

*Charlotte Peel*

# China's one-child policy

GCSE courses require you to evaluate how countries try to influence population change. China provides a classic case study of such a strategy.

*The one-child policy was started in 1979 by then-leader Deng Xiaoping. Here, children mark the 100th anniversary of his birth in front of his portrait*

**F**or the People's Republic of China, 1 October 2009 was a special day: this National Day celebration marked 60 years since the takeover of mainland China by the Communist Party of China, in 1949.

After the Communists took control China's population grew rapidly, from 563 million in 1950 to 1 billion in the early 1980s, as death rates fell and birth rates rose.

Initially, this growth was seen as a strength for the nation. Party chairman Mao Zedong, China's leader between 1949 and 1976, encouraged population growth. He proclaimed: 'Of all things in the world, people are the most precious.'

However, concerns gradually developed about the possible social and economic consequences of continued rapid population growth. Official



# Factfile

## China's population

- China's 2010 population of 1.3 billion compares with 309 million in the USA and 61 million in the UK
- China's population is growing by 250,000 people a week — almost the population of a city the size of Nottingham
- In China there are 113 boys to every 100 girls (15 years old or under)
- The birth rate in China is 1.79 per woman, compared with 2.05 in the USA and 1.66 in the UK
- The urban population of China is 43%, compared with 82% in the USA and 90% in the UK
- Beijing has almost twice the population of London and covers ten times its area
- Chongqing is the world's largest municipality, with 32 million people — more than Peru
- Sixteen of the world's 100 biggest urban areas are in China
- China has the world's third-largest economy

attempts were made to control this growth, but with limited success.

### Start of the policy

In 1979 Mao's successor as leader, Deng Xiaoping, introduced a government policy on birth control. The aim was to let married couples have just one child so as to reduce the birth rate and slow population growth.

At the time, the policy was designated a temporary measure. However, every 5 years since 1979 it has been renewed. This means that for more than 30 years China has had one of the strictest family planning policies in the world.

The government argued that it was necessary for couples to sacrifice the possibility of having a second or third child for the sake of future generations.

The policy involved both encouragement and discouragement.

- People were encouraged to have

only one child through financial and other incentives, including preferential access to housing, schools and healthcare.

- Larger families were discouraged by fines for each additional child, forced sterilisation, pressure to abort pregnancies and discrimination at work.

The policy was more successful in urban than rural areas. In some of China's more developed big cities, such as Shanghai (see Figure 1), many couples had themselves already decided to have just one child. However, in rural areas the policy ran into difficulties. This happened even though some farming families were allowed to have a second baby if the first one was a girl, because if the second child was a boy he could work the land. The problems in rural areas were that:

- many families had limited savings and, without pensions, needed children to support the grandparents and parents in their old age
- married daughters would traditionally move in with their husbands' families, so families saw it as essential to have one son at the very least

### Impacts of the policy

The policy had some disturbing initial impacts at first. These included:

- forced sterilisation by the authorities
- gender-based abortion by families, with couples terminating the pregnancy if the child was a girl
- infanticide by families, with the child being killed if it was a girl

More problems are becoming apparent now that the 'one-child generation' has itself reached child-bearing age.

Fears about a rapidly ageing society, caused by falling birth rates as a result of the policy, are now coming true. Already about 22% of Shanghai's residents are over 60; the figure is projected to rise to 34% by 2020. There are fewer people of working age available to support the growing number of elderly people.

One result of the one-child policy has been to cause the traditionally large Chinese family to collapse into a much smaller unit, typically with four grandparents, two parents, and one child. The child, as the only member of the youngest generation of the family, is used to being the focus of that family's emotional and financial resources. Rapid economic growth recently has meant many families can give the child better healthcare and education, as well as more toys and clothes. The result of all this has been labelled the 'little emperor' effect: children of this generation tend to be spoiled.

Nevertheless, people of the current generation also have to face heavy expectations. With no brothers or sisters, young Chinese people know that in the future it will be up to them to look after their parents and grandparents. Parents and grandparents often want the child to gain from opportunities they themselves did not have, so children face extra pressure to compete and

succeed academically. Children already have to work very hard to succeed in China's competitive school system.

All this can make for a lonely childhood. It is not uncommon for children to refer to their cousins and friends as 'brother' or 'sister' as a way of making up for not having one.

Young men face an added worry: having to find a wife in a society with a big gender imbalance. The traditional bias towards having male children has meant China is now officially

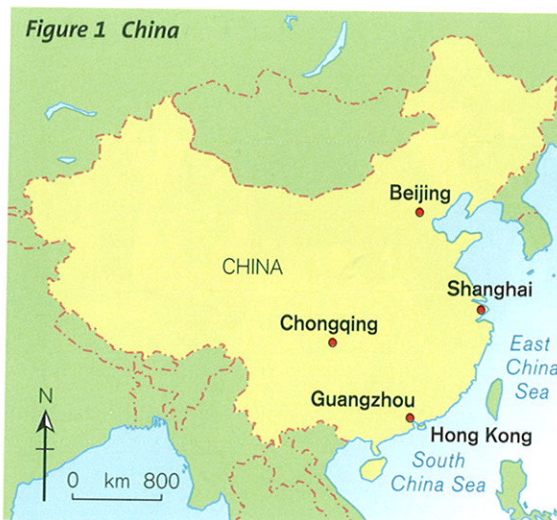


Figure 1 China



*Despite moves to limit birth rates, China's population growth is not expected to peak until 2030*

suffering from a shortage of women, and there is a so-called 'army of bachelors'. For every 100 girls born in China, 119 boys are born, and it is thought that by 2020 there will be 24 million eligible men without wives.

### **The policy in the future**

The Chinese government says that the one-child policy still fits in with the plan for national population growth and will continue indefinitely. Officials argue that abandoning the policy now would cause the birth rate to change quickly and unpredictably.

However, there is an important exception to the one-child rule that will help reduce some of the policy's long-term negative effects. In most provinces parents who have no brothers or sisters themselves are now allowed to have two children. It is hoped that this

will prevent too dramatic an increase in the ratio of dependants (people who are not working) to economically active people (people who are in work and earning money). This change in policy is being especially promoted in Shanghai, which is at the centre of one of China's most important economic areas.

Today, China's population is the world's largest, at 1.3 billion (see Factfile). The world's population is about 6.7 billion, so China accounts for a full 20% of people on the planet — one person in every five.

Despite the one-child policy, China's population is still growing. It is expected to reach 1.4 billion by the late 2010s and is not expected to peak until 2030, after which it may start to fall.



*Precious cargo...China's government plans to continue with the policy*

Although the policy has not yet stabilised the population, there is no doubt that it has reduced the country's (and indeed the world's) population growth by at least 250 million (the Chinese government says the figure is more like 450 million). These reductions have eased at least some of the pressures on communities, the economy and environment in a country that, we must remember, is still developing.