about rivalry and resource dilution, so it is common for firstborn children to have adverse and internalizing problems when they cannot deal with the stress of the significant change in family (Chen, 2016; Kramer and Ramsburg, 2002). This section will try to list the firstborn children's psychological problems that are abstracted from previous research and easily observed phenomena.

### **Anxiety and Depression**

Firstborn children's specific actions of anxiety and depression towards siblinghood, like crying and kneeling to beg parents not to have a second child or going on a hunger strike after the birth of a sibling, can always be found in news and discussions on the Chinese internet (Chen, 2017). There is explicit research using instruments like RCMAS (Revised Children's Manifest Anxiety Scale) and CDI (Children's Depression Inventory) used to analyze firstborn children's anxiety and depression during the adoption process of siblings. It turns out that

there are multiple reports of increased anxiety and depression among elder siblings than in only children (Yang et al., 1995).

The anxiety score of firstborn children in multi-child families is high enough to worry about (Huang et al., 2022). As common internalizing problems, anxiety and depression will be observed as relatively more straightforward. However, due to the different types of negative emotions, firstborn children's reactions will also be different. Some will hide their true feelings and become silent, while some will cry and make noise. No matter what kind of performance it should be, parents and schools must pay attention to these indicators and take measures to address them.

### **Not-Fitting-in and Loneliness**

After having a new sibling, firstborn children may not have enough time to prepare for the changes in the family and need to find a sense of family belonging. Belonging means feeling safe when staying somewhere or with specific people. It is a fundamental and essential human need (Baumeister et al., 1995). Children's sense of family belonging is brought by and rooted in blood and biological ties that are given at birth. Positive sibling relationships can give the firstborn children a sufficient sense of security, fostering the idea that both children (or more) belong to this family equally. Firstborn children are also more inclined to show respect and care because potential sibling rivalry and resource dilution do not deprive them of their identity in the family. If they still perceive themselves as loved and the newborn as just another vital family member throughout their lifetime, firstborn children can avoid most of the anxiety and exclusion. Conversely, feeling excluded and experiencing loneliness is likely indicative of negative sibling relationships and parental neglect.

However, in China, parents may count more on practical family issues, like increasing financial needs for the extended family, than children's development phase. They teach older

children to accept the new sibling but may not give enough time for the process. This is another manifestation of the lack of concern for the psychological well-being of firstborn children, as mentioned earlier. Unwillingness to provide time, denial of psychological issues, and neglect of psychological assistance are all instances where Chinese parents may overlook the possibility of their children experiencing negative psychological problems. However, firstborn children may still be in the role of “the only child in the family”. They may feel threatened by the unaccustomed sibling rivalry, such as the newborn taking away their mother's attention and having to share their room and belongings with siblings. Space and possessions that children find comfort in at home are essential parts of their sense of belonging in the family, and even very young children know how to express their needs for these things (Maine, et al., 2021). If not well prepared to share these things, firstborn children may easily interpret such sharing as potentially losing their ‘only child identity’ in the family. They are likely to feel unable to fit into the family after the change and, as a result, become isolated and feel loneliness.

### **Anger and Hostility**

The most easily observable manifestation of anger and hostility can often be sibling jealousy. There is a substantial body of research on sibling jealousy, and various experiments have been conducted to observe how siblings express jealousy towards each other (Kolak and Volling, 2011; Volling and Kennedy, 2010). Maintaining the parent-child relationship is a crucial source of children's security, and these experiments disrupt some emotional bonds to see children's reactions (Miller et al., 2002). When siblings divert their parents' attention and love, the other child often shows clear jealousy. Aggression is quite common, too, especially among younger siblings, because, as the firstborn children have not fully adapted to having siblinghood, they may simply interpret these unsettling situations as ‘parents are being taken

away' or 'I am being replaced' (Dunn, 1983). This sibling jealousy and hostility are significant aspects of sibling conflict.

These findings also apply to Chinese children. After the implementation of the two-child policy in 2016, sibling conflict arising from jealousy and hostility can still frequently be observed in Chinese families with two children, leading to arguments, hostile emotions, and mutual aggression (Qu and Cao, 2021; Chen et al., 2017). Although there are many traditional Chinese culture norms that encourage firstborn children to be humble, as exemplified in the popular saying, KongRong Shares Pear (a folk story used to teach elder children not to be jealous but to learn to share and be humble<sup>10</sup>), the introduction of a second child in the family will inevitably lead to the elder children's psychological changes. Suppressing these negative emotions can often become the reason for a sense of rebellion and deepen the anger and hostility towards the siblings.

## VISUAL THESIS

The visual thesis is strongly supported by the gist of this paper. Based on all the research and investigations described above, I decided to create a children's book in order to help children who may be facing the negative psychological issues mentioned in this paper's research. This is not created for getting to the root of these first-born children's problems, but the artwork and the storytelling can help them better prepare for the new family members and break down some of the negative imagery of sibling relationships caused by the bad feelings mentioned above.

The book, *Little Witch Will Have a Sibling*, shows Little Witch's journey in the forest to

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<sup>10</sup> The earliest record of this folk tale is from *Book of the Later Han-Biography of Kong Rong* by Xian Li (Tang Dynasty). Kong Rong had five older brothers and one younger brother. One day, his father bought some pears and picked the biggest and best one to give to Kong Rong. However, the boy just picked the smallest one. His father was surprised and asked "Why did you take the smallest one?" He replied "Because I am the younger brother. The biggest one should go to my eldest brother." Then the father asked again: "But you have a younger brother. You are older than him." Again Kong Rong replied: "Yes, I am older than him, so I should leave the biggest to him."

find out what would life be like with siblings. Her journey is a process of exploring her own answer to that question.

Selecting a journey or adventure is likely to resonate with children and facilitate alignment between their thoughts and the developmental trajectory of the book, just like children may inquire would their siblings take parents from them or be nice to them when preparing for future siblings represents a protracted process. In the narrative, the young witch encounters animal siblings who quarrel and even engage in physical altercations, akin to how children may inquire about or observe the lives of their peers with siblings. Such plot elements also derive from my personal experiences mentioned earlier in the text. Upon learning about the impending arrival of a younger brother, I scoured numerous online posts and observed a gamut of negative emotions among eldest children. Consequently, I experienced anxiety and despondency for a period. However, my brother and I share a profound bond, notwithstanding occasional disagreements, which are manageable.

Based on the previous analysis, it is normal that anxiety and sorrow are prevalent among the first-born children during transitions in family structures brought about by a new baby. Regardless of the nature of the relationships these children may forge with their siblings in the future, they all need help to mitigate the burdens imposed by these negative emotions. They need to learn that it's not as scary as it seems. Within the narrative, disparate animal siblings ultimately stand by each other despite heartrending quarrels. Such stories convey to children that while negative emotions are inevitable, care and love among siblings can coexist, awaiting their exploration in the future. Having read such narratives, I aspire to encourage children to embrace the negative aspects of sibling relationships, recognizing that conflict and affection can cohabit within the same relationship.



## **Little Witch's Storyline**

In my picture book, I created the main character, Little Witch, who lived in the forest and whose mom was pregnant. Little Witch wanted to figure out what a sibling relationship would be like. She asked the crystal ball (who knows everything) for help, but it told her to find the answer in the woods with the guidance of moonlight, so she started the journey with her flying broom. Going deeper and deeper in the thick bushes, she met three different kinds of animals there: the stag brothers, the mole sisters, and the bird families. I gave these animals three kinds of typical negative situations between siblings: arguing about who was the strongest in the family, destroying their sibling's belongings, and competing for parental care. After escaping from these chaotic situations, Little Witch felt stress and depression, which made her start crying. However, her tears woke up the Magic Mushroom. It turned into a little girl, a mini version of Little Witch herself. The mushroom joined Little Witch, and accompanied her back into the woods to see the other side of the animal siblings' relationships: the stags who had previously argued about who was stronger protected each other when they heard the wolf; the moles who ruined each other's favorite nuts and blueberries put both treats in a chocolate bar and shared it together; and the little birds who fought over parent's love hid together under their mothers' wings when it rained. On the journey, Little Witch shared her big red hat to cover the mushroom from the rain, like a protective big sister would. At the end of journey, she learned that her relationship with a sibling could be loving. Of course they would have fights, conflicts, or make each other upset; but bad memories were not enough to alter the love binding siblings together.

## Visual Design



Cover and back



Page1-2: Little Witch's appearance.



Page7-8: Little Witch followed the crystal ball's words and flew into the woods.



Page9-10: Little Witch and her flying broom started the journey, walking into the forests following the guide of moonlight.

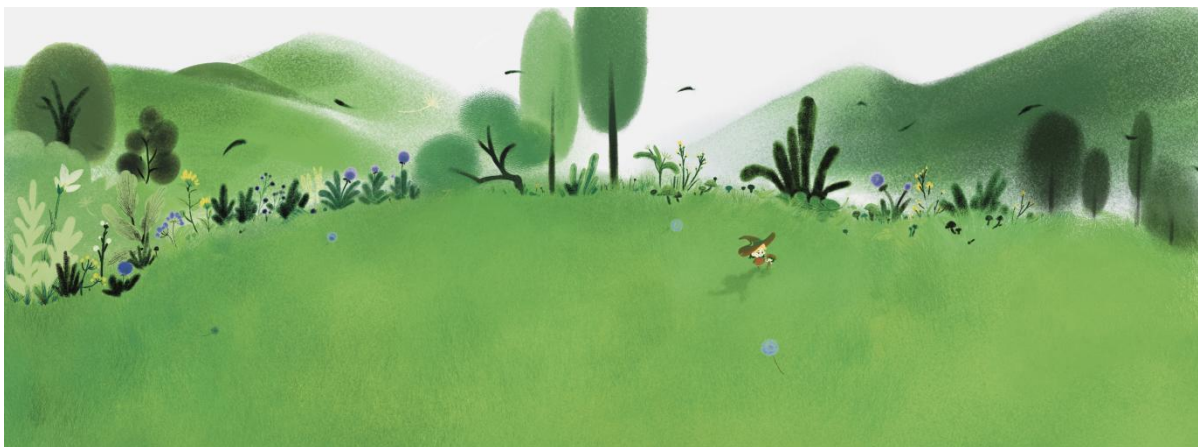


Page23-24: Little Witch was scared by these animal siblings' fights and arguments, but her tears woke up the magic mushroom.





Page29-30: The animal siblings have their own ways to show each other love.



Page33-34: They walked though the beautiful meadow.



Book jacket

## **CONCLUSION**

Research and articles about firstborn children's mental health in multi-child families in China are insufficient. However, based on previous research and papers, this thesis still concludes four common mental problems—anxiety and depression, anger and hostility, not fitting in, and loneliness—that firstborn children commonly suffer from, as well as six causes for them: changes in status and roles, new expectations and pressures, parents' different treatment, preference for sons, marital quality, and a lack of awareness of psychological health treatment. However, this is just the beginning. With the implementation of the Second-child Policy and economic development in China after 2016, the number of multi-child families is rising. This study aims to provide more perspectives to help firstborn children in multi-child families. Future research needs to explore more ways to assist firstborn children needing psychological help.

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