

Research Paper

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### One-Child Policy

China's One-Child Policy was implemented by Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping in 1979 because of the necessity to control the rapid growth of the population. Affected by government propaganda, more and more families in China followed the policy and only had one child. China's One-Child policy was intended to help control population growth. Instead, it has led to unintended and negative consequences. It was truly a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it alleviated the population pressure on the government, but on the other hand, it created some growing problems for these one-child families. With the implementation of the family planning policy, increasingly more families under this new policy realized its many problems, and more and more people began to think that the One-Child Policy was not appropriate. Although the One-Child Policy could solve China's population problem to some extent, its disadvantages are obvious. I will argue that the One-Child Policy is a disadvantageous policy that has brought negative effects to Chinese society. Because of the limit on births, the only child in the family is spoiled, there is a diminished labor force causing economic decline, the population is gradually aging for dependency loads, and the forced abortions cause great harm to the female's body. This policy causes gender imbalances in society creating tension that eventually can cause the whole country to be violent.

The emergence of population problems on a global scale has become a serious challenge facing many countries and regions. For a developing country like China with a large population, the challenge of population growth is not only related to the survival and development of the Chinese nation but also related to the stability and prosperity of its society. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, the population grew rapidly, and population reproduction entered a pattern of high birth rate, low death rate, high growth due to social stability, production development, and the improvement of medical and health conditions. People lived and worked in peace and contentment, and the death rate dropped substantially. However, the problem is that China, like the international community at that time, did not respond quickly to the global population expansion, and missed the opportunity to solve the problem of over-rapid population growth during the first birth peak after the founding of the People's Republic of China. In the 1960s, China entered its second birth peak after the founding of the People's Republic of China. From 1962 to 1972, the annual average number of births in China was 26.69 million, with a total of 300 million births. In 1969, China's population exceeded 800 million. Since the 1960s, the contradiction between population and economy, society, resources, and the environment has gradually emerged. In their academic journal "Challenging Myths About China's One-Child Policy," Martin King Whyte, Wang Feng, and Yong Cai They claim that "With these ambitious goals a national campaign of mandatory birth planning was put into full motion. The slogan that summarized the three demographic components of the campaign was "later, longer, and fewer" (wan, xi, shao).<sup>1</sup> Because of this situation, the Chinese government once called for family planning, but because of the lack of deep understanding

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<sup>1</sup> Martin King Whyte, Wang Feng, and Yong Cai, "Challenging Myths About China's One-Child Policy," *The China Journal* 74 (2015): 149.

of the seriousness of the population problem, the government did not formulate a clear population policy, so family planning was effectively carried out in the whole country.

Talking about the origin of the one-child policy, it is important to mention the 1950s, when the population growth began to exceed the amount of food supply, and the government began to implement family planning. After Mao Zedong's Great Leap Forward in 1958, China's economy tried to develop rapidly to modernization, which led to a series of disastrous famines, resulting in tens of millions of Chinese people dying of hunger. The Great Leap Forward disrupted the order of the national economy, wasted a lot of human and material resources, caused a serious imbalance in the proportion of the national economy, and caused great losses to the cause of socialist construction. Martin claims that, "Due to the obstruction that Mao's stance on population issues created, China's population continued to grow at a rapid and uncontrolled rate until after his death, necessitating the contemplation of a more drastic and coercive program, the mandatory policy enforced after 1980".<sup>2</sup> In the late 1970s, Deng Xiaoping made a profound analysis of China's basic national conditions based on summarizing the experience and lessons of socialist construction since the founding of the People's Republic of China. It is fundamental to point out that to realize the four modernizations of China, we must consider the characteristics of China, such as a large country, a weak economic foundation, a large population, and a small amount of cultivated land. Deng revealed the objective requirement that population, economy, society, resources, and environment must develop harmoniously. Deng Xiaoping's main contribution to solving China's population problem is to examine and deal with the issue in the overall situation of national economic and social

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<sup>2</sup> Martin King Whyte, Wang Feng, and Yong Cai, "Challenging Myths About China's One-Child Policy," 146.

development, putting forward that China's population policy is strategic and important. Based on Deng Xiaoping's thought, the Chinese government has made it a basic state policy to carry out family planning, control the size of the population, and improve the quality of the population, establishing the important position of family planning in China's overall economic and social development.

China is the country with the largest population size in the world, which increases the difficulty of efficient development. Considering Chinese development in the long term; some people point out that the Chinese must carry out the One-Child Policy. However, others think the One-Child Policy is not suitable for children's health growing up. I agree with the latter opinion. Martin claims that “China's controversial one-child policy continues to generate controversy and misinformation, the launching of the one-child policy in 1980 led to a dramatic decline in China's fertility rate; and that the imposition of the policy prevented 400 million births”.<sup>3</sup> The One-Child Policy successfully reduced the total population, especially the urban population, and played a positive role in the early and middle stages of the country's economic development. But over time, the side effects of this policy are gradually emerging. For example, the living environment of the only child has been improved due to the One-Child Policy. In this case, the only child will become lazy and no longer willing to do some basic work. In the long run, this is not a good thing for social and economic development.

In their article “China's One-child Policy and the Changing Family”, Xiao-Tian Feng, Poston Jr., Dudley L., and Xiao-Tao Wang discussed how the one-child family has become normal for the urban Chinese family. They stated, “This generation of one-child

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<sup>3</sup> Martin King Whyte, Wang Feng, and Yong Cai, “Challenging Myths About China's One-Child Policy,” 144.

families has had a tremendous influence on family structure, family relationships, and family lifestyle of all of China, especially urban China, but has also introduced problems for Chinese society”.<sup>4</sup> They also claim that, “Early in the 1980s, at the beginning of the OCP, only children were at the center of the family. The terms “spoiled brats,” and “little emperors’ were frequently used to imply that the parents put all of their hopes on their only children and that the children were spoiled”.<sup>5</sup> The One-Child Policy will make the only child of a family be spoiled. They do not want to share things with others, and they can easily get anything they want without hard work. It is not suitable for children's health growth in the long term. “All the members of the family surrounded the only children and focused their attention exclusively on them and let them do whatever they wanted to do”.<sup>6</sup> As a result, the child will become the so-called “little emperor” or “little princess”. A disorder called four, two, and one syndrome will usually happen to the only child. In many families in modern China, four old people and two parents surround an only child. Such a cosseting environment makes them suffer from a series of pathological reactions in psychological and physical aspects. First, the only child is often capricious, proud, selfish, and has no ability to live independently. Second, the only child usually suffers from malnutrition because the elders do everything possible to match the eating preferences of the child, even if it is unreasonable. Over time, this triggers the formation of picky eating habits, resulting in nutritional intake disorders. According to experts, anemia and zinc deficiency are common among Chinese children, who are either overweight or too thin. When the child grows up, they cannot adjust to society. There is a lot of news saying that

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<sup>4</sup> Xiao-Tian Feng, Dudley L. Poston Jr., and Xiao-Tao Wang, “China’s One-Child Policy and the Changing Family,” *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 45 (2014): 18. doi:10.3138/jcfs.45.1.17.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

the One-Child Policy will increase the rate of committing a crime because no one will treat them as “little emperors” or “little princesses” except their parents.

The extended problems for the spoiled child can also be found in children's mental health problems as the One-Child Policy will make children feel lonely. It means that if every couple can have only one child, the child will have no sisters or brothers to play with him. As time passes, they will feel lonely. We all know that there is not everything children want to tell their parents. Growing up with no brother or sister, the child may easily get mental problems, such as autism, depression, and anxiety. Another unexpected result of the One-Child Policy is in the article “The effects of China’s universal two-child policy.” Yi Zeng and Therese Hesketh talk about how the effect of the One-Child Policy on child welfare is also subject to considerable debate. They claim that, “A series of studies in young adult soldiers have shown that soldiers with siblings are significantly more motivated, hard working, obedient, sociable, and mentally stable than are those who are only children”.<sup>7</sup> Nowadays, most of the only children show obvious cowardice and vulnerability in their growth. Growing up in good times, they are used to enjoying the exclusive status and special treatment in the family. The pampering of their parents keeps them in the ideal world of life. They have a financial security guarantee and have arrangements in life; all the roads that should be pursued and struggled are paved by their parents. In a comfortable environment, the only child does not have their firm will, quality, belief and persistent pursuit. They lack strong independence and self-determination, and cannot make good plans for their own future. They often show weak will when they

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<sup>7</sup> Yi Zeng and Therese Hesketh, “The Effects of China's Universal Two-Child Policy,” *The Lancet* 388, no. 10054 (2016): 33.  
doi: 10.1016/s0140-6736(16)31405-2.

encounter difficulties, they are afraid or at a loss. They feel at a loss for unexpected difficulties and emotional fragility, easy to encounter blows and setbacks on the collapse or negative depravity. For example, some only children are criticized by teachers, fail in exams, have conflicts with classmates, and are wronged by others, which will make them pessimistic, decadent, and have an overall negative mentality. Furthermore, they will have thoughts about dropping out of school, suicide, and so on, which will also cause adverse consequences to society.

If China's aging process is a natural demographic transition with rising labor productivity and per capita income, like that of most developed countries, it will have no difficulty in coping with this issue. It will only need to build an effective pension system, as other countries have done. However, China has a high proportion of working-age people in the total population and is experiencing the problem of population aging faster than other countries. The One-Child Policy has led to a sharp drop in fertility, a drop in the proportion of young people, a rise in the proportion of old people, and a slowdown in the growth of the working-age population. As the proportion of the young population began to decline faster than the proportion of the old population rose, the productive demographics gave China an ample supply of labor. But as this demographic transition continues to advance, the growth rate of the working-age population will be lower and lower, while the growth rate of the elderly population will be accelerating. Such changes have brought many challenges to Chinese society. By 2030, the United Nations predicts, the age structure of China's population will be more like an inverted pyramid, with older people outnumbered by younger ones. Population control had also resulted in a shrinking workforce. The number of workers entering China's overall labor force has been declining for the last three

years, a trend that is expected to accelerate. In Alice Zhang's article "Understanding China's Former One-Child Policy", she claims that, "According to the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), China's labor force fell to 897.29 million workers in 2018, falling by 0.5% in the seventh straight year of decline".<sup>8</sup> China's increasing elderly population and the decreasing labor force were the impetus for the relaxation and end of the One-Child Policy. Every year since 2004, the net increase in new jobs has been less than the increase in demand for labor, and the gap will widen over time. Although the agricultural sector will continue to release surplus labor as agricultural productivity increases, labor shortages are still expected to occur from time to time in different regions, industries, and types of work.

In the article, "China's One-child Policy and the Changing Family", Xiao-Tian Feng also claims, "China is aging—fast. Already, a generation of young Chinese is struggling with what's called the "4-2-1 phenomenon," in which a single working grandchild has to support two parents and four grandparents".<sup>9</sup> The speed of China's aging population is extremely fast. Feng claims that "The loss of a child is particularly devastating if it occurs when the parents have ended the childbearing ages and entering old age".<sup>10</sup> For the one-child family, once the only child is injured, seriously ill or dead, especially the one-child who starts to earn money to support the family, it will not only cause great economic losses to the family, but also give a fatal blow to the parents' spirit, and thus fall into a desperate situation. Some younger parents may be given the chance to have children again, but what about older parents who lose their only child? They become "only child lost families". It is a tragedy in Chinese society for offspring to die before their elders. Feng

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<sup>8</sup> Alice Zhang, "Understanding China's Former One-Child Policy," Investopedia, December 20, 2020, <https://www.investopedia.com/articles/investing/120114/understanding-chinas-one-child-policy.asp>.

<sup>9</sup> Xiao-Tian Feng, Dudley L. Poston Jr., and Xiao-Tao Wang, "China's One-Child Policy and the Changing Family," 20.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.



also claims that, "In China, children are not only the continuation of the life of the parents, but also their ideals and hopes".<sup>11</sup> The One-Child Policy places all hope and responsibility on one child, so the one-child family structure is fragile. Chinese society has been in a complex family network for a long time. Feng said that "Kinship networks, however, do not exist for only-children; they have no brothers or sisters".<sup>12</sup> The only child itself narrows the family's kinship network to the extreme. Once the one-child family encounters difficulties or accidents, the support from the kinship network will be greatly reduced, and the family's anti-risk ability relying on the traditional kinship network will be reduced to the extreme. At this time, if the social support cannot keep up with it in time, it is very easy to make the one-child family fall into the situation of isolation and helplessness. Also, the elderly mainly rely on their children. The more children there are, the more opportunities and numbers the elderly parents will have to be supported in all aspects. Because the only child parents have too few children, the informal support from their children is generally insufficient, the support pressure of their children is increasing, and the possibility of the elderly falling into poverty is also greatly increased.

Most senior citizens retire or no longer work full-time. For some senior citizens, the years after retirement are not very enjoyable. They usually live in their own houses, while the children either work abroad or study far beyond the home. They feel that their lives are boring for being at home all day and feel lonely. Aging will cause older people to become more concerned with their health as they grow older. What if they can not afford medicare or they did not have health insurance? In the article "The effects of China's universal two-child policy", written by Yi Zeng, Therese Hesketh, they said "Despite the

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<sup>11</sup> Xiao-Tian Feng, Dudley L. Poston Jr., and Xiao-Tao Wang, "China's One-Child Policy and the Changing Family," 26.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

state-sponsored New Rural Old Age Insurance Programme, which started in 2009, most Chinese elderly people, especially those in rural areas, still lack full pension coverage”.<sup>13</sup> Chinese law stipulates that adult children must support their elderly parents and provide them with financial assistance, so they are largely dependent on their children for financial support at this time. The only children need to support their parents, the heavy burden will fall on the shoulders of them, who in many cases, will need to worry about the house or car loans and in addition to take care of the two parents and four grandparents. This reverse-pyramid social phenomenon is the “four-two-one” problem. The only children in the family need to support their parents; it will cause the children to have great pressure in life. Chinese parents will rely on their children to take care of them in their older years. That looks unlikely to change much since the government’s pension system and social welfare systems are inadequate.

Another issue for the One-Child Policy is the government forcing women who tried breaking the policy to have more children to undergo forced abortion procedures, which cause great harm to the body. Back to the academic journal “Challenging Myths About China’s One-Child Policy,” Martin King Whyte, Wang Feng, and Yong Cai claim that “Women who became pregnant without permission were subjected to regular harassment to get an abortion, with pressure also on their husbands and other family members”.<sup>14</sup> The preference for sons has led to an increase in the number of abortions of female fetuses. As a result of this policy, the number of baby girls killed, abandoned, or placed in orphanages has increased. Millions of Chinese parents have had to endure strict enforcement of the policy, including forced sterilizations and abortions. It takes a terrible toll on women’s

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<sup>13</sup> Yi Zeng and Therese Hesketh, “The Effects of China’s Universal Two-Child Policy,” 39.

<sup>14</sup> Martin King Whyte, Wang Feng, and Yong Cai, “Challenging Myths About China’s One-Child Policy,” 150.

bodies, with some women becoming unable to bear children for life and even dying as a result of forced abortions. Martin also claims that “if they persisted in having an over-quota birth, the baby would be denied household registration (and thus denied opportunities for ration coupons, schooling and other essential benefits that depended upon registration)”.<sup>15</sup> In families that already have one child, the extra child born in violation of the One-Child Policy is a newborn without a birth certificate, and the family has to pay a large fine to the government. As a result, these children later have many problems in getting an education or finding a job.

It should also be noticed that the One-Child Policy led to a very serious gender imbalance in China. China has one of the worst sex ratios in the world, as there are far more men than women. In the article "The effects of China's universal two-child policy" written by Yi Zeng, Therese Hesketh, they said, "By 2020, there will be around 30 million excess, and hence unmarriageable, men of reproductive age in a country where getting married and having children is still a strong cultural expectation".<sup>16</sup> It is a big problem caused by gender imbalance, it has made it much more difficult for Chinese men to get married. Right now, China already has 34 million more men than women. With such a vast supply of willing suitors, Chinese females have grown increasingly picky, the conditions for marriage are getting tougher and tougher. House and car become the first commodity. To help their son marry a wife, parents must buy them a car and a house to reach suitable conditions for marriage. Parents who can not do this will get a grumble from their son. Different than in the U.S., Chinese tradition also dictates that the male's part needs to cover

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<sup>15</sup> Martin King Whyte, Wang Feng, and Yong Cai, “Challenging Myths About China’s One-Child Policy,” 150.

<sup>16</sup> Yi Zeng and Therese Hesketh, “The Effects of China's Universal Two-Child Policy,” 22.

the bill for the wedding cost. All these factors add up to make the economics of having a boy less and less attractive.

Also, the troublesome consequence of the gender imbalance is the increase in China's violent crimes. Yi Zeng and Therese Hesketh claim that "This situation could have considerable mental health consequences: never-married middle-aged and older men have significantly higher levels of depression, they are more prone to aggression than married men, and maybe more easily drawn into crime, leading to concerns about social instability".<sup>17</sup> The regions with the most male-biased sex ratios also have more gambling, alcohol and drug abuse, bride abduction, and human trafficking. In societies with surplus men, males have a greater tendency to engage in non-productive and risky "wife-seeking" behavior. Gender "re-balancing" could bring about a reduction in crime and a rise in productivity.

While much of the male-to-female ratio in other countries is due to gender preferences in immigration or gender differences in mortality rates, China's male-to-female ratio is largely due to a sharp deviation from the norm at birth in recent decades. The reason behind this is precisely the implementation of China's family planning policy. If there is no limit to the number of children, parents can have more children to satisfy their gender preference. But the One-Child Policy comes out to block the gender preferences that cause families who want boys to abort female babies most of the time. Ultrasound and other fetal gender identification technology provide the technical possibility for this method. Since 2002, the government has banned the use of ultrasound and other techniques to determine the sex of fetuses to improve the gender imbalance. Martin claims that "In the

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<sup>17</sup> Yi Zeng and Therese Hesketh, "The Effects of China's Universal Two-Child Policy," 26.

early days of the "later, longer, fewer" program, IUD insertion, female sterilization, and induced abortions all increased sharply."<sup>18</sup>

The Chinese preference for sons over daughters is also related to previous national conditions. From ancient to nearly farming times, people have thought of men as having more advantages in physical strength, and it is easy to be affirmed in the ability to maintain the community reproduction or support the previous generations. This affirmation is not only the male affirmation, also includes the father-generation female affirmation. China is an agricultural country, and the majority is still agricultural, and it is in these areas that son preference tends to be more severe. The poorer and more backward the region, and the more physically demanding it is to survive, the more severe it is. Another popular concept in China is the issue of procreation. As a way of family continuity, man has become the character to produce offspring, and the male of his own family reproduces offspring, further, the best offspring is a male, so that the grandchildren of the male can bear the mission of family reproduction. In contrast, the offspring of the female who bears the family name is considered "tools" for the reproduction of other families. This idea gradually solidified in China and passed on from generation to generation.

To fix the problems, the Chinese government came out with another policy called the "Two child policy" in 2016. This policy is obverse, which means each family now could have two children. Is the Two-Child Policy necessary? China is one of the great countries with the largest population in the world. To solve the population problem, the Chinese government decided to implement the One-Child Policy. When it is carried out for some time, many people see not only its advantages but also disadvantages. Thus, people

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<sup>18</sup> Martin King Whyte, Wang Feng, and Yong Cai, "Challenging Myths About China's One-Child Policy," 151.

argue that a Two-Child Policy should be put into effect. In my opinion, a Two-Child Policy should be carried out. In Sabu Padmadas' article "Two-child policy in China: Rhetoric versus reality," he claims that "A historical U-turn to the one-child policy came through on 29 October 2015 when the CPC publicly announced that couples in China can have a second child, with effect from March 2016, until the two-child policy is legally ratified".<sup>19</sup> The two-child policy can guarantee the number of the Chinese population. The Chinese government's policy on two-child family planning is important and mentions its impact on demographic development. Sabu said that "As China gears towards the two-child policy, population planners are vigilant of the unfolding demographic developments. It is reassuring that the two-child policy will at least allow future generations of Chinese children to have a sibling 'brother or sister'".<sup>20</sup> Due to the two-child policy, children will not feel lonely and also can improve the problems with the aging population.

In Xiaoyan Yin, Zhihua Li, Jianhua Li, Xiaoqun Liu's article "Sibling relationship quality and young children's mental health in Chinese two-child families", the authors talked about the Chinese new family policy that will influence the way that the family forms. "With the enactment of the universal two-child policy in China in 2016, the two-child family will replace the one-child family as the main family form," claimed the authors.<sup>21</sup> The writers claim that "The sibling relationship is an important relationship in individuals' lives, especially for young children, because siblings spend a lot of time with each other in a day".<sup>22</sup> The Two-Child Policy is a gift for one-child policy families. Once they have two children in the family, they can talk to each other and help to solve the

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<sup>19</sup> Sabu S. Padmadas, "Two-Child Policy in China: Rhetoric versus Reality," *Annals of Human Biology* 44 (2017): 1. doi:10.1080/03014460.2016.1177113.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>21</sup> Xiayun Yin, Zhihua Li, Jianhua Li, and Xiaoqun Liu, "Sibling Relationship Quality and Young Children's Mental Health in Chinese Two-Child Families," 1.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

problems. For example, a young couple grew up under the one-child policy, let's decided to put aside the loneliness of their grown-up experience, when they are getting married, because the burden for them is going to be too heavy –, they have to take care of both sides of their parents. Usually, a young couple looking after an old couple is a little difficult; if the pressure is increasing twice as much, how can they stand it? But if their parents have two children, it means they would have siblings; they can share the burden of taking care of their parents. Xiaoyan Yin, Zhihua Li, Jianhua Li, Xiaoqun Liu also claim "For most individuals who are members of a family with more than one child, the sibling relationship is their longest-lasting relationship".<sup>23</sup> Two child policies can help children become more cheerful, optimistic, and lighten the burden.

In conclusion, while other people in China think about the advantages of the One-Child Policy, on the other hand, I believe there are also some disadvantages to this policy. People cannot deny that the One-Child Policy plays a key role in China's population control, but with the progress of society, the One-Child Policy's drawbacks have gradually emerged. The negative effects of the One-Child Policy can be spread into five parts. The first is spoiled children, the extension question is children's mental health. Secondly, China's diminishing labor force will cause the Chinese economic decline. Third, in China's aging population the extension question is dependency loads, such that the only child of the family has more press. Fourth, the government will be forcing women who trying to broke the policy to have more children to do abortions cause great harm to the body. And last but not least, gender imbalance lets China have about forty million more males than females, the marriage problem is obvious. So, the "Two-Child- Policy" is meant to help solve these

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<sup>23</sup> Xiayun Yin, Zhihua Li, Jianhua Li, and Xiaoqun Liu, "Sibling Relationship Quality and Young Children's Mental Health in Chinese Two-Child Families," 2.

problems. The One-Child Policy has been out of date. While the Two-Child Policy is needed to control the rapid growth of the population in China, and necessary. The Two Child-Policy is very obverse and can address the issues of nowadays and the future. Also, I believe this is the right decision that will make a benefit for China.



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