

Outline the
background to china's
one child family policy
and assess its likely
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China has long been a nation with a large populace. By the time the People's Republic of China (PRC) was founded in 1949 its population totalled 540 million. By July 1990 China's population reached 1.16 billion and accounted for 22% of the world's population (Chen, 1995). In addition to a rapid increase in population, poor population characteristics and uneven distribution have affected the country's development.

Few countries in the world cope with such high population pressures as China's thus social and economic problems are inevitable consequences. In response to such pressures China's family planning program, particularly its 1979 mandatory one child policy, has received a large amount of the attention from the world's academic community. This is partly because of the relatively limited access to information that China provided, but is also a product of widespread acknowledgment of the measurable, though not universal, success of its various birth-control programs. These programs have tended to be tied to economic and political shifts within the country. Elisabeth Croll divides these shifts into three family models beginning in 1949.

The Complex Peasant Family Model was in effect from 1949 to 1969 and was concerned mainly with ideological shifts from the traditional "ideal" Chinese family to the family unit as a part of the communist regime. The Small Family Model was practical from 1970 to 1978 and centred on voluntary birth reduction for urban families and lenient birth limits for peasant families (Croll, 1985). The Single-Child Family Model has dominated Chinese policy since 1979 (Winckler 2002). China's one child family policy has remained in

place despite the widespread political and social change that has been implemented over the past two decades.

It emerged from the belief that rapid unbridled population growth, and its resulting increase in numbers of young people, could seriously threaten the future development of the country. Each of these models has produced reaction from the Chinese people and changes in population; I will outline the reasons for the reactions, the predictions about the consequences of continuing the policy and the possible advisability of the policy more generally. Integral to this is the success of the one child policy in terms of public response to policy implementation, along with its demographic consequences, both intended and unintended. Scholarly consensus is that while the one-child policy has, to some extent, succeeded in stemming China's population growth; it has also spawned inequitable social outcomes; elements of which can be isolated as having significant implications for China's future. Notwithstanding significant uncertainties with regard to demographic events in China, its population problem has subsisted throughout hundreds of years of history and culture; thus is not solely a modern phenomenon.

Traditionally, the ideal Chinese family consisted of several children and at least one son, who was particularly important because the daughters left the household when they married. The sons remained, taking care of the family farm, providing for elderly parents and relatives, and producing children to carry on the family name (Croll, 1985; Greenhalgh, 1994). Families continued to have children until they had a son, labour demands in rural communities were high, and families desired as many children as they could sustain. Over <https://assignbuster.com/outline-the-background-to-chinas-one-child-family-policy-and-assess-its-likely-success/>

the past century, China experienced a series of uprisings, wars, epidemics and the dismantling of imperial authority during which time the annual population growth probably reached no more than 0.

3%. The gross population growth rate, however, steadily rose to around 2.8%, mostly due to falling death rates, translating into around 250 million additional people by 1970. This expansion was seen, initially, as part of China's increasing strength, with Mao Zedong (Chairman of ruling Chinese Communist Party from 1949 to 1976) quoted as saying that "of all things in the world, people are the most precious" (Kane, 1987: 41). During the period of the Complex Peasant Family Model, the government was squarely focused on economic, political, and cultural issues in China. Economically, transition to collectivism with its lack of individual ownership weakened the traditional, land-based family unit (Croll, 1985).

A number of government initiatives touched on family planning, but none had as their purpose in population control (Croll, 1985). The population exploded from 560 million in 1949 to 810 million in 1969, and increase of almost 70% (Banister, 1987). Part of this was due to an increase in life expectancy during the period, from below 40 to nearly 60 (Croll, 1985), due to changes in health services. As health and economic measures improved, particularly in rural communities, large families became a symbol of newfound wealth and stability. Rapid population growth, however, did not appear to be matched by the government's ability to cater for the basic needs of its people. In 1970, alarmed by the implications for China's future if the population explosion continued, the government began to advocate the Small Family Model (Croll 1985).

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In 1972 the CCP formally declared the establishment of the State Family Planning Commission which advocated the key principle of "one-family, one-child" setting limits in terms of the desired rate for population growth.

Projections were that China would soon be unable to feed or economically sustain its population if growth continued (Kaufman et. al, 1989). The Chinese government began a concerted effort to persuade families to have only one or two children. The slogan of the campaign was "later - longer - fewer;" it encouraged young people to marry later, wait longer before having their first child, and to have fewer children in the aim of patriotism (Greenhalgh, 1994).

Population research studies had been discontinued in China in the late 1950s due to Marxist doctrine and it was only in 1975 that new university departments, staffed mainly by statisticians, began to establish themselves (Kane, 1999). It was not long before researchers realised that with half the population aged under 21 years, it was inevitable that the population would grow, even if families remained quite small (Kane, 1999). By the time of the census in 1982, there were already more than one billion people in China, and if contemporary trends continued, there would be 1.4 billion people by the end of the century. Hao (1988) observes that by the early 1980s, most population growth targets were abandoned and the official objective from 1985 was to maintain the population at about 1.2 billion by the year 2000 (Kane, 1999).

The results were spectacular. The birth rates per woman dropped from six children to just under three children, while this was short of the

government's goal of 1.1 children per woman, it was a marked decrease
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(Greenhalgh, 1994). For the most part the policy was accepted by the Chinese people and birth reductions were voluntary.

It is unclear why the Chinese government did not continue such a successful policy, but leaders stated that the "Small Family Model" (Croll, 1985) was ended in favour of the One Child Model so that China would achieve a secure, globally recognised economic status by the end of the millennium (Greenhalgh, 1994). The Chinese government, then, introduced its radical policy in 1979 requiring that urban couples limit their families to one child each. As Fong (2004: 1) suggests, the aim of the initiative was "to help the country leapfrog from a Third-World economy into the First-World economy by mimicking First-World fertility and education patterns". It was hoped that third and subsequent births could be eradicated and that about a third of couples would agree to adhere to having only one child. Feng and Hao (1992), note that strategies to discourage larger families included financial levies on each additional child and sanctions ranging from social pressure to restricted career prospects for those in government employment.

The One Child Family Model, implemented in 1979 originally only encouraged one-child families. The government was trying to rapidly make China a developed socialist nation, and the costs of sustaining the projected population would take resources away from industry, technology, and defence (Croll, 1985). In 1980, One Child became mandatory. Women who had birthed two living children were forced to become sterilised.

These sterilisations peaked in 1983, when the government launched an aggressive nation-wide campaign (Greenhalgh, 1994). Women who had one

living child were forced to use contraceptives, the most common being the IUD (Intra-Uterine Devices). Second and third pregnancies were sometimes forcibly aborted by the government, against the wishes of the mother (Kaufman et. al, 1989). As Kane (1999) asserts, all factors conspired to ensure that, within a short space of time, around 90% of couples in urban areas were persuaded to limit their families to a single child. Banister (1987) highlights how the attitudes of families in rural areas of China contrasted with those of families living in the towns and cities.

Rural families tended to be more resistant to the one child policy, as poorer peasants with limited savings and no pensions relied on children to support them in later life. Greenhalgh (1992) describes how many peasants, unconvinced by government policies and their likely duration, were skilled at avoiding unpopular prescriptions forcing local authorities to rely on financial penalties for higher order births. He observes that, " village level family planning workers were caught between the state's demands and the determination of their friends and neighbours" (1992, p. 56). However, since its inception " reductions in Chinese fertility have reduced the country's (and the world's) population growth by some 250 million" (Kane, 1995). This reported decrease in fertility reduced at least some of the pressures on communities, the government, resources and the environment in China.

Conversely, however, authors have identified distinctions between the letter of the law where the one child policy is concerned and evidence that the policy has been avoided, evaded or flouted in ways that imply difficulties with successful management and reporting of population objectives (Johnson 1993). Variation in one child policy application have been identified, along <https://assignbuster.com/outline-the-background-to-chinas-one-child-family-policy-and-assess-its-likely-success/>

with evasion and avoidance strategies on the part of Chinese individuals.

Many commentators have noted that there is significant under-reporting of both male and female births, with the latter being twice as likely to be under-reported. It accounts for about half to two-thirds of the difference in infant sex ratios, which had risen to 114 boys to every 100 girls by the early 1990s (Kane, 1999). Johnson (1993) describes how unrecorded daughters are often left with relatives, adopted out or abandoned to orphanages and sex ratios are further complicated by widespread abortion.

It has been noted that the Chinese government oversight of private lives through the one-child program encumbers the reproductive, living, and career choices of individuals throughout China (Banister 1987). Due to the prospect of losing state-provided benefits or of getting fined for exceeding the birth limit, it is disadvantageous for a family to put multiple children on its household register (Hull, 1991). Underreporting takes several forms: adopting the baby out, so that the adoptive family includes the infant in its registration practice; reporting the female as an immigrant some time after birth to account for registration delays; or simply not reporting the birth at all. This suggests that China's actual population numbers may be different from officially reported figures and that the unregistered population could conceivably inflict stress on the social-welfare infrastructure (Hull 1991). Tellingly, unregistered births in China appear to be much more routine in rural areas where it is conservatively estimated there have been more than 20 million unregistered births, comprising at least 1.6 percent of the total population of China in 1996 (Chen 1996).

The growth of internal migration seems to have had a significant effect on the PRC's success in limiting families to one child. The demand for labour in the towns and cities has grown in recent years and led to a relaxation of previously tight restrictions on movement. Government attempts to quantify and regulate the migrants have had limited success. Scharping (2002) recorded recent estimates which show that up to 150 million Chinese people, mostly adults in their 20s and 30s, constitute a floating population who leave their villages for periods of varying duration.

These people often go unregistered with the authorities since they tend to earn cash wages, live in temporary accommodation, moving around between jobs, cities and villages. Such practices tend to render population statistics unreliable, with some estimates of a quarter of all births going unrecorded in 1991-2 (Zeng, 1996). Population distribution, like economic development has historically been quite uneven in China with coastal areas much more densely populated than the interior and mountainous regions. Most of china's "floating" population swarmed into better-developed and developing cities like Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou.

Residential background information of migrant workers is kept where they came from (Freidman 2001) and accordingly, there is a potential for China's migrant population to be uncontrolled by any family-planning authority (Goldstein 1997). Some observers have suggested that China's migrant workers routinely ignore family-planning policy and have more than one child thus making the floating population largely responsible for an increase in the number of total births under the one-child policy (Christiansen 1996).

Meanwhile, particularly owing to the economic reforms that led to a rise in <https://assignbuster.com/outline-the-background-to-chinas-one-child-family-policy-and-assess-its-likely-success/>

their incomes in the past couple of decades some Chinese peasants were willing and increasingly able to pay penalties for having another child outside the birth quota (Goldstein 1997). Even though some migrant workers may not want to have them for economic reasons, if they desired to have them for cultural reasons, they might be able to do so and avoid penalty from the regulatory apparatus of the PRC.

The variety of ways that people have found to challenge the enforcement mechanisms of the one-child policy demonstrates that the existence of the policy, even in a one-party state where instances of coercion and intimidation have been connected to enforcement practices, does not guarantee compliance (Zeng, 1996). One unintended result of the government's one child policy was the removal of first-born girls from the home. Couples who had a son as their first child, which should statistically be around half, were likely to voluntarily comply with the one child limit (Kaufman et. al, 1989).

Those who had a girl were likely to try for a second child, regardless of penalty, or find some way to remove the girl from the home, allowing them another chance for a boy (Croll, 1985). Some families were able to adopt their girl babies outside of the home; some resorted to infanticide. China's long tradition of preferring male to female children is described by Li and Cooney (1993) as a 2000-year old cultural norm wherein parents consider sons important for reasons aside from sentiment: as sources of support in their old age of contribution to a household labour force. There is also evidence of more extreme responses to the one-child policy. Johansson and

Nygren (1991) refer to “ the missing girls of China” in a survey of a change in sex ratios in China from 1970 to 1987.

Tien et al. (1992: 15) comment on “ a clear increase in the proportion of male babies... undoubtedly related to the government’s population policy”.

One view of the increased ratio of male to female births in China is that extra-quota births are more likely to be reported even if fines are incurred if the infant is male and non-reporting is more likely if the infant is female (Yi et al. 1993). Misreporting births has been said to account for up to 85% of the sex ratio differential between males and females (Promfret 2001). As prenatal sex selection becomes more technologically feasible, abortions are expected to overtake infanticide as a sex selector of choice (Yi et al 1993) regardless of the government’s orders forbidding such prenatal sex determination activities.