

## Bachelor boys

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**China is facing a crisis as a result of its famous one-child rule, according to an announcement made by a senior politician last week.**

The Chinese government's population advisor Li Weixiong declared that as many as 40 million men will be unable to find a marriage partner by 2020 ([The Guardian](#), 09 March 2004).

A cultural preference for boys has left China with an unbalanced population pyramid since the one-child rule was introduced in 1980 in response to the threat of **overpopulation**. In very poor rural areas, especially in the initial years of the policy, it was not uncommon to hear reports of female infanticide (the killing of infant girls). Many young girls were also abandoned due to the need to try again for a male heir, especially amongst

farming households. More recently, ultrasound testing has enabled couples to choose to abort female foetuses.

### China's dynamic population pyramid

According to Li Weixiong, the male: female infant ratio remained at 100:108 until 1982 (there is normally a biological surplus of male births in all societies). However, by 1989 there were reports that some rural counties were recording ratios of 4:1, with the government admitting that tens of thousands of mothers and midwives, under pressure from fathers and fathers-in-law, were admitting to having murdered infant girls ([The Observer](#), 15 January 1989). The national **census** results in May 2001 revealed that there were 116 males for every 100 females in China as a whole ([The Guardian](#) 12 October 2002). With a population of 1.3 billion, this results in a very large number of men – numbered in the tens of millions – that are unlikely to ever find a female partner.

### What are the causes of the one-child rule?

The one-child rule was introduced in 1980 to avoid a fight for food in the mid-21<sup>st</sup> century. The consequences of overpopulation had become all too evident, and still remain a cause for concern, meaning that the policy is likely to stay in place for years to come. Problems have included:

- Rising unemployment in rural areas where geometric population growth [1, 2, 4, 8, 16....] fast outstripped employment opportunities prior to 1980. Rural poverty still remains a problem in 2004, recently triggering waves of migration into the UK (resulting in the **tragedy in Morecambe Bay**).
- Famine in the 1960s claimed the lives of many. Between 1959 and 1961, 25 million died. As recently as 1989, 20 million still remained short of food. While urban China is increasingly affluent, China now has the greatest gap between rich and poor in the world ([The Daily Telegraph](#), 03 March 2004).

### How does the one-child rule work?

Initially, the rule stipulated that couples could have only one child. Fines equivalent to £3,000 ensured that only a tiny number of affluent Chinese would be able to exceed this limit. More recently, the law

has been reformed in several ways in recognition of the adverse impacts that it has been having on the demography and social fabric of society, especially in rural areas. **Two** children are now allowed if:

- the first child is a girl; however, this only applies in some *rural* districts – and a reduced fine may still need to be paid
- the first child is born with a disability
- both parents are only children

Despite this relaxation of the law, its strict application in urban areas and the increased use of ultrasound scanning continue to contribute to a growing gender imbalance. As incomes grow in urban China, but female pay remains low in comparison, the financial incentives for having a male heir are greater than ever.

## What are the consequences of the one-child rule?

In addition to the gender imbalance, there have been many other **demographic** and **social** consequences. According to the new report in *The Guardian* newspaper, since the introduction of the rule China has witnessed:

- *A general slowing of population growth.* Authorities claim that 300 million new births have been prevented since 1980. However, population has continued to creep upwards in the short-term to 1.3 billion and may actually be closer to 1.5 billion, as large numbers of unregistered children are thought to be kept hidden in rural areas when census officials visit.
- *Abandonment of infant girls.* This has resulted in the growth of orphanages such as the Shanghai Children's Welfare Institute.
- *Social problems of abduction.* 42,000 kidnapped women were freed by police in 2001 and 2002, many of whom had been sold into marriage and prostitution.
- *Programmes to foster cultural change.* In some villages, posters are now displayed reading 'Daughters are as good as sons!'
- *Increased migration into China.* Wealthier men have begun to look abroad for brides.

China is now rapidly industrialising and is predicted to overtake the UK to become the world's fourth largest economy next year. Further social changes are inevitable as the country shifts from being an agrarian society to a fully-fledged industrial nation. Cultural changes might, for instance, include bringing women's pay into line with men. In time, this could lead to more relaxed attitudes towards female children. Without such changes, the one-child rule increasingly appears to be an increasingly costly policy.