

# The Consequences and Future Implications of China's One-Child Policy

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## ABSTRACT

This research paper provides an analysis of China's One-child Policy, tracing its historical roots, enforcement methods, and long-term socio-economic impacts. Introduced in 1979 to prevent overpopulation, the policy was enforced through both incentives and extreme measures, such as forced sterilizations and abortions. While the policy succeeded in preventing over 300 million births, as well as lifting millions out of poverty and averting famine, it also produced significant unintended consequences. The most profound effects of the policy include a dramatic gender imbalance, a shrinking labor force, and the surfacing of millions of unregistered, hidden children who lack access to basic rights and services. As China now faces an aging population and a declining birth rate, the government has reversed its position, promoting larger families to counteract the demographic crisis. Decades of propaganda have made this shift challenging for Chinese society. While the one-child Policy alleviated immediate concerns of overpopulation, it has left serious lasting socio-economic challenges that will affect China for generations to come.

## Prologue

I have studied the Chinese language and culture for my entire academic career-to-date. From ages 5 until 12, I was taught Mandarin at a language immersion school that also placed an emphasis on learning about ancient Chinese tradition and history. Subsequently, for the past four years, I have continued to independently study the language and culture, culminating in a recent month-long internship in China. Chinese culture and history always fascinated me due to its richness and complexity. I recall reading *Wild Swans* by Yang Chang and closing the book, stunned and thinking about all the previously suppressed events in China's modern history including the culture of concubinage and feet binding, or more political issues such as the Cultural Revolution and the Tiananmen Square Massacre. It became quite apparent that China's schooling has generally left its students ignorant to these hushed historical events and left China misunderstood by so many. I then began to explore China's modern history through documentaries, articles, and local Chinese media. Once I stumbled across the country's one-child policy, it hooked my attention to the point where I couldn't overlook it; I wanted to fully delve into related events that took place. What I realized through my research is that although the policy has been officially lifted for several years now, its effects will linger well into my generation and those to come.

## The History of the Policy

China's idea of a one-child policy was introduced to its society in 1979, and was taken into serious effect on September 25, 1980, with an open letter issued by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China.<sup>1</sup> The Chinese leaders

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<sup>1</sup> Tessa Berenson, "Here's How China's One-Child Policy Started in the First Place," *Time Magazine*, October 29, 2015.

and government were aiming to control an over-population issue that, if left unchecked, would exact an enormous toll on local economic growth and lead to famine for a great part of the country. In the decades before the policy was instituted, the population had risen from approximately 600 million to 969 million, and the birth rate had hit a high of 7.51 children per woman.<sup>23</sup> Although the population in 1979 was not completely unmanageable, the Chinese government predicted that if the birth rate levels were to continue at their then-current rate, China and its people would have serious overpopulation issues. Many people involved in the formation of the policy justified it by harshly stating that if the law wasn't enacted, China would be full of cannibals and dead people.<sup>4</sup> In addition to reducing overpopulation, the policy would raise the living standard and improve availability of healthcare, education, housing, land, and clean water. However, in order to achieve their goal, the Chinese took many drastic measures to ensure that the controversial policy was upheld. Ultimately, the policy prevented more than 300 million births and pulled somewhere between 200-400 million people out of poverty.<sup>5</sup> But I couldn't help but wonder, what were the consequences?

## Encouragement of the Policy

The Chinese government initially encouraged their citizens to follow the one-child policy in many different ways, including through financial incentives and media campaigns. To reinforce the edict, the Chinese government repeatedly told their citizens that they were fighting a "population war."<sup>6</sup> As well as being heard in speeches, this slogan was seen written on walls, posters, commercials, and even used as lyrics in operas and plays. The Chinese finance ministry was particularly motivated to ensure that the country's population growth rate decreased. Local economists believed that there was an inverse correlation between the country's population size and its economic growth, indicating that lower population growth would improve living standards.<sup>7</sup> However, the initial efforts proved to have a limited effect. Once the government saw that simply putting up signs and promoting slogans were not meeting their population growth targets, they resorted to more extreme measures. Chinese officials began using economic and other draconian tactics to prevent more women from conceiving and giving birth. Huge fines, in local purchasing power terms, were imposed on families who birthed additional children. In 2014, *China Daily* took a poll and deduced that 58.1% could not afford to raise a second child, especially when accounting for the associated fine.<sup>8</sup> non-monetary consequences were even more extreme. Earlier, in 2005, a woman in the city of Linyi told *The Washington Post* that the local authorities took her "aunts, uncles, cousins, [her] pregnant sister, and in-laws" to the family planning office, starving and beating them severely in order to manipulate her into getting an abortion.<sup>9</sup> Such coercive tactics continued for many years. For example, in 2012, a woman seven months into her pregnancy in the Shaanxi province was dragged to a hospital by local authorities and forced to have an abortion, as she could not pay the fine (equivalent to \$6,300) for having a second child.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> "Total Population (China)," chart, Data Commons, accessed September 28, 2023.

<sup>3</sup> "Fertility Rate (China)," chart, Data Commons, accessed September 28, 2023.

<sup>4</sup> *One Child Nation*, directed by Nanfu Wang and Lynn Zhang, Amazon Studios, 2019.

<sup>5</sup> *One Child*.

<sup>6</sup> *One Child*.

<sup>7</sup> "China's One Child Policy," Asia Pacific Curriculum, accessed September 10, 2023.

<sup>8</sup> "Cost of second child puts couples off," *China Daily* (Beijing, China).

<sup>9</sup> Taylor, "The human,"

<sup>10</sup> Adam Taylor, "The human suffering caused by China's one-child policy," *The Washington Post* (Washington, D.C.).

## Drastic Measures

Many of those who enforced the one-child policy were local officials and population police, subjecting women to regular physical exams and other preventative measures, including forced sterilization, to ensure that pregnancies would not produce an abundance of unsanctioned babies. Throughout the many decades of the one-child policy, there were countless instances when women who did not want to be sterilized were abducted by county officials and forced into the procedures. Several families that refused or fought the forced sterilization saw their homes demolished and ripped apart.<sup>11</sup> Eventually most of these targeted women were sterilized, regardless of their level of defiance. At the height of the policy, countless women were apprehended, tied up, and dragged to operating rooms where doctors would complete more than 20 sterilizations per day.<sup>12</sup> In some cases, women would even try to run away without clothes or any of their possessions.<sup>13</sup> These were very scarring and traumatic experiences for people on both sides of the operating tables. Many officials did not, in fact, agree with such brutal enforcement, but had no other choice than to serve the government in order to provide for and protect their own families.<sup>14</sup>

## A Midwife's Role

Local midwives played a crucial role in the process of helping save China from overpopulation by performing dozens of abortions and sterilizations per day. Although their primary duty was to be a loyal communist member and serve their country, these midwives were placed in very morally conflicting situations that went against many of their instincts and beliefs. Many midwives performed more than 50,000 sterilizations and abortions during their careers.<sup>15</sup> Most women who were eventually forced to get abortions hid their pregnancies for many months. This, along with the fact that midwives were required to perform the procedure regardless of the baby's stage of development, meant that some babies were even induced alive and then killed.<sup>16</sup> In one account of a midwife, she said that because she felt so ashamed and guilty of her actions, she began helping couples with their fertility, bringing children into the world to redeem herself and her past actions.<sup>17</sup>

## Unanticipated Consequences

After 35 years, the Chinese government ended its one-child policy in 2015. However, its effects linger and will likely be felt for generations to come. Since its implementation, China has prevented an estimated 350 million births and saved more than 400 million people from starvation.<sup>18</sup> However, since the policy came to an end, the government has realized the full scope of effects it has brought upon the country. Some of the unintended consequences have become so pronounced in the present day, that the government is now struggling to counteract them.

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<sup>11</sup> *One Child.*

<sup>12</sup> *One Child.*

<sup>13</sup> *One Child.*

<sup>14</sup> *One Child.*

<sup>15</sup> *One Child.*

<sup>16</sup> *One Child.*

<sup>17</sup> Pdraig Moran, "China's one-child policy was enforced through abortion and sterilization, says documentary director," *CBC* (Ottawa), accessed September 10, 2023.

<sup>18</sup> *One Child.*

## A Lack of Children

Due to the one-child policy, there was a dramatic decline in China's birth rate between 1980 and 2015. This demographic bust is now raising concerns for many Chinese citizens. The country's government has acknowledged that by 2050, 30% of the population will be at least 60 years old.<sup>19</sup> This pending demographic and financial imbalance will have severe repercussions for the country. As expected in a family-centric society, elderly Chinese people are traditionally cared for by the younger members of their families. Looking ahead, there will be a large difference in the ratio of young family members to elder family members. Young adults in China who are single children now face the possibility of having to support two parents and up to four grandparents, a situation referred to as the "4-2-1 problem."<sup>20</sup> Recognizing this problem and considering those affected, the Chinese government introduced the Elderly Rights Law, making it illegal to ignore one's elderly relatives.<sup>21</sup> However, there are other consequences at play in this domino effect. Analysts predict that future Chinese generations will be smaller due to their low-birth policy, potentially decreasing from the current 1.4 billion to approximately 800 million over the next 60 years.<sup>22</sup> As a result, by 2050, the labor supply is forecast to decline by 20%.<sup>23</sup> It is already becoming apparent that there may be 30 million unfilled manufacturing jobs and countless other positions that will lack sufficient workers.<sup>24</sup> In the future, once the current generation retires, it is thought that there will not be enough labor to support the economy, leading China's businesses and economy into a protracted decline, jeopardizing all that the powerful country has fought to achieve.

## A Sudden Switch

The Chinese government has recently taken notice of these population issues and has started to urge families to expand, not only lifting the one-child policy, but also changing their entire philosophy on having children; they are now encouraging families to have a second and even a third child. After 2015, the Chinese government allowed more children to be born into the country and began advertising the fact that now, because it suited the government's motives, two or more children is the best amount for a family to provide stability and longevity. There was an immediate change in slogans written on walls, magazines, posters, and elsewhere, almost as if to erase the fact that there ever was a one-child policy at all. This was a difficult transition for the Chinese people to make, conflicted by the decades of control and influence that the government had over their familial beliefs. From one day to the next, the Chinese people were expected to reverse their engrained confidence in the fact that having only one child was best, and instead were suddenly supposed to think differently. From 1987 until 2022, the population growth rate has nearly steadily declined from 17.5 million per year to near zero (see below chart).<sup>25</sup> In 2023, China experienced its first negative population growth since 1961. This is illustrative of the long-term demographic cycles and the toll that this policy has taken on Chinese society. China is now faced with the prospect of long-term negative population growth, which will usher in many repercussions for the country's society and economy.

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<sup>19</sup> China's One Child," Asia Pacific Curriculum.

<sup>20</sup> China's One Child," Asia Pacific Curriculum.

<sup>21</sup> China's One Child," Asia Pacific Curriculum.

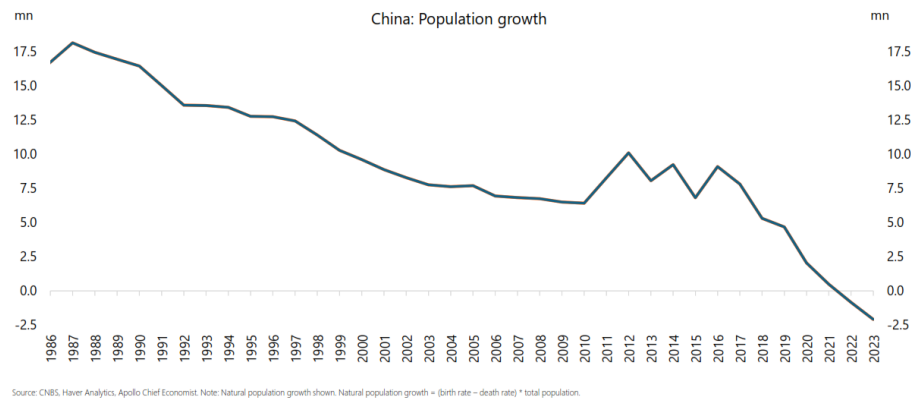
<sup>22</sup> Yi Wu, "How China's Population Decline Will Impact Doing Business in the Country," *China Briefing*, February 17, 2023.

<sup>23</sup> Clement Tan, "China's youth unemployment hits a record high, deepening its economic scars," *CNBC*, May 29, 2023.

<sup>24</sup> Tan, "China's youth,"

<sup>25</sup> Torsten Sløk, "Negative Population Growth in China," chart, Apollo Academy, August 20, 2024, accessed August 25, 2024.

## China's population growth has turned negative



**Figure 1.** China's population growth has turned negative.

## An Abundance of Men

Among the other major issues that the one-child policy has created is the profound gender imbalance in society, one that has resulted in there being 3-4% more men than women in China today. This gender imbalance was created due to the desire for boys to inherit the family name and land, which became even more important once families were limited to having only one child. Because of this, the number of baby girls that were abandoned or killed greatly increased during the years of the one-child policy.<sup>26</sup> It was not rare for families to leave their daughters in the streets or markets with some money, where they would either be rescued or eventually die. Some families also sent them away to traffickers or orphanages that would send them to international families.<sup>27</sup> Although the gender imbalance is not huge, it creates an additional social problem that relates to dating and marriage. Chinese men predominantly want to be coupled with women with lower intellectual statuses; however, most women desire to be intellectually equal or even superior to their partners. When coupled with the aforementioned gender imbalance, together they increase the number of single adults in China, which may further jeopardize near-term population growth. As previously discussed, future generations are a large concern of China's, given that the projected population decline will negatively impact the economy and many other aspects of China's advancement. In order to combat the economic problems that the population decline is anticipated to create, China has introduced many national shopping holidays and other online sales. Single's Day, China's biggest online shopping holiday—the equivalent of Black Friday in the U.S.—is a recognition of the many bachelors who have been unsuccessful in finding partners in the gender-skewed society and an additional way to promote Chinese business.<sup>28</sup> The Chinese people are making the most of a difficult situation and implementing such holidays in order to boost their economy and support the future prosperity of their country.

<sup>26</sup> Lesley Downer, "Casualties of China's One Child Policy," *The New York Times* (New York City, U.S.A.), April 1, 2011.

<sup>27</sup> *One Child*.

<sup>28</sup> Emily Feng, "China's Former 1-Child Policy Continues To Haunt Families," NPR, last modified July 4, 2021, accessed September 10, 2023.

## Ghost Children

One of the most extreme outcomes of the one-child policy are China's ghost children, otherwise known as 'black children' or 'hei hai zi' in Chinese. These children are the product of many families' opposition of the one-child policy; more specifically, they are the 13 million unintended products of these defiances, according to a census from 2010. These children were born during the one-child policy into families that already had one child. If the population police found out about these banned children, they punished the families by imposing hefty fines, ones that were far too expensive to pay; therefore, not many of these children were ever seen by the public. These children were mainly hidden from the eyes of the world, staying within the confines of their homes, destined to be forever invisible. Their anonymous personas have led them to remain unnoticed by the Chinese government. They were never given *hukous* (Chinese residence permits), and therefore cannot live like normal people who are able to attend school, ride buses, or have access to healthcare, among other imperative things.<sup>29</sup> However, China has now become aware of the millions of disenfranchised children, and is now taking action to improve their lives.<sup>30</sup> In December 2015, the Chinese government finally announced that these *hei hai zi* would finally be allowed to register for a *hukou*.<sup>31</sup>

## Conclusion

In the 35 years of its reign, the one-child policy undoubtedly alleviated China's overpopulation and resource security problems but replaced them with new ones. On the day the policy ended in 2015, the communist party announced that the one-child policy had made the country more powerful, the people more prosperous, and the world more peaceful.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, the effects of China's one-child policy will have great social and economic repercussions. The family planning edict succeeded in achieving a lasting decline in birth rates, decreasing them from 2.7 births per woman in 1979 to 1.2 births per woman in 2022.<sup>33</sup> Having few children has truly become ingrained in Chinese society, even once the policy ended and the government began encouraging families to have more. Despite the demographic cycles since the formation of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the country's population has now reached 1.4 billion citizens. Looking ahead, reduced reproduction, in combination with an increasingly aging population, will lead to a rising dependency ratio between working people and retirees, as well as a shrinking labor supply, leaving the lingering socio-economic effects to be dealt with over future generations.

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<sup>29</sup> "China's One Child," Asia Pacific Curriculum.

<sup>30</sup> Nathan Vanderklippe, "The ghost children: In the wake of China's one-child policy, a generation is lost," *The Globe and Mail* (Toronto).

<sup>31</sup> "China's One Child," Asia Pacific Curriculum.

<sup>32</sup> *One Child*.

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