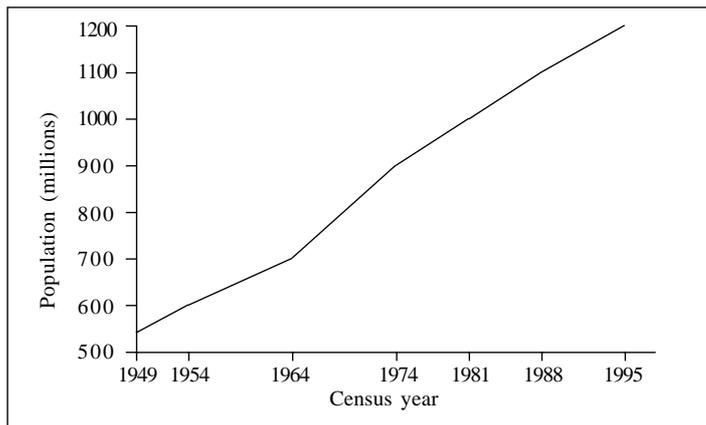




Population Policy in China

Since 1949 China's population has experienced rapid growth (Fig 1).

Fig 1. Population in mainland China (1949 - 1995)



Improving the living conditions of the population was a priority of the Communist government when they took power in 1949, but such rapid growth made any improvement in people's living standards difficult. As a response to this rapid growth, the government introduced a series of extreme family planning programmes.

Why control population?

1. Food production

One of the major challenges for China is to produce sufficient food, mostly grain, to feed its expanding population. The idea was stated in the early years of Communist rule in China, that the doubling of the population in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, was 'creating an unbearable pressure on the land'. However, Mao Zedong's rebuttal of this American statement was that 'people were the most precious of all things'. Mao disputed the **Malthusian** argument that food production could not keep pace with population increase and maintained that "it is a very good thing that China has a big population. Even if China's population multiplies many times, she is fully capable of finding a solution; the solution is production."

Total and per capita food production has been increasing steadily since 1950. However, production during recent years was unable to match this steady growth and has fluctuated around the 450 billion kilogram figure. This fluctuation of grain production poses a real problem as the population continues to grow. The population of China is forecast to grow by 375 million over the period 1995–2040 - more than the total population of the USA and Japan.

It is doubtful that China can sustain the necessary annual increase in grain production. Increasing use of fertilisers, pesticides, high-yielding varieties and genetically improved crops has enabled the productivity per hectare to increase hugely, but the decline in the absolute amount of arable land may reduce the effects of these technical improvements. The average area of land per person in China is 50% less than the world average and arable land in China is being lost at an increasing rate due to urbanisation, natural disasters, soil erosion and construction projects. Urban areas are consuming more and more land as the proportion of urban dwellers in China rises (see Factsheet #51 - Changing patterns of migration in China). The cultivation of crops on marginal or unsuitable land is one of the major causes of soil

erosion in China and it has been argued that the 1998 floods in the north of the country were caused by deforestation to make way for more agricultural land.

2. Unemployment

Unemployment and underemployment are serious problems that China could face as its population increases. The recent development of urban based industries has provided many employment opportunities, and surplus agricultural workers have migrated to urban areas. However, unemployment within China has grown from 1.8% in 1985 to 2.9% in 1995. This figure may increase into the next century. It is estimated that the working age population of China will increase by 30% between 1995 and 2020.

Recent population policies in China

In the 1970s, the government introduced a population policy with the explicit objective of reducing population growth. The measures implemented to reduce fertility were summed up in the slogan 'later, longer, fewer'. This signified later marriages and pregnancies, longer intervals between children and fewer children. During the 1970s, in less than 10 years, fertility levels declined at a rate not seen before in an agricultural nation. By the end of the decade, women were having half as many children as before. There had been a decline in total fertility rates from 5.81 in 1970 to 2.72 in 1978.

However, despite the relatively low total fertility rate, population increase will continue for many years to come as a consequence of population momentum - the very high numbers of young people in the population producing large numbers of children as soon as they reach child-bearing age. The demographic population policy target set in 1979 was to limit population numbers to 1200 million and to reach zero growth by the year 2000. In 1986, when it was obvious that this ambitious target was not likely to be achieved, the limit was adjusted to 1300 million.

The one-child policy

In 1978, the most harsh and controversial family planning policy to date was introduced, the one-child policy. There has been widespread rural resistance to this programme, because rural families consider children, especially boys, a necessity for labour and old-age security. This has now been recognised politically which means that in practice, the one-child policy is not implemented nationally, but only in urban areas. Roughly half of China's population lives in the countryside, so a significant proportion of families are permitted to have a second child.

A major consequence of the one-child policy has been the changing sex ratio within the country, itself a consequence of the higher mortality rates for female children.

Between 1954 and 1964, roughly the same number of males and females were born. There will always be slightly more males born, but male mortality at birth is slightly higher than female. However, in 1982, the ratio of girls to boys born in China was 100:110. In 1990, the problem had got worse and the sex ratio had risen to 100:111.7 at birth. In addition to this, there were more females than males dying in the first year after birth.

Exam Hint - Many candidates appear to believe that it is only rural communities which show a definite preference for male offspring. However, males are seen as providers of old age security, an issue which affects rural and urban families equally.

There are several suggested explanations for the sex-ratio imbalance.

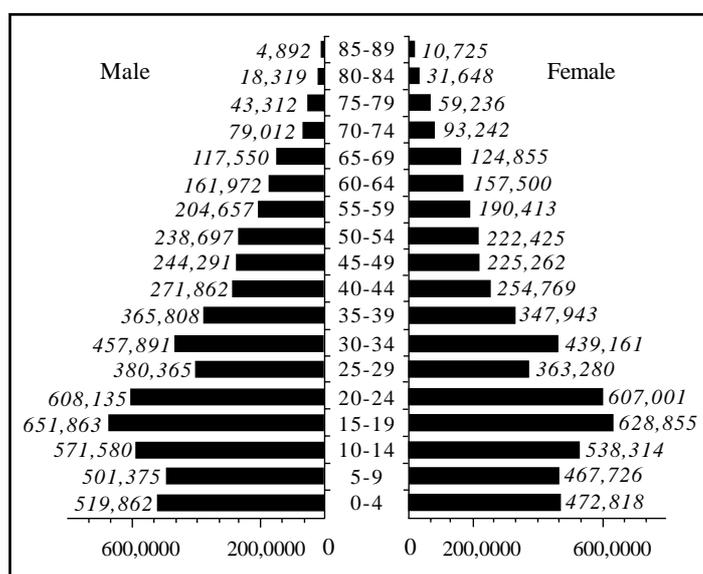
1. Female births are under-reported. Couples whose first child is female are allowed to have a second child. However, couples whose first child is male are not allowed to have a second child. To get around this, it is suggested that many couples fail to tell the authorities if their first child is male.
2. Female babies are killed at birth (female infanticide).
3. The use of ultrasound equipment allows couples to selectively abort female foetuses.

Many believe that this last explanation is the most important. Although the government theoretically prohibits the practice of identifying the sex of a foetus with the purpose of practising gender-specific abortions, there is no supervision of the operators of the machines. This explanation can be confirmed by the fact that the highest sex ratios can be found in urban areas, where there would be more equipment available and the more rigid enforcement of the one-child policy would mean that the birth of a son would be more important (to support the parents in old age).

Implications of sex ratio

There will be a shortfall of women in the important fertile age groups for some considerable time to come. In the 1990 census, the sex ratio of the total population of mainland China was 100:106.6, with the total number of males exceeding women by 36.21 million. This sex ratio is higher than any other preceding census. Only in the age groups above 65 years are there more women than men (Fig 2). This is due to a higher mortality rate amongst men.

Fig 2. Population pyramid of age distribution in China (1% survey) (1987)



This sex imbalance may cause a number of social problems. Young men may find it difficult to obtain a partner. Prostitution, which is a growing problem in many Chinese cities, may rise. The imbalance will not help the status of women in an already male-dominated Chinese society.

Age-related problems

The baby boom of 1962-1973 will, in time, produce a retirement bulge in the 2030s. By this time, the over 65s could constitute more than 25% of the total population and thus, within a lifetime, the number of retired will have increased from one in twenty of the population to one in four. This degree of dependency is far greater than that seen in western countries with their 'greying' population and may well be a hindrance to the further economic development of China, especially if the present retirement ages, of 55 for women and 60 for men, remain. Projections of China's elderly population (those over retirement age) can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Projections of the proportion of elderly in China (%)

Year	Urban Areas	Rural Areas	China (Total)
1988	6.99	7.16	7.1
1990	7.25	7.48	7.4
1995	7.87	8.09	8.01
2000	8.43	8.48	8.46
2010	9.34	9.36	9.35
2020	12.12	11.55	11.87
2030	16.10	14.12	15.38
2040	19.04	16.18	18.18
2060	20.23	16.04	19.40
2087	21.58	15.94	20.96

Children in LEDCs are seen as an investment for old age. Pensions in China are restricted to employees in government jobs and workers in state enterprises. With the modernisation of agriculture, the dismantling of the collective system and the growth of private enterprises, the number of citizens who will be eligible for a state pension will decline. In a one-child society, there will be too many dependent old people, and children will simply be unable to fulfil their social obligations. Parents whose only child is a daughter may feel particularly vulnerable, for once married, the daughter may well move away and join her husband's family. A state social security scheme which included the whole of the Chinese population would be a massive undertaking which the government could not afford. One of the consequences of the one-child policy then, is that in the near future, each worker will need to support almost twice as many pensioners as is the case in the developed world (Fig 2).

Since 1949 China has undergone a profound demographic change. China enjoys advanced levels of demographic development with a low birth rate at an early stage of economic development. Levels of fertility are completely out of character with an agricultural nation. Much of this fertility decline has been put in place by a government which believes that it can introduce and maintain radical social change - the one child policy has been one of the most ambitious exercises in social engineering the world has ever seen.

The main rationale for the policy is that food production cannot keep pace with population growth. Coupled with this is the challenge of underemployment and unemployment. The number of urban unemployed has been increasing due to the closure of many loss-making industries and factories - it is expected that the labour force will be expanded by 30% in the next 25 years. Over the same period the labour supply in urban China will be doubled. Rapid economic growth must be maintained to ensure low unemployment and prevent the political problems which come with high jobless levels.

However, as China develops economically, there will be a desire for fewer children and this will narrow the gap between what the Chinese people desire and the policy that the Chinese government makes. Such a demographic shift would be aided by the increasing urbanisation of China.

Acknowledgements;

This Geo Factsheet was researched and written by Elizabeth Chubb Curriculum Press, Unit 305B, The Big Peg, 120 Vyse Street, Birmingham, B18 6NF

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