

**Sample Chapter: CHINA A TO Z**

**One Child Policy**

In 1978, Deng Xiaoping promulgated what has become, at least in the West, China's most controversial family planning policy. The One Child Policy is exactly that: as of 1979, all Chinese families (with exceptions for ethnic minorities) could have only one child. The reason Deng felt the need for such a policy was the astronomical growth in China's population under Mao Zedong, who at one point had advocated and rewarded "model mothers" who gave birth to the most number of children. Mao believed that a more populous China would offer the nation protection, famously declaring that even if a U.S. nuclear attack killed three hundred million Chinese, there would still be three hundred million more Chinese whereas America could never survive such a war of attrition.

The problem with promulgating a rewards system for very large families, and making birth control difficult if not impossible to obtain, was that China's population soon outgrew its ability to feed itself. China simply didn't have enough arable land, flood control measures, pesticides, herbicides, fertilizers and the like to grow enough food reliably, nor was its economy strong enough to provide a high standard of living for such a large population. Everyone was becoming very poor and underfed.

By 1971, even Mao began to realize China had a population problem. In 1949, when the PRC was founded, China had roughly 450-500 million people. By 1964, the population had reached nearly 700 million. In his new "Five Year Plan," Mao included a proposal for later marriages, longer

spacing between births, and fewer children. However, the policy was seen as too little too late and so after Mao's death, the One Child Policy was formulated and adopted into the Constitution in 1978. By 1979, 90 percent of Chinese couples signed one-child certificates pledging to have only one child. Those who signed the certificates were awarded with benefits--such as health care, extra food ration coupons, the right to send their child to school, and other rather basic necessities. Those who failed to sign faced harsh penalties ranging from large fines to forced abortions and even forced sterilization. (Still, the 1982 census revealed the population had surpassed the one billion mark.)

By 1981 the State Family Planning Commission was established. Women were forced to reveal the dates of their periods to their "work units," that is the Party apparatus that every employed person belonged to. Work units provided you with housing, permission to marry, permission to have a child, and they could also report you to authorities if you did not obey the law, including the One Child Policy. Furthermore, so-called "neighborhood committees" often run by retired, elderly women would patrol the apartment complexes in their neighborhood blocks, essentially spying on residents to make sure everyone obeyed the laws. Not everything the neighborhood committees did was bad, of course. They could also mitigate domestic disputes and help women suffering domestic violence, they kept crime down to a minimum, they looked after neighborhood children, they helped the sick, the weak and the elderly. But they also ensured that no one had much privacy.

The policy did effectively slow China's population growth, although with 1.3 billion Chinese, China remains the most populous nation on earth. However, it also brought about many unintended consequences and much

suffering. Rural Chinese in particular did not like the policy as the traditional Chinese preference for male children--as well as farmers' need for a son to work in the fields and to take care of parents when they aged--caused many desperate, poor couples to commit female infanticide. This skewed the male-to-female sex ratio severely, with the 2000 census showing 117 males born for every 100 females. (The natural ratio should have been roughly 105 males to 100 females.) Scholars warn the ratio may rise to 120 males for every 100 females born by 2010. Today there is already a shortage of women in the countryside and many male farmers fear they will never find a bride. This has led to a billion-dollar industry in the trafficking of women from one part of China to another as well as Asian females from poor, rural parts of Southeast Asia who are kidnapped and sold by traffickers as wives to Chinese farmers.

The policy also led many local officials to commit draconian human rights violations in order to meet their population quotas. For example, activist lawyer Chen Guangcheng was sentenced in 2006 to more than four years in prison after he exposed an illegal campaign of forced abortions and sterilizations that had occurred years earlier in rural Shandong province. By the time these measures had been inflicted upon the population, the central government had in fact eased up on enforcement of the One Child Policy in rural areas, realizing its futility. Alas, this did not help Chen, a self-taught lawyer who has been blind since birth.

Today, the One Child Policy still exists but its enforcement is uneven. Many wealthy urbanites simply bribe officials now so that they can get a birth certificate for a second child (or even a third). They can pay for private schooling and healthcare as well, so they no longer need to worry if the government tries to forbid an additional child from attending publicly

financed schools and hospitals. The government allows more official exceptions as well—for example, for families where both the father and the mother are only children, they are allowed to have two children as the burden of one child taking care of both parents and four grandparents would be too great.

In the countryside, the government has already allowed farmers to have two children, and many officials look the other way when families end up having more (although their female children are often not sent to school, as it is too expensive, but are made to work at a young age). Many families make use of ultrasound machines that allow them to determine the sex of the fetus. If it's a girl, they'll abort and try again for a boy. Female infanticide has decreased now that it is easier to drop off an unwanted baby girl at one of the government's "orphanages." As foreign adoption of these girls has increased, and become more lucrative for the government, local officials no longer are pressured to force pregnant mothers to have late-term abortions or to become sterilized. (However, foreign adoption of Chinese girls has not solved the ever-growing problem of the skewed sex ratios, something the government is aware of but has not yet acted to fix.)

Finally, as China grows more prosperous, the government has been weighing the idea of allowing all families to have two children.

It is important to remember that many Chinese support the One Child Policy wholeheartedly as they believe it is necessary in order for China's economic prosperity to continue. Not all Chinese couples want to have more than one child, and in a new trend, many young urban couples now say they'd rather not have a child at all. It has grown increasingly expensive to raise a child in the city with a good education, clothing, tutoring, and all the advantages that parents feel they need to give their

**child in order for him or her to succeed in the ever-competitive market-driven economy. Parents often sacrifice greatly for their child and many young people are beginning to question whether the sacrifices are worth it. As the concept of retirement communities grows in popularity and in practice in urban areas, couples realize they will not necessarily be dependent on their child in their old age but can provide for their own care. Thus, having a child is becoming a choice rather than a necessity. However, in the countryside, having a child--and a son, at that--can still mean the difference between life and death for a peasant family.**