

## CHINESE POPULATION POLICIES: AN UPDATE

by David Wood

**A**LTHOUGH INDIA was the first country to consider a mass family reduction programme as far back as 1952, China's so-called 'one child policy' is far better known. This is largely because of the scale of the policy, and the alleged zeal with which many local officials enforced it.

### What is the 'one child policy' and why was it felt necessary?

China was an extremely poor country when it was re-united under its first communist government in 1949. The then leader, Mao Zedong, was keen to encourage a fast-growing population, arguing that the more people there were in China, the stronger the country would be. However, by the 1960s the rapidly expanding population was threatened by a series of famines and food shortages, leading to great hardships for the Chinese people. By the 1970s the government also feared that the rapid growth in population would hinder rather than help to advance the country's economic prospects.

It was out of these crises that the government introduced three new voluntary policies with the target of slowing down any future population increase (Figures 1 and 2). However, by 1979 it was decided that the voluntary policies were not effective enough and a new, tighter set of rules were announced. These new rules came to be known as the 'one

- **Late marriage:** men were to be at least 28 years old in urban areas or 25 in rural areas before marrying. For women, the ages were 25 and 23.
- **Wider spacing between births:** there should be a gap of at least four years between each new child.
- **Fewer children:** urban families should aim for 2 children and rural families up to 3.

Figure 1: Population policies in China in the 1970s

child policy' (Figure 3). Officials hoped that the new policy would keep China's total population to below 1.2 billion by the year 2002.

However, even taking into account the one child policy, China's total population continues to grow and is likely to continue to do so for some time (Figure 4).

### Problems with the one child policy

While the policy has undoubtedly led to a fall in the rate of China's natural population increase, a number of inconsistencies have crept into its practical operation. Some of these are listed in Figure 5. Figure 5 clearly shows how

Figure 4: China's population growth compared with that of the UK, 2005 and 2050

Country	Population 2005 (millions)	Projected population 2050 (millions)	Rate of natural increase (%)
China	1,303	1,437	1.9
UK	60.2	69.2	0.2

Source: World Population Policies, UN 2006

### POPULATION POLICIES

People's Republic of China

'Later, Longer, Fewer'

Figure 2: An early poster encouraging later marriages, longer gaps between births and fewer children

- Most ethnic Chinese (the so-called Han Chinese who make up 92% of the country's population) were to be limited to one child per married couple.
- Contraception was to be readily available to married couples.
- Mistreatment or abandonment of baby girls was prohibited by law – unfortunately, this was a common practice in many rural areas where boys are still often more prized.
- Couples who kept to one child were awarded a 'certificate of honour' which entitled them to various rewards.
- Couples having a second or further child were fined by having to pay a 'social maintenance fee' to the state.
- Men had to be over 22 and women over 20 to have a child.

Figure 3: Key features of the China's one child policy

better-off Chinese couples can avoid limiting themselves to one child while poorer couples have

- Some well-off couples have resorted to fertility treatments which produce multiple births – there are no sanctions against this.
- Some better-off parents have been having second children abroad or in Hong Kong where the policy does not operate – again, this is legal and the newborn baby is Chinese by birth.
- The policy only applies to the dominant Han Chinese who make up 92% of China's population – the other 56 ethnic groups are exempt.
- If both parents are only children, they may legally have more children provided there is a four-year gap between births – most younger Chinese are now 'only' children as a result of the policy.
- Some better-off couples are happy to pay the so-called 'social maintenance fee' (or fine) to the government – poorer couples cannot afford this.

Figure 5: Figure 5: Inconsistencies in China's one child policy

no choice. This is particularly true in the richer, fast-growing cities such as Shanghai.

Also, as China opens up more to the world (especially following the 2008 Olympics), the country is becoming more aware of criticism from overseas. Traditionally, such criticism has been ignored by the Chinese government with the national media, including the internet, being tightly controlled by the government security services. However, as more Chinese gain wider access to electronic media, it becomes harder for the government to control opinion within its own population. An awareness that many Westerners regard the one child policy as a 'breach of human rights' is more widely known.

### The impact of the one child policy on China's population structure

Despite the criticisms and inconsistencies that surround

the one child policy, its original aim to lower the country's birth rate is actually being achieved. The 2005 mini-census stated that the total population now stands at 1,306.3 million. The annual growth rate has also fallen sharply from 2.23% in 1970 to 0.63% in 2005 and Chinese population experts estimate that the country's total population would now be over 1.6 billion if the one child policy had not been introduced.

Despite this, China's population structure is being altered for the worse. Because fewer children are being born, for example, the population is starting to age. This trend is clearly seen in Figure 6. Whereas in 1950 China's population pyramid is clearly that of a developing country, by 2005 far fewer children are being born and there is a corresponding growth in the middle-aged and elderly groups. Population experts set a total figure of 7% elderly as indicating an ageing population. Already 6.95% of China's population has reached this point and is projected to rise to 20% by 2050.

A second issue is the growing gender imbalance. Males will outnumber females by 43 million by 2010. This suggests that there may still be a problem in rural areas in ensuring that female babies are given the same quality of early care as males since more females than males currently die in infancy.

### Social concerns stemming from the one child policy

One criticism of the one child policy is that it has produced three generations of 'spoiled children'! Such children are known as 'little emperors' and 'little princesses', and many older Chinese claim that they often grow into adults who lack any sense of social responsibility, having spent their childhood taking things for granted.

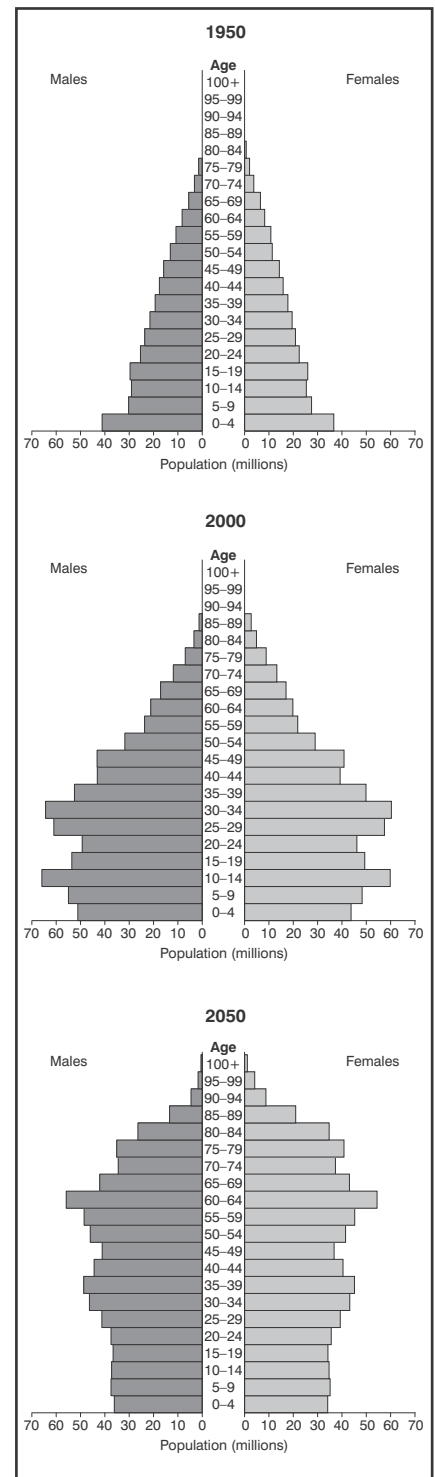


Figure 6: Population pyramids for China, 1950, 2000 and 2050 (projected)

Source: US Census Bureau, International Data Base

A second issue is that there now appears to be a shortage of women of marriageable age in China. Statistics suggest that by 2020 there will be as many as 40 million unmarried men! Some sociologists claim that this may lead to an increase in criminal activity by frustrated bachelors such as kidnapping or trafficking of young women.

Thirdly, while old people have traditionally been cared for by their extended families, this could become a major problem as family size decreases. Already, it is claimed that a typical middle-aged adult often has to care not only for their elderly parents but up to four grandparents as well. This imposes a huge strain on younger, working adults.

Lastly, a growing ageing population inevitably leads to a decrease in the proportion of active workers. This trend is likely to accelerate from 2013 and its impact on China's economy will lead to fewer workers, lower tax revenues but a demand for higher public spending on both health care and welfare for old people.

### **A possible re-thinking of the one child policy**

When in 2003 a new generation of leaders took over in China, a debate on current population policies began. It was appreciated that in the 30 years since the one child policy had been introduced, the country had undergone a huge change with fast economic growth, massive urbanisation, and rapid rural–urban migration.

Consequently, for the first time in the country's history, a new clause was added to the constitution in March 2004 which states that: 'the State respects and protects human rights'. Previously, the rights of the individual came secondary to the needs of the state.

It was also recognised that the rapid expansion of the cities was making the policing of the one child policy much harder. This was because an estimated total of 1–2 million farmers had moved from their registered villages to the cities in search of work. Officials find these migrants are hard to track, making enforcement of the one child policy extremely difficult.

While the one child policy is still officially in operation, it is being interpreted more flexibly in some localities. For example, in Shanghai 13 'exceptions' to having one child are now allowed while monetary fines are more widely imposed for disobeying local rules rather than physical abuses such as enforced abortions.

In March 2003, a new official body, the State Family Planning and Population Commission, was set up to co-ordinate population control, along with two other new institutions, the Development and Planning Bureau and the China Academy of Population and Development. These bodies are to monitor the balance and distribution of the Chinese population along with employment trends and can make recommendations which may have an impact on the one child policy.

By 2008, most urban couples were still officially limited to one child but, in practice, two were permitted in many rural areas. However, in May 2004 the new commission introduced a 'reward programme' to be trialled in 14 provinces. Farmers aged 60 or above who had respected the one child policy to the letter were to be awarded through a new pension scheme when they retired. This payment could be up to 50 yuan per month (13 yuan = £1). This is likely to encourage smaller rural families because state pensions are extremely rare in rural China among the self-employed peasant farmers who still make up a large proportion of the country's working population.

### **The future**

At the moment, some Chinese academics are arguing that a relaxing of the one child policy will be necessary to slow down the greying of the Chinese population. But government policy makers still state that it

must remain in place until more is known about future trends in the country's ability to feed itself, the potential of water and energy sources and the future direction of economic development. Finally, it has been noted that many couples in urban areas opt for one child for economic reasons. This follows a similar pattern in most developed countries. If more couples in both urban and rural areas follow this trend, it is possible that the one child policy may eventually be abolished, giving a much needed boost to the country's human rights image. Currently, however, the policy generally remains in place despite a growing range of local variations in interpretation.

# Activities

1 Refer to the text.

(a) Which events threatened the growth of China's expanding population in the 1960s?

(b) Why did the Chinese government become concerned about the country's expanding population in the 1970s?

2 Study Figures 1, 2 and 3.

(a) Which aspects of marriage did the slogan 'Later, Longer, Fewer' refer to?

(b) What percentage of the Chinese population was never subjected to the one child policy?

(c) How are couples 'fined' under the one child policy if they have more than one child?

3 Study Figure 4. Compare the differing trends in population growth in the UK and China.

4 Study both the text and Figure 5 to answer the following:

(a) Give three examples of how 'better-off' couples sometimes manage to have more than one child.

(b) Which groups in China are exempt from the one child policy?

5 Study Figure 6.

(a) Draw parallel lines dividing each population pyramid into three distinct groups at each of the following break points: ages 14–15 and 64–65.

(b) Neatly label each of the three sections on the pyramids: 'Young dependent', 'Adult active' and 'Elderly dependent'.

(c) Describe the projected population structure shown by China's age-sex pyramid for 2050.

6 Study Figure 7. China's leaders have expressed concern regarding the country's growing population. Use the information provided by the population density map to suggest why this might not be the case in all of China's provinces.

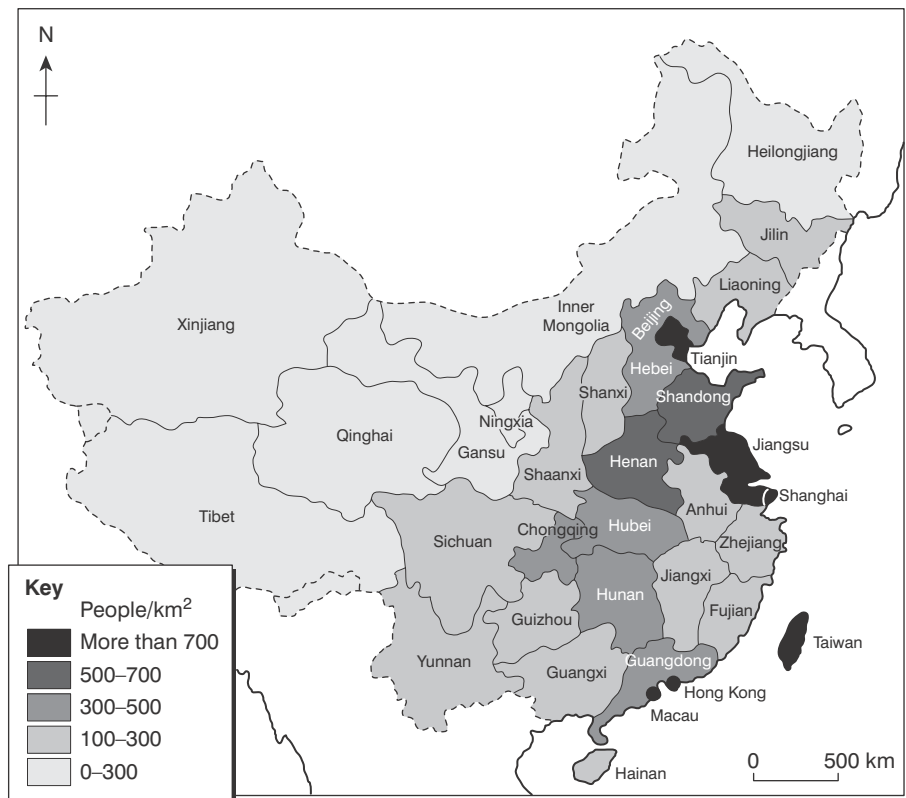


Figure 7: Population density, China

7 Study Figure 8. The two stories of the one child policy in action come from two sources. The first is from an official China news website and the second from the US government's Voice of America website. Write a short report evaluating the two news reports. To what extent do you believe

each report accurately reflects the operation of the one child policy in action?

8 Using the information in this unit, hold a class debate titled: 'Without the one child policy, the Chinese people would have been doomed to a life of famine, death and disease.'

Case 1	Case 2
<p>'Liang Xiaowu, aged 36, is a migrant worker from a suburban village in Zuyi City, Guizhou Province. He is an only child. His parents, both in their 60s, rely on his support. This is a heavy burden. However, a recent policy issued by the State Population and Family Planning Commission providing the Liangs with some much needed breathing space. In March 2004, the commission announced that farmers who were 60 years or more and who had not violated family planning policies would be rewarded with an allowance of at least 50 yuan per month.' The article goes on to say how this has brought a sense of relief to the family and how Liang Xiaowu has now abandoned his</p>	<p>'Four days after Mrs Yao gave birth in October, local officials descended on the Yao household in China's Fujian Province and dragged her and her husband to a hospital. There, the couple was forced to undergo sterilisation. Mr Yao, 31, is angry at the heavy-handed action. "My wife had a four and a half kilogram baby four days earlier. It is wrong to ask her to do another operation," he said. "At least wait until six months when she has recovered. What they have done was very cruel." The Yaos' mistake, as far as the government was concerned, was having a forbidden second child. Mrs Yao had one son from a previous marriage.'</p>

Figure 8: Two aspects of the one child policy in action

Sources: *China Today* and *Voice of America*