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# China's One-Child Policy: Was It a Good Idea?

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Family at Beijing Zoo.

**Overview:** In 1980, leaders in China feared that their nation did not have enough resources to support its huge and rapidly increasing population. To avoid what might become an overpopulation disaster, these officials implemented a far-reaching population control program called the one-child policy. The program has been revised since 1980, but after more than 30 years, it remains in place. This Mini-Q asks whether or not the one-child policy has been a good idea for China.

## The Documents:

- Document A: Population Projections (table)
- Document B: Fertility
- Document C: Environment
- Document D: Young Women in the Workplace
- Document E: Social Imbalance
- Document F: Two Single Children Speak

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A Mini Document Based Question (Mini-Q)

## Hook Exercise: What are the Consequences of Population Control?

**Directions:** In 1980, the People's Republic of China began its famous one-child policy for limiting and then reducing the population. As of 2012, this policy had been in effect for 32 years. At first, the program limited most Chinese couples to having only one child each. Over the years, some changes to the policy have allowed about a third of Chinese couples to have two children.

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The law has had some expected and some unexpected results. Imagine that it is 1980 and that you are a professor at a major university. Your specialty is demography, the study of population. The editors of *Demography Today* ask you to write an article suggesting possible positive and negative consequences of China's one-child policy in five different areas. You say yes, of course, since the subject is right up your alley. You prepare the following Think Sheet and do some preliminary thinking.

Area of Interest	Possible Consequence(s)	Reasoning
Academic achievement	PRO	
	CON	
Economic growth per capita	PRO	
	CON	
Air pollution	PRO	
	CON	
Crime	PRO	
	CON	
Care for the elderly	PRO	
	CON	

## China's One-Child Policy: Was It a Good Idea?

In 1949, after a civil war that had lasted more than 20 years, Mao Zedong and his Communist revolutionaries won control of China. Mao's revolution was based on the communist ideal of a classless society in which workers control the government.

At this time, China was a poor country, having slogged through years of war, disease, and natural disaster. Its population was the largest in the world and growing. How would China feed and clothe all of its people? Against the recommendations of some of his advisors, Chairman Mao called for couples to have even more babies. "Of all things in the world," said Mao, "people are the most precious." More people, Mao thought, would mean more workers, and more workers would mean a stronger China. Birth control was discouraged.

One of Mao's early goals was to catch up economically with richer countries like the United States. To this end, people across the country were forced to abandon farming and help create an industrial China. This movement, called The Great Leap Forward, included a program to build backyard furnaces for making steel. But with too many furnaces replacing farms, China faced food shortages. A devastating famine killed an estimated 30 million people.

As a result of this disaster, Mao changed his mind about population and birth control and in the late 1960s introduced the slogan "Late, Long and Few." The idea was for couples to marry late, wait a long time before having children, and then, when they did have kids,

have only a few. Marching behind this banner, China cut its fertility rate in half between 1970 and 1979. But even then, Communist Party officials feared that China's population, now close to one billion, was growing too fast. Their solution was a government program called the **one-child policy**.

In general terms, China's one-child policy limits Chinese couples to one child each. However, there are exceptions. First, the one-child

limitation only applies to **Han Chinese**, an ethnicity that makes up about 90 percent of the population. It does not apply to minority ethnic groups, who are permitted two or even three children. Second, the policy has not remained absolutely fixed. The Party has begun to worry that there will soon be more old people than young people in China. This possibility has convinced the Communist Party to allow urban residents who are single children themselves to have two kids. Also, the one-child policy has not been evenly enforced. In some places couples

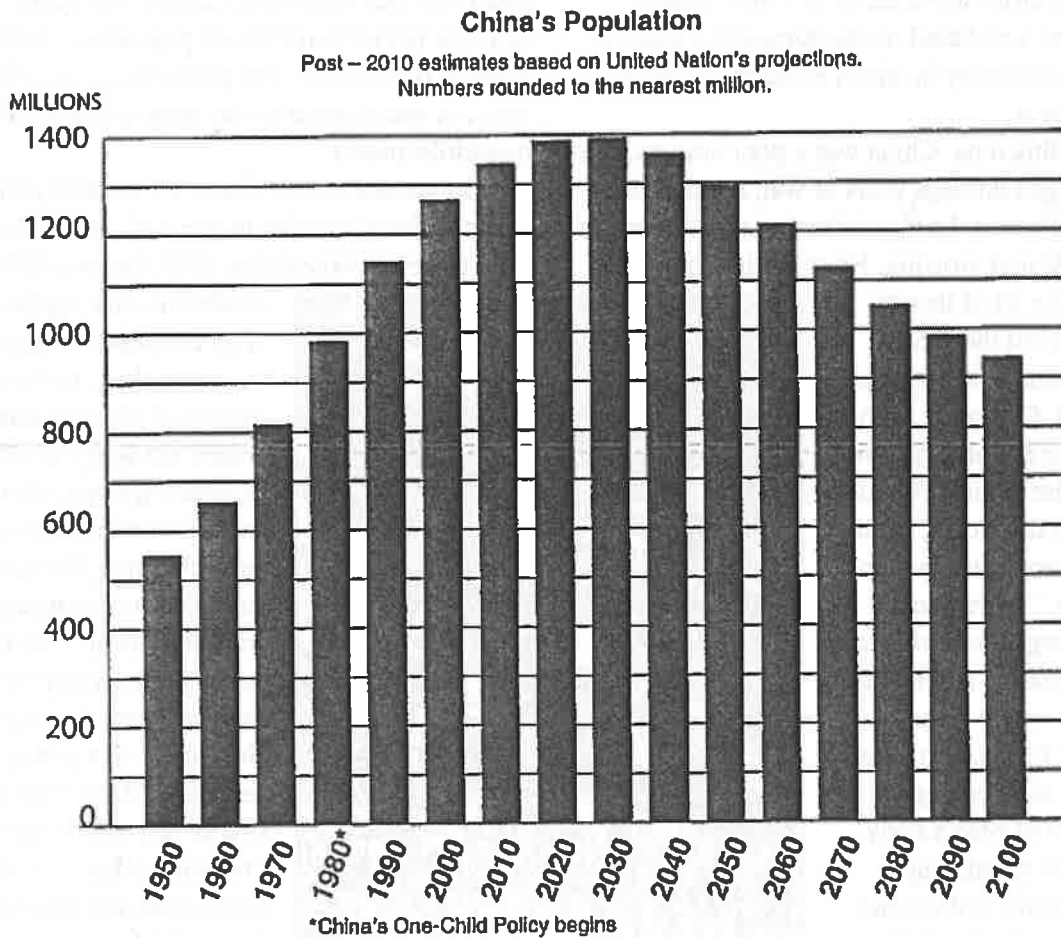
who have broken the one-child policy have had to pay large fines, or been punished with forced **sterilization** and abortions. In other places, couples covered by the policy have two or even three children without paying any penalties.

The one-child policy has its supporters and its opponents. On which side do you stand? This Mini-Q contains six documents. The documents can not tell the whole story, but they do provide an introduction. Read the documents and answer the question before us – *China's one-child policy: Was it a good idea?*



## Document A

Source: Population Division of the Department of Economics and Social Affairs, United Nations, *World Population Prospects: The 2010 Revision*.



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**Document Analysis**

1. The population of the United States in 2010 was a little under 300 million. In that same year, what was the population of China?
2. In what year and at what number is China's population expected to peak?
3. Between 1960 and 1980, a growing number of Chinese planners became worried about population growth. How does this document explain their concern?
4. Does this document support the claim that China's one-child policy is working? Explain.
5. How might the numbers in this document worry Chinese leaders today?

## Document B

Source: Feng Wang and Cai Yong, "China's One Child Policy at 30," *Brookings*, September 24, 2010.

Even before its inception, the one child policy was questioned for its necessity and its enormous social costs. At the time of the policy's announcement [in 1980], China had already achieved a remarkable fertility reduction, halving the number of children per woman from 5.8 in 1970 to 2.7 in 1979. The one child policy, critics warned, would forcefully alter kin relations for Chinese families, and result in accelerated aging.... To enforce a policy that is so extreme and unpopular for families who relied on children for labor and old age support, physical abuses and violence would be inevitable....

China's one child policy may have hastened a fertility decline that was already well in progress, but it is not the main force accounting for China's low fertility today. The claim by Chinese officials that the one child policy has helped avert 400 million births simply cannot be substantiated by facts. Most of China's fertility decline occurred prior to the one child policy. In countries without a forceful and costly policy as China's, birth rate has declined with similar trajectories and magnitude.

## Comparative Fertility Rates\*

	1979	2008
Brazil	4.2	1.9
China	2.7	1.7
South Korea	2.9	1.2
Thailand	3.6	1.8

\*The fertility rate is the number of children the average woman has in her lifetime.

## Document Analysis

1. In what year did China introduce its one-child policy?
2. What does a nation's fertility rate measure?
3. In the first paragraph, how do the authors use fertility rates to argue that China's one-child policy may have been unnecessary?
4. In the second paragraph and in the chart below it, how do the authors use comparative fertility rates to argue that China's one-child policy may have been unnecessary?
5. Based on this document, has China's one-child policy been a good idea?

## Document C

Source: Jonathan Watts, "China's one-child policy means benefits for parents – if they follow the rules," *The Guardian*, October 25, 2011.

Li Tianhao has just given birth to a baby boy blessed with his mother's nose, his father's mouth and an impressive ability to sleep through even the loudest disturbance.

It is a skill the newborn will be fortunate to maintain as he has been born in Henan, the most crowded province in the world's most populous nation ....

Yet he will probably grow up alone. Although Henan last year became the first province in China to register its 100 millionth resident—giving it a population bigger than any country in Europe—it also claims some of the greatest successes in taming demographic growth through its family planning policies.

This has not happened by accident. Henan is one of the most environmentally stressed areas of China with a quarter of the water and a fifth of the land per capita compared to the already low national average.

Senior family planners say this justifies rigid restrictions. "The large number of people has put very big pressure on all resources, especially water," said Liu Shaojie vice director of the Population Commission in Henan. "Over 30 years of effort, we have put in place a systematic procedure for controlling the population. That has eased the impact on the environment. We are doing glorious work..."

This policy was initiated primarily for economic and education reasons, but it is increasingly cited as an environmental blessing. According to Liu, the population controls have kept sulfur dioxide emissions down by 17.6% and [reduced] water pollution by 30.8%. Without [the one-child policy], he says, the average person in Henan would have a third less land and a quarter less forest.

Note: Sulfur dioxide is released by coal-burning power plants. It is a major cause of asthma and bronchial infection and is a big contributor to China's poor air quality.

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## Document Analysis

1. What is Henan? How is it significant in the discussion of the one-child policy?
2. What does the phrase "demographic growth" mean?
3. How much land and water does each person have in Henan compared with the people in the rest of China?
4. What evidence does Population Commission official Liu Shaojie provide to show that the one-child policy is "an environmental blessing"?
5. Do you think environmental concerns like air pollution, water pollution, and overcrowding justify a one-child policy? Explain.

## Document D

Source: Susan Greenhalgh and Edwin A. Winckler, *Governing China's Population*, 2005.

Perhaps the biggest beneficiaries of the one-child policy have been urban singleton daughters. Their parents' only treasure, since the 1980s single daughters in China's cities have enjoyed privileged childhoods little different from their male counterparts.... With no brothers to compete for their parents' attention and resources, ... these teens have been socialized to value educational and career success and provided the resources with which to achieve it. [Anthropologist Vanessa] Fong argues that this generation of urban singleton girls has been empowered to challenge some of the ... gender norms that have long dominated Chinese life.... In cities such as Shanghai and Dalian young women today enjoy a marriage market that favors brides and a job market with attractive opportunities earmarked for "feminine" applicants. Indeed, some of the hottest and best paying jobs in today's globalizing social service economy (bilingual secretaries, public relations, fashion models) are open exclusively to young women with good looks and sex appeal.... For these young women, the one-child policy seems to be a real blessing.

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**Document Analysis**

1. What is a singleton daughter?
2. How have urban singleton daughters benefitted from the one-child policy?
3. What does anthropologist Vanessa Fong mean when she says that urban singleton girls have been empowered to challenge some of the gender norms of Chinese society?
4. Is there anything in the document that suggests that the one-child policy is a bad idea? Explain.

## Document E

Source: Laura Fitzpatrick, "A Brief History of China's One-Child Policy," *Time*, July 27, 2009.

The one-child policy relies on a mix of sticks and carrots [punishments and rewards]. Depending on where they live, couples can be fined thousands of dollars for having an [extra] child without a permit, and reports of forced abortions or sterilization are common. . . . The law also offers longer maternity leave and other benefits to couples that delay childbearing. Those who volunteer to have only one child are awarded a "Certificate of Honor for Single-Child Parents." Since 1979, the law has prevented some 250 million births, saving China from a population explosion the nation would have difficulty accommodating.

But critics of the policy note its negative social consequences, particularly sex discrimination. With boys being viewed as culturally preferable, the practice of female infanticide—which had been common before 1949 but was largely eradicated by the 1950s—was resumed in some areas shortly

after the one-child policy went into effect. The resulting gender imbalance widened after 1986, when ultrasound tests and abortions became easier to come by. China banned prenatal sex screening in 1994. Nonetheless, an April [2009] study published in the *British Medical Journal* found China still has 32 million more boys than girls under the age of 20.

The total number of young people is a problem as well; factories have reported youth-labor shortages in recent years, a problem that will only get worse. In 2007 there were six adults of working age for every retiree, but by 2040 that ratio is expected to drop to 2 to 1. Analysts fear that with too few children to care for them, China's elderly people will suffer neglect.

*Note: Ultrasound* is a technology that enables doctors and parents to see a picture of the fetus when it is in the mother's womb. The fetus's gender can be detected through ultrasound. *Infanticide* is the purposeful killing of infants.

## Document Analysis

1. How are Chinese couples punished for violating the one-child policy? How are they rewarded for complying with the policy?
2. What does the term "gender imbalance" mean? What are the causes of the gender imbalance in China?
3. Imagine that you are a small factory owner in Beijing with 50 employees. Do you support the continuation of the one-child policy? Explain your thinking.
4. How is the ratio of working adults to retirees expected to change in China? What problem might this change cause?
5. How can you use this document to argue either for or against China's one-child policy?



## Document F

Source: Jaime FlorCruz, "China copes with promise and perils of one-child policy," *CNN*, October 29, 2011.

Source: Louisa Lim, "China's 'Little Emperors' Lucky, Yet Lonely in Life," *NPR*, November, 2010.

Note: An Internet survey of 7,000 Chinese only children between the ages of 15 and 25 found that 58 percent admitted to being lonely. A majority also described themselves as being selfish. However, many enjoyed being the "sun" around which the family revolved. (Source: NPR, November, 2010)

## Xiao Xuan

The high cost of the one-child policy is felt deeply by Beijing resident Xiao Xuan, an only-child daughter of a college professor and shopping mall manager. Xiao, 22, says she was blessed with all the attention and resources showered at her from childhood.

Still, she says, she had a mostly lonely childhood. "I used to cut myself on my wrist after being yelled at by my mom and dad because I didn't know who I should talk to or turn to," she says. "I was like that for almost two years, but I am very tough so I made it through."

"I hate to say it but the one-child policy should partly be blamed for some social issues of youth today," she adds. "It's been a ridiculous government interference on family issues."

She wished she had a brother or a sister to share all the attention.

## A. J. Song

A. J. Song, 23, is the only child in his family, which is from a small village in Guizhou province. . . . He says he probably would not be living in Beijing if he had to share his parents' attention and resources.

"I really appreciate [being the] one child, especially from the countryside. . . . My parents, they give me everything. I'm the center of attention in the family. My mother has seven brothers and sisters; my father has six brothers and sisters. Most of my parents' brothers and sisters have two kids. They are all very jealous about me being the only child," he says.

"If I had a sibling, I probably wouldn't be who I am now. Probably I'd still be in my small village, getting married and having kids. If you have more kids in your family, probably they're lacking in education, lacking food, lacking any kind of support, no matter emotional or financial. Basically, everybody is going to be average," he says.

. . . Chinese research finds advantages to being an only child: They tend to score higher on intelligence tests and are better at making friends.

## Document Analysis

1. How does Xiao Xuan feel about the one-child policy? What are her reasons?
2. How does A. J. Song feel about the one-child policy? What are his reasons?
3. For a student writing an analytical paper on the pros and cons of the one-child policy, which is more valuable—the two interviews or the Note? Explain your thinking.
4. Which only child, Xiao Xuan or A. J. Song, would you rather be? Explain your answer.
5. Based on this document, has China's one-child policy been a good idea? Explain your thinking.