

# ***Study on the Social and Economic Impact of China's One-Child Policy***

**Yikun Qing<sup>1,a,\*</sup>**

*<sup>1</sup>Faculty of Social Sciences, Duke Kunshan University, Kunshan, China*

*a. yq92@duke.edu*

*\*corresponding author*

**Abstract:** China implemented the one-child policy in 1979 to control population growth by limiting most couples to one child. This policy has been strictly implemented for over thirty years. However, it is one of the most controversial and radical social policies in modern history. Through an analysis of existing literature, this paper shows that the implementation of the one-child policy was historically necessary because it could better stabilize the economic and human social development at the time, but it also had significant social impacts on Chinese society. These impacts include changes in family structure, gender norms, and social and economic inequality between urban and rural areas. At the same time, the policy also had a significant impact on the well-being of individuals. Because the one-child policy has complex and far-reaching social impacts on Chinese society, understanding these impacts is crucial to developing policies that promote the well-being and sustainability of individuals, families, and communities.

**Keywords:** One-child policy, social impact, economic impact.

## **1. Introduction**

The main purpose of implementing the one-child policy is to control the population growth rate in order to ease social, economic and environmental pressures. Influenced by the former Soviet Union's population theory, in order to ensure daily industrial and agricultural production, China had almost no control over population growth in the early days. In some rural areas, the organization will even select and award "hero mothers" based on the number of children born. This theoretically plausible behavior led to the rapid growth of China's population. According to the data announced by the Chinese government, During the eight years from 1949 to 1957, the net population increase was 105 million. And in the period 1962-1970 after the so-called four-year natural disaster, the net population increase reached 157 million. What is shocking is that the birth rate reached 43.6‰ at the highest with the average level being 36.8‰ during these eight years [1]. The rapid population growth made the government realize the dire consequences if it is not controlled, so as early as 1971, the goal of population control was included in the national economic development plan. However, it was not until the autumn of 1980 that the one-child policy was formally proposed and implemented.

The implementation of the policy has also amended the country's marriage law, raising the legal marriage age for women to 20 and for men to 22 to further control growth. At the same time, in order to ensure the effectiveness of the implementation of the policy, different degrees of fines will be imposed on those who exceed their births according to their identity and family background. Such

punishments are often severe, and may even affect their jobs, social benefits, and administrative life. At the same time, influenced by traditional patriarchal thinking, some Chinese families prefer boys, and the issuance of the one-child policy can only ensure that the baby is a boy through one or more forced abortions. Forced abortion is also manifested in unintended pregnancies in some families after the birth of their first child due to inadequate measures to prevent pregnancy. Because of the one-child policy, they cannot afford fines and other punishments after the birth of a child which makes them must choose abortion.

The formulation and implementation of the one-child policy have indeed greatly reduced the growth rate of the population, but it has also caused the most direct impact of population aging and gender imbalance. Demographers estimate that the one-child policy prevented 400 million births between 1979 and 2009 [2]. However, due to the lack of control or even encouragement of births from the founding of the People's Republic of China to the 1970s, as time went by, the children of this group of hero mothers gradually began their own old age. The proportion of people aged 65 and over in China's total population has exceeded 7% in 2000 and has reached 14.9% by the end of 2022 [1, 3] According to the international population aging standard, limit of the criterion is 7% which shows that China's aging problem become very serious [3]. At the same time, the ratio of men to women in China has also risen from 1.05:1 to 1.18:1. In other words, at least 40 million men are destined to be single [4]. The imbalance of the sex ratio may have a negative impact on social security and further exacerbate the problem of population aging.

This paper will review previous scholars' research on the social impact of this policy, explaining and discussing the research on population control, excess birth punishment, gender discrimination and imbalance. At the same time, provide my own thinking and discussion about these aspects.

## **2. China's One-child Policy**

### **2.1. Population Control**

Population control is the main proof of the effectiveness of the one-child policy. According to Daniel Goodkind, as of 2015, when China fully liberalized the one-child policy, it is estimated that 520 million people in China have been prevented from being born, of which 400 million are directly affected by the one-child policy [2]. Although this data has been questioned by many foreign experts and scholars, who believe it is blindly exaggerated, after considering the overall data on this issue around the world, it is still found that even if China does not have a population of 400 million, it still accounts for 75% of the world. At the same time, to emphasize the size and seriousness of the figure, Daniel Goodkind set Vietnam and India as the two best comparison standards. The main reason why he uses these two countries as the standard is that they both implemented family planning policies in similar years. Vietnam's customs, culture, and ideology are influenced by ancient China and are close to China, but India is not, so there is a comparison. If the Vietnamese model is followed, China's population will reach about 1.7 billion in 2015 and 1.9 billion by 2060. And if the Indian model is followed, China will reach 2.3 billion in 2015 and a terrifying 3.3 billion by 2060 [2]. This is completely unimaginable. Therefore, it can be seen that China's own family planning model is quite effective in comparison.

Furthermore, the birth rate is much related to the environment and climate change [5]. They suggest that most greenhouse gas emissions in the last century have little to do with the rate of population growth since most emissions were generated by developed countries. It is directly related to consumption levels and consumers instead of the population. However, developing countries with medium and low consumption levels, such as China, account for an increasing proportion of global greenhouse gas emissions. Some even directly point out that China's family planning policy has contributed to reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Some studies even list China's one-child policy as

the fourth largest action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and estimate its total emission reduction contribution to 1.3 billion tons of carbon dioxide [6].

However, the release of China's one-child policy brought the era of low birth rate in China to come quickly, even 20 to 30 years faster than the normal standard [6]. This may have an impact on the future development of society.

## 2.2. Excess Birth Punishment

The punitive measures against only children may have the most direct impact on the vast majority of families who want a second child. The incentives for only children Families with one child can obtain a "one-child certificate", which entitles them to additional subsidies, including cash, medical subsidies, etc. According to Carrie, in the early 1980s when the policy was decentralized, Beijing's birth restriction rewards could reach 60 yuan per year [7]. This number was very impressive at that time as it was equivalent to the total monthly income of an urban family, but it has not grown at the same rate as prices and inflation. Therefore, later, especially after the 21st century, this reward did not play its role, and many families were not even willing to go to relevant institutions to receive it, because the possible travel expenses and time costs were higher than the amount of the reward.

Compared with the rewards of this policy, its punitive measures may have an impact on a family for more than ten years or even decades. Having a second child will cancel previous incentives and subsidies and impose fines. The fines range from three to six times the annual income of an average household. At the same time, the family would receive political ire for violating the policy. This may hinder their ability to participate in some administrative matters or require administrative means to solve problems [8]. This is only for ordinary people. For employees of the government or public institutions such as state-owned enterprises and central enterprises, the punishment will be even more severe. First, workers in these institutions have a stronger incentive to cooperate with the one-child policy, because it will directly affect their promotion in the first place. Some units with stricter management systems will even require an early report on the birth of a child. Employees who violate the one-child policy may be subject to penalties such as cancellation of promotion qualifications, reduction of benefits and bonuses, or direct dismissal, in addition to the direct fines mentioned above, depending on how seriously their units attach importance to the policy. For some senior leaders, even face the highest level of administrative punishment, such as expulsion from the party [9].

## 3. Gender Discrimination and Imbalance

The most direct result of severe punishment is widespread abortion, which just reflects the social status of patriarchy and leads to an imbalance in the ratio of men to women.

In the absence of intervention, the birth ratio of males to females should be 1.03 to 1.07, which is due to some biological factors [10]. But in China, in the early 1980s when family planning was implemented, this ratio had exceeded 1.07 and even reached 1.23 in the early 21st century [11]. Due to the huge difference between the data at the beginning of the implementation of the policy and the data 20 years after its implementation, the family planning policy is naturally taken as an important factor to study.

Zhu, Li and Hesketh divide all provinces in China into three categories based on the enforcement intensity of the family planning policy [11]. The first-class provinces are concentrated in the northeast region and the eastern coastal cities, the third-class provinces are mainly ethnic minority provinces, and other provinces are reduced to the second class. Class I provinces have the most stringent implementation of the family planning policy, where a family can only have and raise one child, some rustic areas of Class II provinces are allowed to have a second child if the first is a girl, and rustic regions of Class III provinces are restricted Second or even triple births are allowed. Among the three

types of provinces, the ratio of men to women in the third type is the most normal, the first type is in the middle, and the sex ratio in the second type of province is the most abnormal.

This result seems unexpected. After all, the provinces in the first category are under the strongest policy control, and there is no chance of having a second one, while the provinces in the second category do. But there are traces of it. The one-child policy in the third type of province is relatively relaxed. In addition, these areas have a large demand for the labor force, and some have religious beliefs. There are almost no phenomena and problems such as abortion. The first type of province has a superior location, a more developed economy and a higher level of education, and more people no longer have the traditional idea of patriarchy. According to surveys, more than 50% of the respondents in these areas have completely lost the idea of patriarchy. At the same time, there are more job opportunities and better social security in these economically developed areas [11]. Most families' pensions can fully maintain their daily life, and there is little demand for financial subsidies for their sons. But for the second type of provinces, their policies are not the strictest, or it is just because they allow a second child in some rural areas, but many families still stay in the old-fashioned thinking, and many of them do not have a stable Jobs and stable pensions so that labor is still the most important thing. Therefore, many families still choose abortion as the most reliable way to have a boy. The second type of province has the largest population in my country, which has led to a 45% higher mortality rate for girls before the age of five in China than for boys.

Therefore, judging from the above literature, the structural imbalance and inequality between men and women are not only affected by the one-child policy but also affected by education level and labor demand.

## **4. Economic Impact and Discussion**

### **4.1. Economic Impact**

The one-child policy has a significant impact on human capital, income, welfare and GDP growth rate. According to Gu, Compared to the counterfactual without birth restrictions, the human capital of the generation born under birth restrictions is about 47% higher [12]. This generation enjoys higher wages and benefits. However, the one-child policy would reduce total income because the size of the labor force would be significantly reduced. In addition to the direct reduction in the labor force due to the reduction in the total population, the implementation of this policy also has a significant impact on the female labor force. First, in families where the husband works in the public sector, the wife tends to still participate in the workforce, while in families where the husband does not work in the public sector, it is more likely that the wife will have a second child and not participate in the labor force [13]. Meanwhile, for women who have a second child, Mothers' labor supply intensity and monthly income decreased by 1.4 hours and 54.5 yuan (18.7%) per week, respectively [14]. However, due to the stricter one-child policy implemented in cities, the transfer of rural labor to cities has increased significantly. This labor migration also plays an important role in China's socio-economic development.

### **4.2. Discussion**

Although the one-child policy has played a good role in controlling the total population, it has also left many problems, which makes us think about whether the introduction of this policy is worthwhile. First of all, on the issue of population control, it cannot judge whether China's claim to the outside world that if there is no control, China's population will increase by another 400 million is accurate. Our calculation of this value is based on the level of economic development and people's way of thinking at the beginning of the implementation of the policy in 1979. However, with the development of the economy, the rise of commodity prices, the improvement of education levels, and the change

of ideas, many families may face greater economic pressure or their ideas have been changed, and they do not think that more children are more blessed or There must be a boy to pass on the family line and have children like crazy to get a boy. Similarly, using this principle to deduce Goodkind's prediction of China's future population using the standards of Vietnam and India, the result will definitely be questioned. Because such seemingly exaggerated data is predicted based on the economic development status and people's way of thinking many years ago, the rapidly changing development of the times will definitely have a greater impact on this number. Even though it cannot consider the impact of the development of the times, judging from the current situation, the increase in population is definitely less than 400 million. Therefore, this does not exceed China's environmental carrying capacity, even in a densely populated, most economically developed but relatively small city like Shanghai [15].

Although the birth of these people may cause greater social competition pressure, as a country with a large demand for labor, the Chinese labor market is not unacceptable to these labor forces. Compared with the high competition pressure in the labor market, the impact of sudden low fertility rate on the labor market and future economic and social development is more significant. China's fertility rate dropped from 2.2 to 1.5 in the 1990s. According to statistics, among countries in East Asia and Southeast Asia, when the first birth rate reached this level, China's per capita income was extremely low, even less than 1/3 of Thailand's [2]. Premature low birth rate seems to reduce the life pressure of each family, but it is more likely to cause social instability. Even the rapid economic development in China since the 21st century cannot conceal the labor shortage problem that may be brought about when children born during this wave of low birth rate grow up and start working. Especially so far, China is still a developing country. Although the level of science and technology is relatively high, the level of education still needs to be improved and the fairness of educational resources should be pursued as much as possible. In this way, many jobs cannot be replaced by artificial intelligence, and the top talents in various industries are limited, so the basic labor force is very important.

The previous discussions are all from the macro level of the country, but each family is most directly affected by the policy. Abortion is a bad consequence of the one-child policy. Mosher even directly asserted in "The Lancet" that "China's one-child policy itself leads to forced abortions". In order to provide guarantee for the normal implementation of the policy, some Chinese officials were even exposed to use power and cruel means to force abortions [16, 17]. Whether it is an active abortion that is found to be a girl through inspection or a passive one because it cannot accept or bear the punishment of having a second child, it will bring direct physical and psychological harm to every family, especially women. Even though relevant regulations and laws have been promulgated that doctors cannot tell pregnant women and their families the sex of their children during B-ultrasound tests, many people still obtain information through relationships. Some rural families and urban families without these relationships will even believe in some superstitious witchcraft to judge. Although such regulations seem to solve the problem fundamentally, their implementation effect is limited and there may be other problems affecting social security such as bluffing and deception. Moreover, to this day, most Chinese families are still very attached to the "iron rice bowl", that is, a well-established job. The punitive measures of the one-child policy will make them lose their jobs, so the conflicts arising here can only be resolved by choosing abortion.

At the same time, filial piety is also a question worth thinking about. As an ancient civilization in China, every citizen has been influenced and infected by Confucian culture. Every child needs to learn to recite classic Confucian works such as the "Three Character Classic" and "Di Zi Gui" from an early age. Parents have raised us, and it should be filial to repay this concept, which is also engraved in the hearts of every Chinese. Therefore, the pressure on the only child will be even greater when the parents are old and sick. They need to balance work and caring for their parents. At the



same time, their parents' daily expenses, especially medical expenses, will also be a heavy burden on their shoulders. Of course, this also provides an opportunity for the elderly care market, even though many families still cannot overcome the psychological barrier of not being filial.

To sum up, I think the implementation of the one-child policy is too strict in some respects. First of all, the demand for labor in rural areas should be considered, and the policies for rural areas should be optimized so that the rural areas of all provinces allow a second child if the first child is a girl. At the same time, the level of education should be considered. People in most provinces of China are still influenced by the idea of "there are three ways to be unfilial, and having no offspring is the greatest", and their desire for boys will be stronger, which will also lead to problems such as selection abortion. But the punishment is too severe, especially the administrative punishment. Therefore, it can be optimized to increase the fines or go to the Social Security Bureau to pay the "second child fee" to purchase the right to have a second child. This cost can be set slightly higher to avoid more pop births. However, administrative penalties will be canceled. Finally, for families with a one-child certificate, increase the pension and medical insurance benefits of the parents to reduce the burden on the one-child.

## 5. Conclusion

In summary, previous studies on the social impact of China's one-child policy reveal complex and multifaceted consequences. While the policy did contribute to the decline in population growth, it also brought about some unintended consequences. These include gender imbalance, a reduced labor force, an aging population, and potential slowdowns in economic growth. The implementation of the one-child policy should take these consequences into full consideration and should be tailored to local conditions, taking into account labor demand, education level, economic development level, household income, and commodity prices in different regions, and making appropriate adjustments to the policy.

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