

CHINA'S "ONE-CHILD FAMILY" DEMOGRAPHIC POLICY - ANALYZING THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE MEASURES TAKEN TO CONFINE THE DEMOGRAPHIC GROWTH OF CHINA

Mihai Lucian PASCU¹

Abstract: *The so called "one-child policy" has brought economic benefits in China for the three decades since it was enforced, but it has also brought a series of disadvantages with consequences in the near future: increase of the dependency ratio in China with the accentuation of the population ageing phenomenon and the occurrence of disparities in the sex ratio that will lead to special social problems. Some experts believe that the simplistic reasoning behind the "one-child policy" might be responsible for the next demographic crisis. On one hand, the number of Chinese citizens is still growing. On the other hand China faces a very rapid aging of the population.*

Key words: *"one-child" policy, birth control, gender disparities, ageing of the population.*

1. Introduction

The first post-revolutionary census in 1953 revealed China's population to be of 582 million inhabitants. Upon the fifth census in 2000 the population had exceeded 1.2953 billion, thus showing a particular dynamics of the demographic evolution. According to the CIA assessments, in 2009 the Chinese population counted a total of 1.338.612.968 inhabitants [9] in the continental China, with an estimated increase rate of 0.629% for 2008. According to the same assessment, in 2009, Hong Kong registered a population of 7.055.071 inhabitants, 559.846 inhabitants in Macau, hence a total of 1.346.227.885 inhabitants.

Every year China's population increases by approximately 7 million inhabitants, i.e. the population of a London-sized city. This increase rate is estimated to keep up in the next 8 to 10 years with a higher rate in the rural regions, where jobs are harder to find. [8]

The Chinese have shown an interest towards social programs designed to support birth control including eugenics, since the 1920s - 1930s. In the mid 1950s, the Chinese government had gradually incorporated family planning and birth control measures. In 1971 the government launched the first family planning initiative known as the "wan-xi-shao" (later, longer, fewer), meaning "later marriages, longer period between births and fewer children".

¹ PhD candidate in sociology, SNSPA Bucharest.

The climax of the population increase curtail was the implementation of the “one-child” law. This law enhanced the moderation of the fertility rate, but generated a series of mid- and short-term perturbations.

2. The ‘One-child’ Policy

In September 1980 the government formally adopted the ‘one-child’ policy and set a restricting target to China’s population of 1.2 billion inhabitants in 2000.

This policy aimed to convince the population about the advantages of one-child families and mostly to penalize those who didn’t abide by the new law. During the first four years the law was very rigorously implemented, although there was some natural resistance on behalf of the population and an international opprobrium for the methods of enforcement of the law. In 1983, the authorities imposed the placement of intrauterine devices for the sterilization of women with one child, the sterilization of couples who had two or more children and abortion in the cases of unauthorized conception. The harsh measures and the infringements of human rights stirred violent international reaction, thus forcing the Chinese government to embrace the bending of the law enforcement methods in 1984. The government officially abandoned the imposed sterilization and abortion, leaving it up to the provincial authorities to enforce the law. As a result of this bending, soon after 1984 the “one-child” law came to be interpreted as the “one-child and a half” law. Some provinces allowed couples who had one girl to have a second child. Also, significant regional differences were also recorded since, in order to avoid ethnic discrimination accusations, some provinces allowed minorities to not apply the ‘one-

child’ law, as it was applicable to the Han majority.

In the rural regions certain differences in the enforcement of the law were noted. In certain provinces the families with one girl had the right to have another child, while in other provinces the law was rigorously applied. Where a woman with one or two children got pregnant again, the social workers in the rural areas pressured the woman and her family daily to abort the foetus. [7]

Where a couple from the rural area had a baby despite the provisions of the law, the provincial authority applied severe financial penalties that could equal the annual income of the family. If the family in question was not able to pay said financial penalties, the authorities proceeded to confiscating the family properties or to pulling down the house they lived in.

Despite such severe penalties, some families did give birth to a second or third baby, and avoided to register it.

Some of the Chinese families chose to go round the law, since it did not take into account the Chinese children born outside the country borders. Thus, the families fled China before the due date and came back shortly after the baby’s birth.

3. Consequences of the “One-Child Family” Policy

3.1. Gender disparities

Perhaps the most dramatic consequence of the ‘one child’ policy was the throwing over of the natural boy-girl balance. This disparity had been also fed by the rural mentality concerning the advantages of having a boy. In the Chinese rural culture the girl leaves behind her natural family after marriage, to continue her life next to her husband’s family. This has direct consequences upon economy of the rural family. First of all, the girl’s family loses manpower, as well as support and a source

of income when the parents grow old and they can no longer secure income by their own physical work. In the absence of a pension plan, the lack of descendants who would support the old couple becomes a vital problem. Because of this reason the rural couples prefer to have a boy. Once the "one-child" law was enforced, first giving birth to a girl placed a lot of families in an unfortunate position. The

result of this was a high rate of baby girls being abandoned right after birth, a high rate of infanticide and an even higher number of unregistered baby girls.

As of 1981, the gender disparities in China evolved from 108 boys to 100 girls, to a ratio of 111 boys to 100 girls in 1988, and 117 boys to 100 girls in 2001, [4] given that the natural ratio varies between 103 and 107 boys to 100 girls.

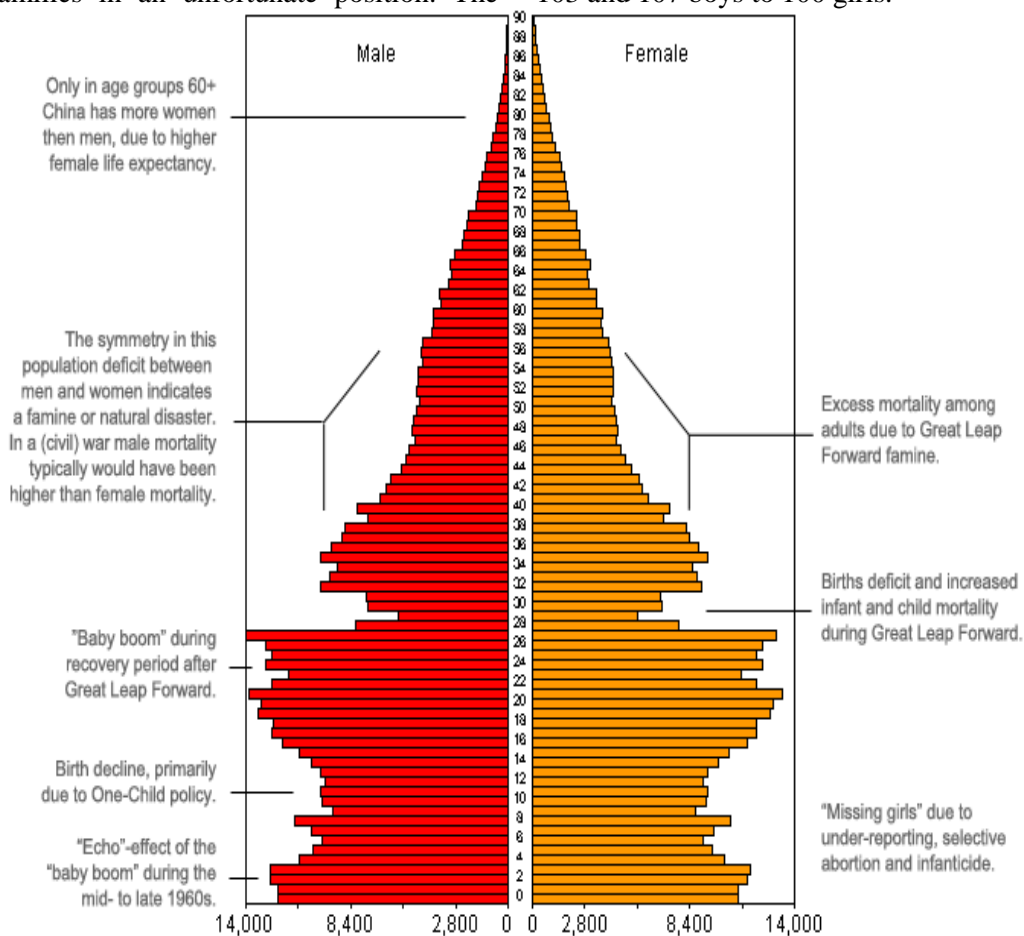


Fig. 1. *The structure of China's population by age and gender categories in 1990 (1990 Census)*

Source: National Bureau of Statistics of China (1992): *Relying on the 1990 Census*. http://www.china-profile.com/data/fig_p_19a_m.htm

This demographic pyramid reflects the Chinese population's drama throughout 4 decades. The late 1960s and early 1970s

are marked by an "explosion of births", a process that had started in the 1950s. The catastrophic results of Mao's policy within

the “Great leap forward” program practically halved the number of both genders. The exemplification for this was given by the number of people aged between 28 and 31 in the 1990 census, who had been born between 1959 and 1963. This dramatic fall is explained by the deficit of births due to starvation and the poor quality of life during the “Great leap forward” period that equally influenced both genders. The number of births exploded again between 1964 and 1974, which was proven by the segment of the population aged between 16 and 26 at the time of said census.

Another decrease followed due to the family planning and birth control policies imposed by the state between 1978 and 1985, the correlation being reflected by the children aged 4 to 11 in 1990. A comeback was noted after 1985 due to a partial loosening of the birth control measures.

A characteristic feature of the time following 1978 was the small number of girls as compared to the number of boys, a result of the ‘one-child’ law, the baby girls being unregistered or even murdered during that period.

The preference for boys became obvious in 1987, when the world press announced that the Chinese orphanages sheltered half a million girls, double, even triple their number before the enforcement of said law, the proportion in orphanages being of 27-36 boys to 100 girls.

At the beginning of this period, with no methods available for the identification of the baby’s gender prior to its birth, the Chinese families refused to register their baby girls and abandoned them. They ended up in orphanages and, in some worse cases, their parents committed infanticide in order to be entitled to having another baby.

Gender disparities in China continue to exist even nowadays, both in the rural and in the urban setting. In the urban setting

the boys-girls ratio is of 113 to 100 while with the second birth it reaches 130 to 100. It is obvious that in the urban setting, at the second pregnancy, gender identification methods are intensively used during the intrauterine period. [4]

3.2. Decelerating the pace of the population growth

In September 2007 BBC took over the statements of Minister Zhang Weiqing who was, at the time, in charge of the National Population and Family Planning Board’s activity. These statements emphasized the success of the controversial ‘one-child’ policy. “Thanks to China’s great efforts for the past 30 years we now have 400 million less inhabitants. As compared to other developing countries of the world we have accomplished this transformation half a century earlier”. [1] Mr. Zhang’s assertions expressed the success yearned by the Chinese government. A group of Chinese and foreign professors coordinated by Professor Wang Feng of Irvine University in California drew the conclusion that the law had reached its purpose, but that the population had dropped mostly due to the decrease of the fertility rate in the 1970s.

The comparison was made with Thailand and South Korea, where the modernization of society turned out to lead to the lessening of the number of children as a result of the decision of the women in these states, mainly for economic reasons.

The same attitude is adopted by more and more Chinese families who, aside from the legal impositions, voluntarily decide to have only one child and to get married later on account of their economic situation. More and more interviewed couples express their wish to willingly limit to one child, without bearing in mind the legal limitations.

3.3. Unregistered children

The issue of unregistered children has particularly severe social consequences.

These children have no identity and as such, no rights, and benefit from no protection from the state. As long as, statistically and legally speaking, they do not exist, the state is not responsible for them, yet society senses their presence. These children, future adults, are not entitled to lawful employment, education, medical care, social protection, and remain permanently a social layer exploited by a society that institutionally refuses to formally acknowledge them.

In 1998, during my first official visit to China, a high official of the host province stated in an informal discussion that the approximate number of Chinese people without an identity or any form of official registration was 30 million.

3.4. Other social matters

It is presumable that the increasing number of men as compared to that of women will lead to an over-assessment of the future 'brides' with direct effects on men coming from the penurious social layer, especially in the rural setting.

As a high official admitted within the Forum of Chinese towns that took place in October 2009 in Beijing, the boy-girl gender disparities is closely examined at birth. [10] China has reached its highest rate of gender disparity ever recorded in its history and in the history of the world, with 33.31 million more men than women.

"The chances for marriage of a man over 40 are very low, especially in the rural setting" says researcher Wang Guangzhou. A survey of the Chinese Social Science Academy predicts that over 24 million Chinese at the age of marriage will be left without brides in 2020 as a consequence of the demographic imbalance. [11]

This perspective poses new problems to the Chinese authorities, since the large number of bachelor may lead to sexual offences, such as forced marriages, girl kidnappings for marriage, bigamy, prostitution, rape and adultery. Currently

the shortage of women in China determined the appearance of the 'bride' traffic phenomenon, with brides brought in from Vietnam and North Korea, but also an increase in the number of kidnappings.

At a press conference held in November 2008 the expert Iuri Golubcikov from the Sociology Department of the Moscow State University quoted by Agerpres stated: 'Sometime between 2015 and 2030 China will have 25 million more men than women. What will ill-fated people do then? Evidently, they will cross the border and find wives-to-be in Russia, where they will also settle down'. Russia could restrict the immigration of Chinese males in the context in which the population of the Russian Far East counts 5.7 million people, whereas on the other side of the Chinese border live 1.358.000.000 people. [12] Nowadays, a few millions of Chinese live on the Russian territory, but the authorities in Moscow do not have accurate data on the number of the Chinese who work or live in the Russian Federation.

Another problem that appears to have an explanation rooted in the enforcement of the one-child law is the *increase of the criminality rate* with the generation affected by the law in question. Statistics reveal a heavier increase of the criminality rate in the areas where the 'one-child' policy was rigorously applied and where, thus, there is a greater number of single male adolescents. As a consequence the number of offences increased by 13% yearly since 1998, with 70 percent of the criminals aged between 16 and 25, 90 percent of which are male. Relying on these statistics, the American and Chinese scientists have explained the relation between the 'one-child' law effects (a higher number of boys) and the increase of the criminality rate. The survey published in April 2008 is entitled: 'Sex Ratios and Crime: Evidence from China's One-Child Policy', signed by researchers Lena

Edlundy, Hongbin Liz, Junjian Yix and Junsen Zhang.

Another survey carried out on the Vietnam veterans reveals the link between the increase of the criminality rate and the men's single status, the explanation consisting of the higher level of testosterone among singles, hence an increased propensity for aggressiveness. [3]

Both theories are broadly discussed in the study entitled 'Bare Branches' signed by Valerie Hudson and Andrea Den Boer. [2]

3.5. The ageing of the population

Another dramatic consequence of the one-child policy has medium and long-term effects and is expected to profoundly affect the demographic structure of China's population by 2030. In 1982 the weight of the population aged over 65 of 5 percent of the entire population. According to the statistics of the World Bank, in 2006 this percentage had increased to 7.5 and the projections for the next 30 years indicate 22 percent of China's population.

3.6. The "Little Emperor" Syndrome

The one-child policy also had psychological effects over China's population, among which what was generically called the "Little Emperor" Syndrome. The only children, or children with no siblings, generally grew in families where they sometimes benefited from exaggerated care, the reason being the parents and grandparents' pride and adoration. The "pampering" of that generation had not only psychological and emotional repercussions, but also significant physiological and social consequences. The number of obesity cases increased in that generation of children, mainly due to changing of their feeding habits following the western model, especially based on the "fast-food" type of aliments. According to the estimates of Doctor Philip James, the President of International Obesity Task Force, at the end of this century's first

decade, one out of five Chinese children is obese. [13]

The "Little Emperor" Syndrome led to the alteration of the social relations among individuals, as the greater openness to socialization of the children who have siblings has been demonstrated, as opposed to the predilection for internalization and egocentrism of the only-children. [5]

4. Other criticism

The one-child policy has also been criticized through the voice of demographer Nicholas Eberstadt in a commentary signed by the Catholic Family and Human Rights Institute. While comparing the one-child policy in China with "a slow-motion humanitarian tragedy", Eberstadt urged the Chinese government to "immediately and without reservation" scrap the coercive population control program that has been "a tragic and historic mistake." The demographer delivered the stinging rebuke in an address to the World Economic Forum held in Dalian, at the beginning of September 2007.

Eberstadt told the officials that when the population control program has achieved its objective of lowering the number of births in China, it "directly undermines the country's future development potential." According to Eberstadt's researches, by 2015, China's working-age population, aged between 15 and 64, will be in a continuous decline and, in a generation, China's labour force will be smaller than what it is today.

Some university professors believe that the simplistic reasoning behind the "one-child policy" might be responsible for the next demographic crisis. Among them is Mr. Peng Xizhe, Dean of *Fudan University's* School of Social Development and Public Policy: "The main policies only to the total number of the population. But nowadays, the dynamics of China's

population has become very complex. On one hand, the number is still growing. On the other hand we have a very rapid aging of the population. We will have serious problems connected to migration and, also, we are confronted with the problem of the abnormal sex ratio at birth". [6]

To conclude, the "one-child policy" has brought economic benefits for the three decades since it was enforced, but it has also brought a series of disadvantages with consequences in the near future: the increase of the dependency ratio in China with the accentuation of the population ageing phenomenon and the occurrence of disparities in the sex ratio that will lead to special social problems. The fertility rate has decreased from the average of 5.4 children per woman in 1971 to 1.7 children/woman in 2004. [14]

The decrease of fertility, the ageing of the population, the social problems occurring as a consequence of the drastic enforcement of the "one-child" law and the perspectives of China's economic development will soon call for the revision of this demographic policy by the Chinese government, a relaxation being considered an acceptable solution.

References

1. Chan, C., D'Arcy, M., Hill, S., Ophaso, F.: *Demographic Consequences of China's One-Child Policy*. BBC NEWS, September 2, 2007. Available at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr//2/hi/asia-pacific/7000931.stm>. Accessed at 03-05.2010;
2. Hudson, V. M., Andrea M., den Boer, Branches, B.: *The Security Implications of Asia's Surplus Male Population*. Belfeter Center for Science and International Affairs, Massachusetts, Harvard University Cambridge, 2004, p. 4.
3. Hvistendahl, M.: *No Country for Young Men*. în *New Republic*, 9 July 2008.
4. Kang C., Wang Y.: *Sex Ratio at Birth*. in Thesis Collection of 2001 National Family Planning and Reproductive Health Survey, Beijing. China Population Publishing House, 2003, pp. 62. 88-89.
5. Qian, N.: *Quantity-Quality: The Positive Effect of Family Size on School Enrollment in China*. Dept. of Economics, Brown University, 17 January 2006.
6. Mangum, L.: *Brothers' Lives Reflect China's Growing Income Gap*. NPR, the morning edition, 14 April, 2008.
7. Naughton, B.: *Chinese Economy – Transition and Growth*. Massachusetts. Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2007, p. 116.
8. Tulloch, J.: *Demographic Profile China: People Power*. August 25, 2008. Available at: http://knowledge.allianz.com/en/globalissues/demographic_profiles/china/china_population_demographics.html. Accessed at 08.08.2010;
9. CIA World Factbook: *Demographics of the People's Republic of China*. Available at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographics_of_the_People's_Republic_of_China#CIA_World_Factbook_demographic_statistics. Accessed 14-09-2010.
10. Ziare.com: *Populația activă chineză va atinge un miliard în 2020*. Available at: <http://www.ziare.com/international/china/populatia-activa-chineza-va-atinge-un-miliard-in-2020-923839>. Accessed at: 19-10-2009.
11. Ziare.com: *24 de milioane de chinezi nu vor avea cu cine sa se insoare, in 2020*. Available at: <http://www.ziare.com/articole/populație+China>. Accessed at 11-01-2010.

12. Ziare.com: *Ruşii se tem că bărbaţii chinezi le vor fura femeile*. Available at <http://m.ziare.com/international/rusii-se-tem-ca-barbatii-chinezi-le-vor-fura-femeile-502519>. Accessed at 26-11-2008.
13. Agenţia Xinhua: *Study Foresees Soaring rate of Childhood Obesity*. Available at: http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2006-03/06/content_4263297.htm. Accessed at: 6-03-2006;
14. CIA World Factbook: *Demographics of the People's Republic of China*. Available at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographics_of_the_People's_Republic_of_China#CIA_World_Factbook_demographic_statistics. Accessed 14-09-2010.