

## China's 'one child' policy, ageing population and related issues

By Mike Morrish

### Synopsis

China's population stood at 550 million in 1949. By 1990 it had doubled to 1.13 billion but the intervening years had seen dramatic changes in the country's fertility and life expectancy.

1979 saw the introduction of a 'one child' policy. Punitive fines are imposed on parents who have a second child without permission. The policy led to an upsurge of female infanticide, and currently in China there are 118 boys born for every 100 girls.

With lengthening life expectancy and fertility well below replacement level, China is facing serious problems in supporting the growing ranks of the elderly.

In 2011 half the country's population of 1.34 billion was classified as urban. Thirty years previously it had been approximately one fifth. By 2025 the urban population may be swelled by a further 350 million migrants from the countryside, reaching more than a billion by 2030. There will be 221 cities of more than a million people, compared to Europe's present total of 35.

There is tremendous pressure on young people in China to marry but the gender gap is making it increasingly difficult for the surplus males to find a wife. Nowadays there is greater emphasis on material factors. Young women can also face prejudice if they choose to remain single to pursue their own career.

### Key terms

**ageing population, birth control, fertility rate, gender imbalance, life expectancy, 'one child' policy, rural-urban migration, urbanisation**

### Learning objectives

By examining ways of life and contemporary challenges arising from and influencing urban change in a recently emerging economy, you will have a better understanding of:

- cities and urban society in the 21st century
- processes and change in human geography.

After working through this unit you will understand:

- the causes and effects of rapid urbanisation
- the causes and impacts of internal migration on the growth and character of cities
- population change in the wider political and social context.

Exam Board	Link to specification
<b>AQA</b>	Unit 1 GEOG1 Physical and Human Geography, Core Human Section, Population Change <a href="http://filestore.aqa.org.uk/subjects/specifications/alevel/AQA-2030-W-SP-14.PDF">http://filestore.aqa.org.uk/subjects/specifications/alevel/AQA-2030-W-SP-14.PDF</a> (see page 8)
<b>Edexcel</b>	Unit 1 Global Challenges Topic 2: Going Global; Unit 2, Geographical Investigations, Time to Rebrand, 'What is rebranding and why is it needed in some places?' <a href="http://www.edexcel.com/migrationdocuments/GCE%20New%20GCE/UA035234_GCE_Lin_Geog_Issue_4.pdf">http://www.edexcel.com/migrationdocuments/GCE%20New%20GCE/UA035234_GCE_Lin_Geog_Issue_4.pdf</a> (see pages 26–27 and 44)
<b>OCR</b>	A2 Unit F763 Global Issues, Population and Resources, Option B1 <a href="http://www.ocr.org.uk/Images/69036-specification.pdf">http://www.ocr.org.uk/Images/69036-specification.pdf</a> (see page 38)
<b>WJEC</b>	Unit G2 Changing Human Environments <a href="http://www.wjec.co.uk/uploads/publications/6312.pdf">http://www.wjec.co.uk/uploads/publications/6312.pdf</a> (see pages 22–23)
<b>CCEA</b>	Unit AS 2 Human Geography, Section B Unit A2 1: Human Interactions and Global Issues, Option A: Impact of Population Change <a href="http://www.rewardinglearning.org.uk/qualifications/results.aspx?g=1&amp;t=1&amp;c=R&amp;s=0&amp;v=0&amp;f=0&amp;q=182&amp;d=d">http://www.rewardinglearning.org.uk/qualifications/results.aspx?g=1&amp;t=1&amp;c=R&amp;s=0&amp;v=0&amp;f=0&amp;q=182&amp;d=d</a> (see pages 13–14 and 17–18)
<b>International Baccalaureate</b>	Geography Diploma Programme, Paper 1 – Core Theme – Patterns and Change, Population in Transition <a href="http://ibgeog2009.wikispaces.com/Populations_Transition">http://ibgeog2009.wikispaces.com/Populations_Transition</a>

# China's 'one child' policy, ageing population and related issues



**Figure 1** 'One child' policy advertisement, Xinjiang province

Source: Mike Morrish

China's population stood at 550 million when the Communist government, under the leadership of Mao Zedong, took power in 1949. Since 1949 the Chinese population has experienced dramatic changes in its fertility rate and life expectancy, and by 1990 the total population had doubled to 1.13 billion. During the 1950s Mao, against better advice, promoted rapid population growth. He believed that large families were a source of strength, raising workers for the collective economy and providing recruits for the People's Liberation Army. However, China's disastrous 'Great Leap Forward' led to a famine between 1959 and 1961 that claimed the lives of more than 30 million Chinese. In the ensuing decade attempts to introduce family planning made little headway during the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution.

The 1970s saw the first effective birth control campaigns, with the aim of limiting couples to no more

than two children. The government used the slogan *wan-xi-shao*: 'later, longer, fewer': later marriages, longer gaps between births, and fewer children. By 1979 more than two-thirds of Chinese couples were using contraception and the fertility rate had been halved from its 1960s peak to an average of 2.9 children per woman. There were corresponding improvements in education, health, family incomes and the role of women. Life expectancy at birth soared over Mao's reign, from 35 to 68 years.

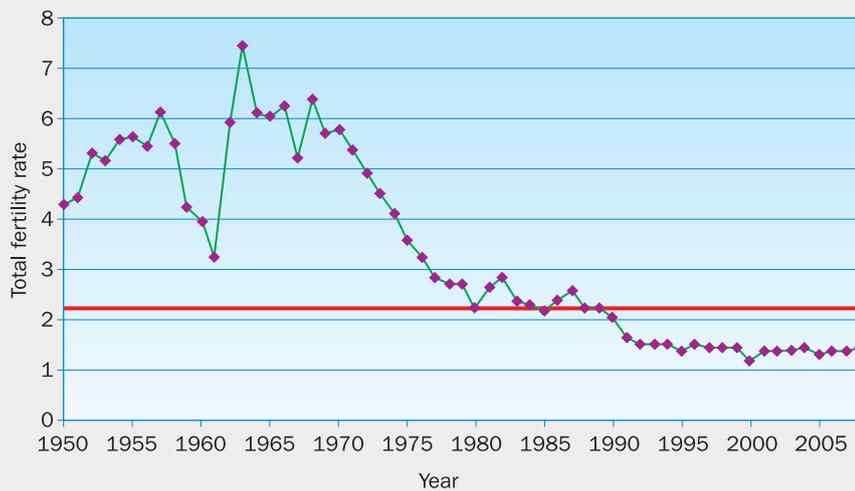
Following Mao's death in 1976, Deng Xiaoping emerged from a power struggle as China's new supreme leader. He initiated a raft of economic reforms, known as *gaige kaifang*, which opened up the country to private enterprise and international trade. This was paralleled by the introduction of the 'one child' policy on 1 January 1979 (Figure 1). The Communist government resolved to minimise population growth. Couples were

offered cash bonuses, better housing and free medical care if they promised to have a single child. The child would also benefit from improved welfare and greater educational opportunities.

At first the policy appeared to be successful but opposition grew, especially among rural peasants, who represented three-quarters of the population. Strong social and economic reasons made a large family desirable in the countryside. Most important was to ensure that a couple had one or more sons, which are a source of respect and continue the family name. Only sons can support parents in their old age, since daughters go to live with their husband's family. In practical terms, sons are stronger and more able to contribute to the physical work on farms.

By 1990 the authorities were forced to admit the 'one child' policy had failed to slow down growth sufficiently and China's population would overshoot the planned total of 1.2 billion in 2000. The reasons for this failure were found in the countryside, where the policy had never been applied effectively. Some farmers, particularly those situated near large cities, had become very prosperous and were prepared to pay substantial fines to have larger families. Others avoided registration of additional children's births. In the early 1990s the government responded with a crackdown on 'hidden' pregnancies and births, accompanied by a nationwide campaign of forced abortions and sterilisations.

After that there was no further tightening of the 'one child' policy but the fertility rate soon fell below



**Figure 2** Fertility rate 1950–2008 (births per woman) (red line shows replacement rate)

Source: United Nations

the 'replacement rate' of 2.1 births per woman and has subsequently fluctuated between 1.5 and 1.7 (Figure 2). It is clear that the main driver of fertility has been socio-economic change, with the factors of increasing affluence, urbanisation and modernisation playing a major role.

Rocketing housing and education costs have led many parents to conclude that they can only afford a single child and material aspirations take increasing precedence. Also the close and intrusive monitoring of women's fertility that occurred previously does not sit comfortably with the urban middle class in an era of international travel, social media and a consumer society.

In November 2013 the government announced a significant easing of the 'one child' rules by allowing a couple in which only one parent is a single child to have two children. The 'one child' policy is judged to have prevented 400 million extra births since its introduction but the pressures of an ageing society and a shrinking workforce may signal the need for measures that boost, rather than restrict, fertility in the future. China's population is expected to peak in ten years time at 1.45 billion.

## Disadvantages of the 'one child' policy

The 'one child' policy was originally proposed as a temporary measure but has now been in place for over 30 years, an entire generation. It is a fundamental aspect of modern Chinese society and, as time passed, important consequences became apparent and presented problems to individuals, families, rural communities, urban authorities, the Communist Party and the state.

### The 'demographic crunch'

The duration of the 'one child' policy has coincided exactly with China's economic rise to its current pre-eminence as the world's leading trading nation. A key factor in its manufacturing success has been the abundance of cheap, productive labour provided by an expanding working age population. This began to shrink in 2012 and will continue to decline as the size of the workforce becomes more reliant on the 'one child' generation.

### Support for the elderly

The second generation of single children not only have no siblings, they also have no aunts, uncles or cousins. By 2030 married couples could find themselves responsible for as many as 12 elderly people:

two sets of parents and up to four sets of grandparents.

### 'Little emperors'

In the early 1990s, as the first single children were becoming teenagers, Chinese media began to highlight the problem of parents who spoil their only child, causing problems of obesity, selfishness and bad behaviour.

### The gender gap

Currently in China there are on average 118 boys born for every 100 girls, compared with a standard biological ratio of 105:100. In some areas the gender imbalance can rise as high as 150:100. This reflects the traditional preference for male children. When ultrasound screening was introduced in the 1980s it became possible to determine gender in the womb, giving rise to sex-selective abortions if couples wanted to avoid having a girl.

### Fines, penalties and corruption

Punitive fines, the equivalent of several years' wages and known as 'social compensation fees', are imposed on parents who have a second child without permission. Other punishments can include blocked promotions at work, a 20% pay cut, loss of benefits and eviction from a subsidised apartment. Penalties vary from place to place and are enforced inconsistently, while corrupt officials may use fines to line their own pockets. The system is not helped by publicity surrounding celebrities who use their wealth to buy the right to have large families.

### Unregistered children

The 'one child' policy allows approximately one third of Chinese citizens to have a second child. This includes rural couples whose first child is a girl, parents who are both single children, ethnic minorities, disabled people and those expecting a multiple birth. However, since the

policy was introduced there have been millions of 'hidden births', creating a pool of individuals who do not officially exist. Unregistered children are not entitled to any state benefits and, as adults, cannot legally get married or have children themselves.

**Human rights abuses**

Official figures record that 336 million abortions and 196 million sterilisations have been performed under the 'one child' policy, many of which were carried out against the will of the women concerned. In 2007 in Bobai County, south-west Guangxi province, 17,000 women were subjected to sterilisations or abortions and fines totalling £800,000 were levied for 'illegal births'. The homes of those whose fines went unpaid were ransacked. Riots involving tens of thousands of residents broke out, making this the worst example of public disorder since the 1989 demonstrations in Beijing's Tiananmen Square.

**An ageing population**

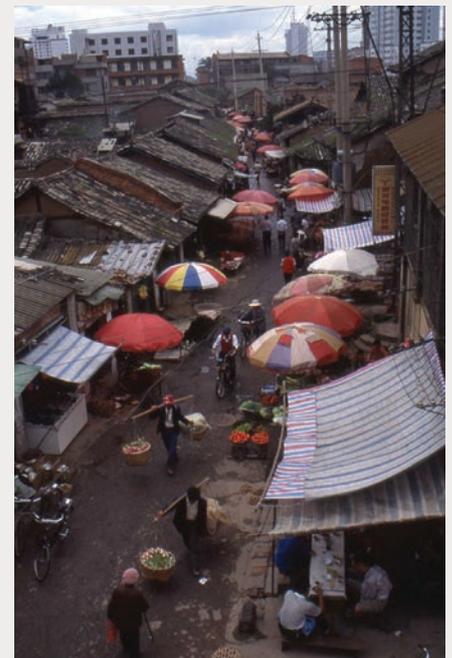
With lengthening life expectancy and fertility well below replacement level, China is facing serious problems in supporting the growing ranks of the elderly (Figure 3). As one observer put it 'China is getting older before getting rich'. Between

2002 and 2011 life expectancy in China increased from 71.5 to 74 years. In 2012 the number of people over 60 was 200 million, or 15% of the population, and that total is predicted to rise to 300 million in 2025 and 480 million by 2050. In contrast, the total number of 20–24-year-olds will fall by nearly half over the next decade, from 125 million to 68 million.

Although there is a strong tradition in rural China of families caring for the old, that responsibility has been eroded by the migration of young adults to work in the cities. Single children especially struggle to meet their filial duties: they may live far away from their parents or lack time due to economic changes. Also the number of working age people to support the over-60s is falling rapidly: in 2000 there were six workers per retiree, but by 2030 it will be barely two. Reforms over the past 10 years have greatly improved the provision of pensions and medical insurance. In 2012, 229 million urban employees and 449 million urban and rural residents had pension coverage, with 124 million pensioners receiving payments.

**Urbanisation**

In 2011 the results of China's sixth census, conducted the previous year, revealed that half the

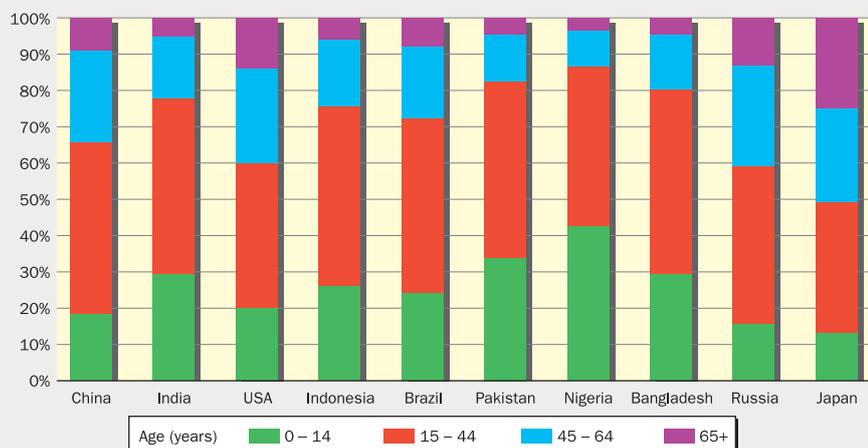


**Figure 4** Traditional residential area, Kunming

Source: Mike Morrish

country's population of 1.34 billion was now classified as urban (Figure 4). Thirty years previously it had been approximately one fifth. It had taken Western Europe 100 years to achieve a comparable rate of urbanisation and, more recently, Japan and South Korea had required 50 years. As well as being so fast, the process of urbanisation in China has also been the most managed in human history. The state is involved in every respect. That is not to suggest that urban development has always been strictly planned or controlled: it is in the nature of the country's rapid expansion of manufacturing, commerce, infrastructure, power production and housing that environmental factors have often been marginalised.

The most recent Five Year Plan, adopted in 2011, promoted further urbanisation as it aimed to raise living standards and give priority to developments in the western interior. By 2025 the urban population may be swelled by a further 350 million migrants from the countryside, reaching more



**Figure 3** Age distributions (percentages) for China and other selected countries

Source: Geohive.com, based on UN statistics

than a billion by 2030. There will be 221 cities of more than a million people, compared to Europe's present total of 35.

As China shifts its economic focus from export led growth to boosting domestic demand, cities become crucial since urban dwellers consume far more than the rural population. Each year 2.5 to 3 million farmers lose land to urban sprawl, rarely receiving sufficient compensation. Local officials are eager to find new sources of economic growth and, having already redeveloped the historic centres of China's cities, they are now targeting productive farmland on the fringes of major urban areas. This gives rise to tens of thousands of conflicts every year as evicted farmers protest over the loss of their land, businesses and livelihoods. It is significant that the division of land use in new urban areas is 50% industrial parks and only 20–30% residential, contrasting with 50–70% housing in other countries.

### Rural–urban migration

China's economic miracle was powered by migrant workers who flocked to the booming cities of the east coast from rural villages inland. As well as providing much of the manufacturing workforce, migrants are employed in construction, domestic service, cleaning, security and transport. The average urban income is £2,750, while rural earnings are officially only one third of that, though some observers claim that the real city/countryside income ratio is 5:1 and is 25% wider than it was in 1997.

There is now reckoned to be a 'floating population' of over 200 million migrants in Chinese cities, whom urban residents view with suspicion. A *nonmingong* works punishing hours, spends years away

from home and family, but is regarded as dirty, uncouth and responsible for undercutting wages and overwhelming services. Younger migrants are the most dissatisfied, being well aware of the disparity between their treatment and the situation of permanent residents, and they represent a threat to stability unless the authorities give them the rights they deserve.

Their grievances centre on the *hukou* system, instituted in 1958 for the communist planned economy, which categorises people according to their place of origin rather than where they live. This means that migrant workers are classified as rural residents who have no access to education, housing or medical services in the city. Children of migrants inherit their parents' *hukou* registration so they face the same disadvantages: an estimated 19 million migrant children live in Chinese cities, though three times as many are left by parents in the countryside to be cared for by relatives (Figure 5).

Rural migrants make up one third of Beijing's population of 19 million, predominantly living in migrant-inhabited areas such as



Figure 5 Grandmother and baby, Guizhou province

Source: Mike Morrish

Haiding, Chaoyang and Daxing. Secure 'walled villages' have been built within these areas to segregate migrant workers from Beijing residents, and plans exist to house up to 4 million people in this type of settlement.

### Social issues

It is predicted that by 2020 there will be 24 million men of marriageable age without partners, and by 2030 that number could have doubled. In Shanghai the proportion of adults over 15 who are still single is 25% and rising, though the figure is much lower in more remote areas.

There is tremendous pressure on young people in China to marry but the gender gap is making it increasingly difficult for the surplus males to find a wife. Many of these lonely men are found in 'bachelor villages' of the rural interior, where poverty and lack of opportunity blight their marriage prospects. Nowadays, when seeking a partner there is greater emphasis on material factors, most notably the possession of a house or apartment. Women prefer to marry older men, who tend to be wealthier and more mature: male suitors, on the other hand, favour younger women. The frustration felt by those spurned by women can spill over into crime.

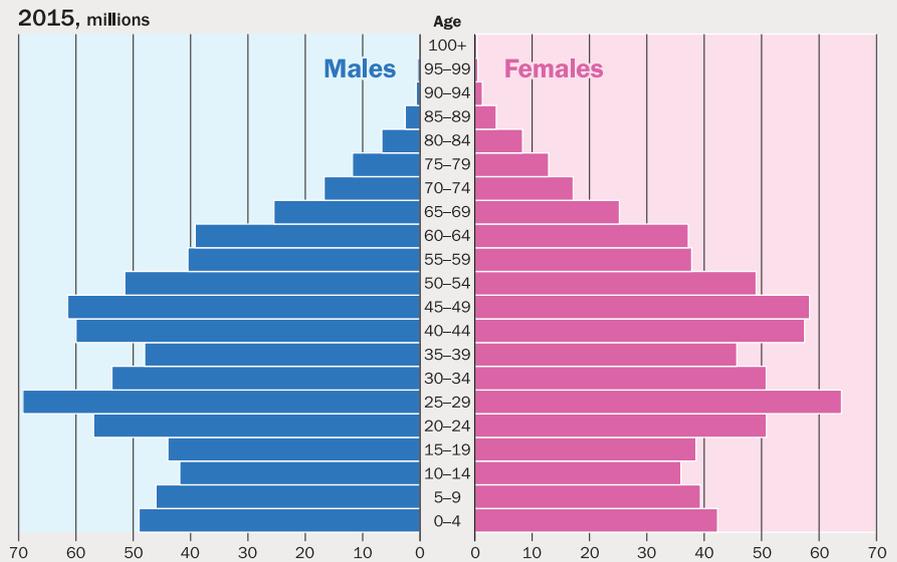
Unmarried women also attract disapproval from a society that holds deeply traditional views of marriage. The All China Women's Federation refers to those still single at 27 as *sheng nu* – 'leftover women'. These are often well-educated, moneyed, professional women who have put their career ahead of marriage. This is very much an urban phenomenon: in Shanghai, for example, single women outnumber unmarried men in the 30–44 age group.

**Surrogate babies**

Although surrogacy is theoretically illegal in China, a black market operates efficiently to provide surrogate mothers for childless wealthy, often older, professional women. A fee amounting to £50,000 is paid to agencies that recruit the surrogates, usually students, who are also supported by the clients during the pregnancy. The surrogates earn around £20,000 which can be up to 80 times a graduate salary in Beijing. The unlicensed IVF facilities that service the surrogacy business make it convenient to link the process to male sex selection.

**Homosexuality**

Homosexuality remains a sensitive issue in China: indeed, it was illegal until 1997, and classified as a mental illness until 2001. There is a stigma attached to being openly gay; much prejudice still exists, even in the most cosmopolitan cities, but there is legal protection against homophobic discrimination. Research suggests that 80% of gay and lesbian people get married, mostly to 'straight' partners, a reflection of the traditional pressure exerted by parents to continue the family line. China's Social Science



**Figure 6** Population pyramid for China 2015  
Source: UN Dept of Economic and Social Affairs

Academy estimates that some 12 million gay men are in fact married to heterosexual women. Interestingly, 90% of respondents in a recent study had no objection to working with gay colleagues (more than in the USA), and 30% would back same-sex marriage.

**Prostitution**

The demand created by millions of men without partners, and migrant workers living a long way from home, sustains widespread prostitution in China. Six million women have worked in China's sex

industry in recent years and, like prostitutes everywhere, they face the hazards of abusive clients, HIV infection and police harassment or crackdowns. Prostitution is criminalised and the Ministry of Public Security holds 20–30,000 women in detention every year, often employed in prison workshops seven days a week without pay. On release, most return to the 'hair salons' and massage parlours where they can earn up to £700 a month, three times the average income of an unskilled labourer.

**Focus questions**

- 1 Refer to Figure 1. The photograph shows an old advertisement promoting the 'one child' policy in Xinjiang province, northwest China. How does it indicate the different approaches taken towards the region's indigenous Muslim minority and the main Han Chinese population?
- 2 Refer to Figure 6. Attempt to explain the pattern of the population pyramid in terms of the impact of China's 'one child' policy since its introduction in 1979.
- 3 Predict the features of China's future population (a) with and (b) without a continuation of the 'one child' policy.

**Checkpoint**

**Remember this case study:**

While you're reading, consider the following questions: Critically evaluate the policies which have influenced Chinese population post-1949. What were they? The policies were started in order to: What are the consequences of the one-child policy?

This is because:

My feelings on these consequences are:  
Do you agree/disagree with the one-child policy?  
An alternative way to solve some of the problems of over-population could be:  
Pros/Cons of your plan:  
Try to make your notes fit on to one sheet of A4 paper.