



## **China's One Child Policy**

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Rising populations have been an enormous problem around the world. Humanity first surpassed one billion people around 1805, and only two hundred years later increased the population sevenfold to over seven billion.<sup>i</sup> Because of this, there have been both environmental and economic consequences. Increased need for food not only causes governments to scramble to enhance agricultural output but also results in ecosystem destruction. Although population around the world has only recently begun to reach unmanageable levels, the idea of overpopulation is not a new one. In 1798, Thomas Malthus, published *An Essay on the Principle of Population* which addresses overpopulation.<sup>ii</sup> He was one of the first people to recognize that the Earth would not be able to meet the needs of an exponentially growing human population.<sup>iii</sup> In his treatise, he states that, “the power of population is indefinitely greater than the power in the earth to produce subsistence for man. Population, when unchecked, increases in a geometrical ratio. Subsistence increases only in an arithmetical ratio.”<sup>iv</sup> Although Malthus’ theory has not yet held true due to technological advances that have aided in agricultural production, eventually if the population continues on its upward course, his predictions will come to fruition.<sup>v</sup>

China is the most inhabited country on the planet with a population of over 1.3 billion people.<sup>vi</sup> In the 1970’s, China had a total fertility rate of six, which means that the average woman would produce six children during her reproductive years.<sup>vii</sup> This is almost three times greater than replacement-level fertility, which is 2.1 children on average per woman, enough to replace both parents while account for factors such as infant and childhood mortality.<sup>viii</sup> In response to this, China has implemented a one-child policy which aims at slowing and reversing population growth by decreasing total fertility. The policy is maintained through strict government enforcement, such as fines, jail time, and forced abortions for policy violators, in addition to benefits for one-child



families, such as monthly subsidies, additional food rations, and housing preferences. China's one-child policy has been a highly successful and necessary policy that must be continued until China's population can be stabilized. The one-child policy has already proved to be effective by helping to alleviate environmental stress, reducing poverty, and improving the economy.

In the period between the Han and Qing dynasties, an epoch of around one thousand years, Chinese population fluctuated between thirty-seven million and sixty million people.<sup>ix</sup> From the year 1749 to the year 1851 during the Qing dynasty, the population increased by almost 145 percent from 177.5 million to 431.9 million.<sup>x</sup> This marked the beginning of the growth explosion that brought China's population to over one billion.<sup>xi</sup> From the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, birth control and family planning were in place, but were not mandatory practice. In 1978, a voluntary program encouraging two children was introduced; however, in 1980, with escalating demand for only one child per family as population approached the one billion mark, China officially began its one-child policy, under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping.<sup>xii</sup>

Population is one of the major factors in environmental impact because by having more people, agricultural output needs to increase. Ecologist Paul Ehrlich and physicist John Holdren developed a formula to explain how humans affect the environment.<sup>xiii</sup> The formula they created is, "environmental impact equals population, multiplied by affluence and consumption patterns, and multiplied by the level of technology of the society."<sup>xiv</sup> There are many ways of increasing agricultural output to meet the demands of a growing population; however, most of the methods are environmentally detrimental. Two methods to increase production are to intensify cultivation of land or to open up land for farming.<sup>xv</sup> Currently, China has been overcultivating its land which may lead to a decrease in soil productivity in the near future.<sup>xvi</sup> Already 20 percent of China's arable land has been lost because of this practice.<sup>xvii</sup> In addition, 60 percent of the Chinese populace is located rurally.<sup>xviii</sup> Among these people, the majority are impoverished subsistence farmers.<sup>xix</sup> If population continues to rise, especially in rural China, these subsistence farmers will not be able to provide for themselves. As a result, more overfarming will occur as well as the conversion of China's two million square kilometers



of forests to farmland.<sup>xx</sup> Deforestation to create agricultural land may seem to be beneficial; however, the transformed land tends not to be optimal for farming and in a short time the land is not longer capable of producing meaningful agriculture.<sup>xxi</sup> Also, the forest provides vital ecosystem services, such as conversion of carbon dioxide to oxygen, whose monetary value outweighs that of the timber or agriculture that the land may produce.<sup>xxii</sup> By lowering fertility rates and thus reducing the population through the one-child policy, China is able to diminish one of the major factors which lead to a greater environmental impact.

With the majority of China's 750 million peasants living on less than one dollar a day, China has an immense amount of poverty.<sup>xxiii</sup> Most poverty-stricken rural peasants rely heavily on subsistence farming, which is heavily affected by overpopulation.<sup>xxiv</sup> The world's poorest people tend not to be well-educated and usually have a plethora of children.<sup>xxv</sup> This is due to a magnitude of reasons such as high infant mortality rates, children providing helping hands on the farm, and the lack of access to contraceptives and reproductive health information.<sup>xxvi</sup> Because of their high reproductive rate, many of the poor around the world fall into a vicious cycle where, "increasing population density leads to a greater depletion of rural community resources like firewood, water, and land, which encourages couples to have more children to help gather resources, and so on."<sup>xxvii</sup> China has been able to break out of this poverty trap, by implementing its one-child policy. Since the one-child policy's introduction in the 1980's, China has reduced its poverty rate from 85 percent to 15.9 percent, which is the equivalent of lifting 600 million people out of poverty.<sup>xxviii</sup> India, a country with a similar population to China's at around 1.2 billion people, does not have a one-child policy.<sup>xxix</sup> As a result, it has a poverty rate of 32.7 percent, nearly double that of China.<sup>xxx</sup> In addition, China has been able to focus on improving its citizens' quality of life in both health and education.<sup>xxxi</sup> Before 1949, China had a mortality rate of 20 per thousand, but by 1980, the number was able to be reduced to only 7 per thousand.<sup>xxxii</sup> Through investing in public education, the Chinese government has also helped to decrease population.<sup>xxxiii</sup> A direct link has been established between increased education and smaller families, with a study showing that "[i]lliterate women desire 3.1 children on average, those literate with below a middle school education



hope for 2.6, middle-school-educated women want 2.4, and those with a high school education or above desire only two.”<sup>xxxiv</sup> Because of this, fertility rates will remain low even after the government eliminates the one-child policy.

Since the one-child policy was able to reduce the fertility rate as health improvements increased longevity, China was able to reach a period where a large workforce existed alongside a small number of children and seniors.<sup>xxxv</sup> This period is called a demographic transition and transpires when the fertility rate drops to meet a low mortality rate.<sup>xxxvi</sup> It is a unique, non-repeatable, occurrence that provides an exceptional opportunity to eradicate poverty and produce economic growth.<sup>xxxvii</sup> This is because of a low dependency ratio, a proportion of the young and elderly to the working-age population, where society does not need to pay for medical expenses for the elderly and new schools for youths.<sup>xxxviii</sup> This window of opportunity lasts for approximately twenty years and provides a demographic dividend, which is the, “gains (or losses) in per capita income brought about by changes in a population’s age structure.”<sup>xxxix</sup> China went through this demographic transition window between 1980 and 2000, in which 15 to 25 percent of its economic growth was generated by the demographic dividend with per capita income growing 8.4 percent annually.<sup>xl</sup> However, the window has now closed, since the workforce is now aging and negative dividend is starting to occur.<sup>xli</sup> This is due to a large part of China’s population being in the retirement age with only a small part of the population being in the workforce because of the drop in fertility. However, once the aged, “baby boomer” generation dies out, population will be stabilized and a lower dependency ratio will be achieved. Because of the one-child policy, China was able to experience and make the most of the demographic window allowing for tremendously beneficial economic growth.

Although the one-child policy is very beneficial, it has its drawbacks. In China, males are greatly preferred over females.<sup>xlii</sup> This preference has roots which are deeply imbedded in China’s culture, tracing back to the Confucian values.<sup>xliii</sup> Families did not want girls, and women were constantly pressured to produce a boy.<sup>xliv</sup> As a result, with the inception of the one-child policy, women would have selective abortions or even terminate the child’s life if the baby or fetus was discovered to be



female.<sup>xlv</sup> Laws were put in place to prevent female infanticide; nevertheless, cases of both selective abortion and termination of a female baby's life still occurred, if a doctor was willing.<sup>xlvi</sup> This deep-rooted urge to have a male child resulted in a skewed proportion of male to female children. In 2008, a government report estimated that the gender ratio was 120 boys for every 100 girls.<sup>xlvii</sup> This ratio results in a surplus of unmarried young males, who have been linked to an increase of violence.<sup>xlviii</sup> In an attempt to create a more balanced ratio, the government has provided incentives to have female children, such as preferential medical care to families with only a girl.<sup>xlix</sup>

In addition, China's one-child policy infringes upon human rights. Although the Chinese government deems otherwise, many of the methods used to force cooperation with the policy violate basic rights.<sup>i</sup> Fines and other penalties, such as jail time are imposed on families for having excessive children. A more extreme, yet common practice is for the government to detain women and force abortions if the woman is pregnant with her second child.<sup>ii</sup> One woman was apprehended eight months into her pregnancy and coerced into a late-term abortion.<sup>iii</sup> Abuse became widespread as officials were rewarded based on their ability to keep the population low.<sup>iiii</sup> Forced sterilizations also occurred after a woman gave birth to her first child.<sup>liv</sup> In one incidence, a woman's sister and her brother's wife both had two children. When the government found out, "[b]oth of them were sterilized, their health ruined, making it impossible for them to ever live or work normally." Although these are some extreme cases which do violate human rights, the benefits derived from the one-child policy, from alleviating poverty to reducing environmental degradation, greatly outweigh its negative effects.

In conclusion, the one-child policy of China has not only helped China, but also the planet as a whole. By easing environmental strain, through decreasing the population, China is able to help protect many natural ecosystems which are growing scarce. Also, the one-child policy addresses poverty, one of the most prevalent issues, by breaking the poverty trap, which is holding back many people from attaining financial security. Finally, the policy has proven to be crucial in strengthening the Chinese economy by providing the unique demographic window of opportunity. If



China had not implemented the one-child policy there would have been an additional 400 million people born, a majority of whom would have been in poverty.<sup>iv</sup> Currently, China is slowly relaxing its enforcement of the policy by introducing many exceptions to the law.<sup>vi</sup> Rural people are starting to be allowed to have a second child along with some families whose firstborn was a girl.<sup>lvii</sup> Many wealthier Chinese families can afford to and are willing to pay the fines in order to have a second child.<sup>lviii</sup> In addition, the one-child policy will need to continue for 10 more years in order to finally stop the population momentum, which is presently causing China's population to continue to grow.<sup>lix</sup> Once China's population has stopped growing, a two-child policy would be beneficial in order to maintain the population. Because of the success of its one-child policy, China should be used as a model for developing nations, such as India, to help propel themselves into the developed world.

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<sup>viii</sup> Richard T. Wright and Dorothy F. Boorse, *Environmental Science: Toward a Sustainable Future* (Boston, MA: Benjamin Cummings, 2011), 201



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- <sup>xv</sup> Ibid., 205.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Ibid.
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- <sup>xxiii</sup> “Modern China: The Promise and Challenge of an Emerging Superpower”.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Wright and Boorse, *Environmental Science*, 204.
- <sup>xxv</sup> Li, *Civil Liberties in China*, 104.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> Wright and Boorse, *Environmental Science*, 225.
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<sup>lviii</sup> Wright and Boorse, *Environmental Science*, 240.

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