

**The One Child Policy and Its Cultural Implications upon Modern China from 1979**  
**to Present Day.**

**“To what extent did China’s one child policy impact Chinese culture from 1979 to  
present day?”**

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## **I. Introduction**

During the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century overpopulation emerged as an increasingly global issue and this became especially evident at the 1974 United Nations' International Conference on Population. The one child policy, a population control method implemented in 1979, was the People's Republic of China's (PRC) unique response to this globally recognized issue. While this method works theoretically its practical implementation faced obstacles and had unforeseen consequences on Chinese culture. To investigate this, the question: "To what extent did China's one child policy impact Chinese culture from 1979 to present day?" was used. This investigation seeks to evaluate the method used by the PRC to control population within the context of its cultural implications. This included analysis using the disciplines of history and global politics through government documents, studies, and journal reports that all discussed the impacts of this theory of population control in China and other countries. Evidence was analyzed from both Chinese sources and sources from other countries to ensure greater reliability and the acknowledgement of contrasting views. The methodology of analyzing historical and globally political sources was chosen to offer diverse analysis on a variety of impacts the policy had on Chinese culture from many perspectives. For these sources I will affirm and challenge different analyses to draw a fair conclusion on a globally significant issue. This research question is worthy of investigation because of the increasing importance of population control as the consequences of overpopulation are being felt locally and globally. The Chinese one child policy marked a turning point in how population control is viewed and created a discussion of the correlation between human rights and population control. This investigation will evaluate a past population control method which requires deep reflection as we make global population policy in the future.

## II. Origins of the One Child Policy

Mao Zedong saw large families as a key to China's new strength; however, after his rule China's culture shifted to favor small families. Under Mao rapid population growth of around 2.8% was supported<sup>1</sup>. By the 1970s this growth rate pressured the government to address possible control via "targets for population growth rate" including, "Contraceptive and abortion services... promotion of later marriage, longer intervals between births, and smaller families"<sup>2</sup>. After these targets successfully slowed growth, the government set the new limit to 1% by 1980<sup>3</sup>. After further analysis unanticipated exponential growth was realized. In 1980 the government shifted from goals based on limiting population growth to goals preventing the population from reaching 1.2 billion by 2000 through the "longer, later, fewer campaign"<sup>4</sup>. The campaign initiated the one child policy which limited the Han, the dominant ethnicity, to one child per couple and marked the beginning of China's secular approach to an international struggle. The Chinese government believed the one child policy would bring, "about a sustained economic growth and sustainable development, satisfying the daily increasing material and cultural demands of the whole people, and guaranteeing the fundamental and long-term interests of the current generation and their posterity"<sup>5</sup>. This policy and its enforcement would eventually lead to the disruption of their gender distribution which caused unexpected cultural implications.

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<sup>1</sup> Penny Kane and Ching Y. Choi, "China's one child family policy," *The BMJ* 319 (October 9, 1999): 992, accessed September 13, 2018, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1116810/>.

<sup>2</sup> Information Office of the State Council Of the People's Republic of China, Family Planning in China, accessed September 13, 2018, <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/celt/eng/zt/zfbps/t125241.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> Kane and Choi, "China's one child," 992.

<sup>4</sup> Kane and Choi, "China's one child," 992.

<sup>5</sup> Information Office of the State Council Of the People's Republic of China, Family Planning.

### III. Enforcement of the One Child Policy

China's strict enforcement of the one child policy sparked intracultural conflicts that caused a significant cultural shift. Within rural areas there was stronger resistance to the policy than in urban centers due to pervasive son preference in the primarily agricultural economies. Here, "sons are preferred because they have a higher wage-earning capacity..., they continue the family line and they usually take responsibility for care of parents in illness and old age"<sup>6</sup>. Girls are viewed as a burden to the family because they would be married and offer little support to their birth parents. In response to this China allowed rural couples whose first born was a girl to try for another child to have a boy<sup>7</sup>. Enforcement of this policy ranged from fines and jail time for violations to forced sterilization, forced abortions, and imprisonment of family members<sup>8</sup>. These methods laid the foundation upon which cultural shifts rapidly occurred throughout the country. Other smaller strategies included trying to shift public opinion from son preference to acceptance of both genders to prevent excessive births in attempts for a son. This was observed through "the Care for Girls campaign...a comprehensive program of measures, initially conducted in 24 counties in 24 provinces, which aims to improve perceptions of the value of girls"<sup>9</sup>. However, this was only effective in urban areas where there was more gender equality. The strict enforcement of the policy led to female births being underreported, often these babies were abandoned by its parents. Additionally, its enforcement would have important social, economic, and political consequences that would reshape the culture of modern China.

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<sup>6</sup> Therese Hesketh, Li Lu, and Zhu Wei Xing, "The Consequences of Son Preference and Sex-Selective Abortion in China and Other Asian Countries," *Canadian Medical Association Journal* 183, no. 12 (September 6, 2011): 1374, accessed September 13, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1503/cmaj.101368>.

<sup>7</sup> *It's a Girl!*, directed by Evan Grae Davis (2012; Shadowline Films, 2013), DVD, accessed September 13, 2018.

<sup>8</sup> *It's a Girl!*.

<sup>9</sup> Hesketh, Lu, and Xing, "The Consequences," 1376.

## IV. Impacts of the One Child Policy

### A. Son Preference and Female Infanticide

Traditional Chinese son preference is exemplified in the idea and common saying “重男轻女” (zhong nan, qing nu) which means heavy boy, light girl<sup>10</sup>. This, one of many sayings, suggests that boys are much more important in Chinese society than girls. While son preference is easily observed in Chinese policy, according to Hesketh, “There are also specific local reasons for son preference: in India, the expense of the dowry; and in South Korea and China, deep-rooted Confucian values and patriarchal family systems”<sup>11</sup>. Son preference can be observed globally however it is especially strong in these Asian countries and when combined with population restriction can prove deadly. Confucian values and a rapidly rising population in China have further exasperated the lower societal status of women and has led to their gendercide in favor of the highly prized males. Males are viewed as superior because they, “carry on the family name, inherit the family property, and play a special role in family traditions...if no sons are born, the family dies”<sup>12</sup>. Westley argues that these social statuses and staunch son preference have been reinforced by marriage customs. Often when a female gets married her husband’s family may begin to take priority over her own. In this way a female is seen as a waste of resources or a financial burden to her family since she cannot promise them a secure future like a son<sup>13</sup>. This persistent son preference has caused many families to take drastic

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<sup>10</sup> Kelly Donovan, "A SOCIETY IN CRISIS: CHINA'S GROWING GENERATION GAP," *Virginia Review of Asian Studies* 16 (2014): 205, PDF.

<sup>11</sup> Hesketh, Lu, and Xing, "The Consequences," 1374.

<sup>12</sup> Sidney B. Westley and Minja Kim Choe, "How Does Son Preference Affect Populations in Asia?," *Asia Pacific Issues* 84 (September 2007): 2, PDF.

<sup>13</sup> Sidney B. Westley, "Evidence Mounts for Sex Selective Abortion," *Asia-Pacific Population & Policy* 34 (May/June 1995): 2.

measures to ensure they can have a son. These measures including, “Neglect or mistreatment can increase female mortality rates: in some cases, families may even resort to female infanticide”<sup>14</sup>.

Sex selective abortions rose in frequency after increased access to ultrasound machines and access to abortion allowed these to be abused to abort female babies. This is not unique to China and often happens in countries like South Korea and India. Westley shows the global effects of

infanticide by stating, “Around the world, death rates between birth and age five are higher for boys than for girls.

But the balance is reversed in.... China, India, Nepal, and Pakistan”<sup>15</sup>. China’s

sex ratio at birth (SRB) changed drastically from 106 boys for every 100 girls in 1979 to 121 in 2005, the world average SRB is around 105 and can be

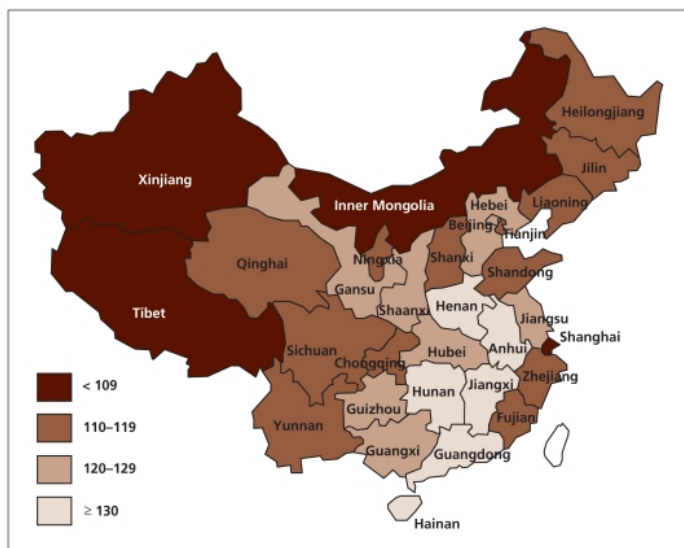


Figure 1: “Sex ratios in the one-to-five group in Mainland China in 2005” (1375).

contrasted in figure 1<sup>16</sup>. This has caused a higher proportion of men entering the workforce and marrying age compared to women which has allowed women to be highly selective and “‘marry up’ inevitably leaving the least desirable men with no marriage prospects”<sup>17</sup>. These men, known as bare branches, left without relationships and failing societal expectations could begin to form a toxic culture that could lead to increased violence including prostitution and human trafficking for wives. Prominent son preference, pressure on women to conceive sons, and the infanticide of

<sup>14</sup> Westley, "Evidence Mounts," 1.

<sup>15</sup> Westley and Choe, "How Does," 2.

<sup>16</sup> Hesketh, Lu, and Xing, "The Consequences," 1374.

<sup>17</sup> Hesketh, Lu, and Xing, "The Consequences," 1375.

their own gender has contributed to “one of the world’s highest rates of suicide of women in the reproductive years”<sup>18</sup>. The physical shift in population distributions has caused a previously unseen culture in China where despite women being in high demand, they are still unwanted in pregnancies and face new dangers in a patriarchal culture.

## B. Eldercare

The one child policy, which has been exasperated by the phenomena of female infanticide, has created a limited younger population to support China’s massive aging population. This unplanned consequence of the one child policy in combination with the shift in socioeconomic attitudes has created, “the emerging “4-2-1” family structure (four grand-parents; two parents, neither of whom has siblings; and one child)”<sup>19</sup>. Because the SRB has shifted to a much higher proportion of males to females, the population reaching retirement and elderly ages without a proper support system from their children is rapidly expanding and posing an issue for China (see figure 2)<sup>20</sup>. Feng states, “The old-age dependency ratio is projected to soar, from 13 dependents per

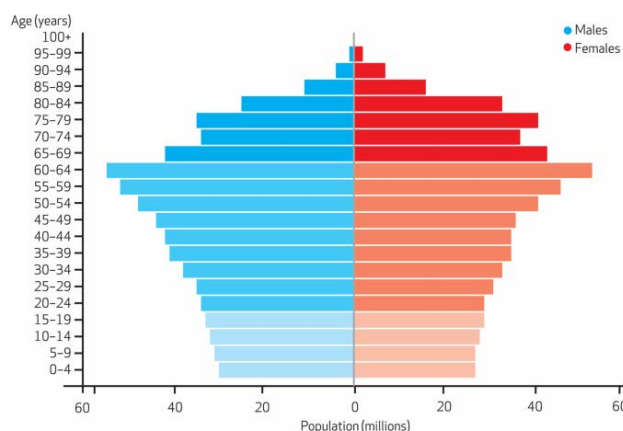


Figure 2: "Age Structure of China's Population, 2050 (Projected)" (15)

100 working-age people in 2010 to 45 per 100 by 2050”<sup>21</sup>. The government has previously relied on the Confucian family value of filial piety as the support mechanism for eldercare and is now having to create new support systems. Younger generations have moved away from filial piety

<sup>18</sup> Kane and Choi, "China's one child," 994.

<sup>19</sup> Zhanlian Feng et al., "China's Rapidly Aging Population Creates Policy Challenges In Shaping A Viable Long-Term Care System," Health Affairs 31, no. 12 (December 2012): 2, PDF.

<sup>20</sup> Feng et al., "China's Rapidly," 15.

<sup>21</sup> Feng et al., "China's Rapidly," 2.

due to a much more western and “selfish” lifestyle than their elders under a stricter PRC. These generations also are having less children and putting more importance on their careers and money over families. Donovan argues, “the younger generation expects more freedoms and does not desire to work to provide for the older generation. Instead, they wish to be successful and benefit themselves”. These new desires have led large sections of rural youth to move to cities, this furthers the eldercare issue as older generations age and don’t have local support structures. These impacts may also explain China’s elderly suicide epidemic. According to Nie, “in the United States, the over-65 age group accounts for 18 % of all suicides, in contrast to 44 % or 2.5 times higher in China”<sup>22</sup>. Nie’s contrast to the United States puts local context into the depth of this issue in China, whose elder population is over 200 million. Elderly suicides can be a sign of mistreatment and lack of care. According to Powell, “The Chinese government has started allocating more funding for long term care for the elderly” but, “the long-term care delivery system does not have an adequately trained workforce”<sup>23</sup>. China does not spend as much on healthcare compared to the world average which could explain the lack of policy that adequately supports their aging populations<sup>24</sup>. The one child policy has likely intensified existing issues in Chinese eldercare by making more elderly people rely on government assistance and welfare and creating a less stable eldercare culture.

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<sup>22</sup> Jing-Bao Nie, "Erosion of Eldercare in China: a Socio-Ethical Inquiry in Aging, Elderly Suicide and the Government's Responsibilities in the Context of the One-Child Policy," *Ageing International* 41 (2016): 355, PDF.

<sup>23</sup> Tabitha Michelle Powell, "THE NEGATIVE IMPACT OF THE ONE CHILD POLICY ON THE CHINESE SOCIETY AS IT RELATES TO THE PARENTAL SUPPORT OF THE AGING POPULATION" (master's thesis, Georgetown University, 2012), 44, accessed September 13, 2018,

<sup>24</sup> Nie, "Erosion of Eldercare,".

### C. Economic Impacts

The one child policy has caused indirect and direct economic impacts that have been enforced by government officials onto Chinese citizens. One of the most pervasive forms of enforcement of the policy has been through fines which have been especially harsh where the policy is most challenged, rural areas. According to the United States government, “social compensation fees, recognizing their coercive nature, and witnessing that they are especially burdensome on the poor, while more affluent citizens simply pay the fee and have additional children”<sup>25</sup>. In these rural areas most families live in poverty and are unable to support themselves or their children with the weight of fines. Despite this China has reported that they have “taken an important step in giving support to the development of poor areas to alleviate poverty by promoting family planning, holding population growth under control, and raising the life quality of the population in those areas”<sup>26</sup>. This claimed benefit of the policy has not been observed and in contrast, many parents are forced to leave their villages and towns to go to cities where they can make more money to send home to support their family and pay for fines<sup>27</sup>. During the 1980s the Chinese government used strong financial punishments for violations of the policy this included a reduction in paychecks up to 10% from both parents for 14 years for having an extra child<sup>28</sup>. In urban areas it is more common for families who can afford the punishments to have extra children in hopes for a boy; however, in poor rural areas families are forced between choosing financial ruin and sex selective abortion in hopes for a son. In both urban and rural areas, the communities are encouraged to report on women who are illegally

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<sup>25</sup> One-Child Policy in China: Hearings Before the House International Relations Committee, 2004 Leg. (D.C. Dec. 14, 2004) (statement of Arthur E. Dewey, Assistant Secretary for Population, Refugees and Migration). Accessed September 13, 2018. <https://2001-2009.state.gov/g/prm/rls/39823.htm>.

<sup>26</sup> Information Office of the State Council Of the People's Republic of China, *Family Planning*.

<sup>27</sup> *It's a Girl!*.

<sup>28</sup> *It's a Girl!*.

pregnant, if they do so they may receive a reward from the government. The families who have been reported on may face forced abortions, forced sterilizations, and may lose their jobs. In addition to these punishments, if the child is born, they will not become a citizen of China which can pose serious economic burdens of the family and the child in the future. These children cannot leave the country, travel on airplanes, go to school, or receive welfare. Because these illegal children cannot leave China they will grow up and reach adulthood without a future. As China moved away from a purely communist society and began to take on more capitalist economic policies their cultural values shifted. This has resulted in younger generations placing a high importance on their economic status over family life. This exaggerates the divisions between younger and older generations. Donovan argues that, “The children born under this policy, lacking siblings, are often associated with undesirable characteristics and the tendency of parents to indulge their child’s every whim. These children became known as “小皇帝” [*xiao huangdi*]... meaning “Little Emperors””. These “little emperors” are growing into increasingly materialistic adults whose desires are focused on having successful careers and partners. Older generations and the Chinese government fear that the younger generations are straying from Chinese values, in response “some family planning associations now run parent education classes to counter parents’ overprotective behaviour”<sup>29</sup>. Under increasing materialism and heavy financial punishment, the one child policy flourishes in its ability to control the economic destiny for families based on socioeconomic status and gender of child.

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<sup>29</sup> Kane and Choi, "China's one child," 994.

## D. Political Impacts

Although the one child policy was originally intended to reduce population growth so China could better the lives of its citizens, the policy has been accused of abusing human rights due to the overall goal of restricting reproduction and its strict nature of its enforcement. Restricting reproduction by telling families how many children they are “allowed to” have is a violation of the human rights to reproductive health and self-determination. According to the U.S. government, “In our discussions with the Chinese Government, we have urged them...that couples, not governments, should decide the number and spacing of their children”<sup>30</sup>. The strict enforcement of the policy through forced sterilizations and abortions and the power the family planning police has over the reproductive lives of Chinese citizens further violates reproductive rights. While these violations of human rights are largely ignored by the Chinese government, they have been trying to combat the largest issue to come out of the establishment of the policy, sex discrimination. According to Hesketh, “There are already laws forbidding fetal sex determination and sex-selective abortion in China, India and South Korea. But only in South Korea has the law been strongly enforced”<sup>31</sup>. While China may have the appearance of trying to prevent sex discrimination, the lack of strong enforcement of this law in contrast to other family planning laws shows that sex discrimination is of little importance to the government. The lack of enforcement of this law could be explained by the ease of access to abortion for Chinese women, this often makes determining whether an abortion has occurred due to sex determination or for family planning nearly impossible. The PRC has also tried to combat sex discrimination

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<sup>30</sup> *One-Child Policy in China: Hearings Before the House International Relations Committee*, 2004 Leg. (D.C. Dec. 14, 2004) (statement of Arthur E. Dewey, Assistant Secretary for Population, Refugees and Migration).

<sup>31</sup> Hesketh, Lu, and Xing, “The Consequences,” 1376.

stemming from son preference using public awareness campaigns. China's nation Care for Girls Campaign purpose is to boost the image of girls in Chinese society by suggesting their value to society and emphasizing the plight of unmarried men due to lack of women<sup>32</sup>. The Chinese government has also loosened the policy more in rural areas where sex discrimination is more common by allowing a third child if the first two are girls and providing pensions to families with daughters. These policy attempts to lessen sex discrimination in wake of the one child policy have seen some success but it will require much more effort to decrease son preference significantly and reduce the gender imbalance in China.

## **V. Evaluation of the One Child Policy**

The one child policy was successful in its goal of reducing the population and "to keep the population at around 1.2 billion by 2000"<sup>33</sup>. However, the measures used to achieve this created negative implications that cannot be justified by limited benefits on Chinese society. While the government's approach to population control was unique it has proved to be an ineffective and intrusive form of population control. This policy was also unsustainable for the Chinese government due to the rapidly changing population distributions in gender ratios and a growing dependent elderly population. Hesketh argues, "It is likely to be several decades before the SRB in countries like India and China are within normal limits"<sup>34</sup>. The Chinese government was unable to successfully support the larger population of elderly that resulted from the policy which contributes to its unsustainability and overall lack of success. Some of the most unforeseen consequences were the economic impacts on Chinese society. Fines, reduction of salary, mass migration of temporary workers to urban areas, and illegal children have caused

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<sup>32</sup> Hesketh, Lu, and Xing, "The Consequences," 1376.

<sup>33</sup> Kane and Choi, "China's one child," 992.

<sup>34</sup> Hesketh, Lu, and Xing, "The Consequences," 1377.

significant economic issues for individuals. These economic issues and the evolution of China's economic changes have caused economic divisions between generations. Donovan argues, "the older generations value working, while the younger generations want money to come to them from other sources"<sup>35</sup>. These economic issues will not be resolved by reversing the policy, it will take generations to eliminate these economic issues. The differences in the generations is causing a political generation gap where, "The younger generation seems to be scared less of confronting their government"<sup>36</sup>. The one child policy created a generation more prone to political restlessness than the Chinese government expected and will shape China's political future. The enforcement of the policy has also led to international conflicts due to the suspected human rights violations. U.S. officials have negotiated for easement of the one child policy and its coercive enforcement and Chinese officials have agreed; despite this, the U.S. government believes, "Such statements, no matter how fervent or how frequent, will ring hollow and will be little more than empty rhetoric"<sup>37</sup>. These consequences prevent the Chinese one child policy from being an effective method of population control. There are methods of population control that reduce population growth rates, reduce fertility, maintain an average SRB, and do not violate rights. The best way to secure population control voluntarily and ensures all the above factors is to raise the status of women in society and increase education of females. Implementing these has been shown to reduce population growth rates naturally while promoting equality in the society.

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<sup>35</sup> Donovan, "A SOCIETY," 209.

<sup>36</sup> Donovan, "A SOCIETY," 211.

<sup>37</sup> One-Child Policy in China: Hearings Before the House International Relations Committee, 2004 Leg. (D.C. Dec. 14, 2004) (statement of Arthur E. Dewey, Assistant Secretary for Population, Refugees and Migration).

## VI. Conclusion

Since the implementation of the Chinese one child policy in 1979 till its replacement by the two-child policy in 2015, serious consequences have changed Chinese society. This method of population control in China is a case study for the effects of restrictive population control and a comparison for its cultural effects to similar phenomena around the world. The PRC's implementation of the one child policy has magnified the phenomena of sex-selective abortions and had caused dramatic shifts in their culture over a short period of time compared to countries with son preference but no population control. These shifts show the consequences and possible benefits of this method of population control. As population growth continues globally more measures will need to be taken in order to prevent further overpopulation and exceeding the carrying capacity of the Earth. Through this analysis it can be determined that this policy would be overall unsustainable and harmful to the preexisting population. This method of population control violates the basic human right of self-determination and reproductive rights. However, there are arguments in support of the policy. For example, the policy has helped to lessen burdens on the government and the environment, and it can be argued that it has also supported women's rights by making women more valued in society and increasing their social status. These arguments while have some validity are not enough to outweigh the negative impacts caused by the one child policy. From a western perspective, where population control locally occurs through women's reproductive rights, a policy that negatively impacts women the most and places heavy restrictions on their reproductive rights is counter intuitive to legitimate population control and simply creates an unsustainable population distribution without addressing the underlying causes of overpopulation.

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