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China's one-child policy - success or failure?

By Weiliang Nie BBC Chinese Service



After three decades, the drawbacks of the one-child policy are more and more apparent

During the period that I grew up in China in the 1960s and 70s, Chinese families could have as many children as they liked. Many had four or five children. Some even had six or seven.

My parents had four children. After the government started enforcing the rule of one child per family - often forcibly - my parents would sometimes jokingly remind me that I was an "exceeded quota person", meaning that under the one-child policy I would not have existed.

Chairman Mao, who led China from 1949 until his death in 1976, regarded a fast-growing population as a productive force necessary for China to become a great power.

He treated brutally those who dared to question him and believed that China should control its population.

His successor Deng Xiaoping started to reverse the trend.

He felt the tremendous drag China's huge population had on its fragile economic recovery after years of political turmoil.

"The first children born under the one-child policy face the prospect of caring for an ever-increasing number of pensioners"

On 25 September 1980, the Politburo of the Communist Party issued an "open letter" to all members of the party and the Communist youth league, urging them to take the lead in having only one child.

This is widely seen as the beginning of the controversial one-child policy.

The government claims that the policy has helped the country achieve 400 million fewer births during the past 30 years.

But this has come at a painful cost - keenly felt by my generation and those after us.

One of my childhood friends, who didn't want to reveal his name, has had to let his daughter, his second child, call him uncle in order to escape punishment for breaking the rule.

He says it breaks his heart every time he talks about his daughter, who is officially registered as someone else's child.

A female friend, like countless other young couples in China, had to pay a large fine for having a second child. But she believed the money was worth it.

Falling fertility

Officials have repeatedly stressed that this "fundamental policy of the state", which has been credited with helping reduce the pressure of population growth on society and economic development, will continue.

But the government has already been challenged over whether the 400 million fewer births were entirely due to the implementation of this policy.



China faces the looming problem of a rapidly ageing society with not enough young carers

A team of independent Chinese and foreign academics completed what they said was the first systematic examination of the one-child policy three years ago.

They pointed out that the reduction was mainly due to a fall in the fertility rate (the number of children a woman is expected to have in her lifetime) in the 1970s when the government began to encourage delayed marriages, longer intervals between births and fewer children.

According to Professor Wang Feng of the University of California, who led the study, China's fertility rate was reduced from more than five to just over two before family planning policy was introduced in 1978.

The debate over whether the one-child policy is still needed was recently stirred up by a newspaper report about the little publicised case of Yicheng county, in the northern province of Shanxi.

Yicheng has been experimenting with a two-child policy for 25 years, said The Southern Weekend, a liberal newspaper based in the southern city of Guangzhou, close to Hong Kong.

Despite its more relaxed regulations, the county has a lower than average population growth rate, the report said.

After three decades, the drawbacks of the one-child policy are more and more apparent.

Even though China still has the largest population in the world, a report last month by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, a leading government think tank, said officials were seriously overestimating the fertility rate.

Instead of suppressing it, the report said the government should try to lift it. More and more people in China, largely in urban areas, prefer to have fewer children.

It is unclear when Beijing might end the one-child policy. But attention will be focused on an upcoming meeting of the party central committee next month.

It will finalise a five-year social and economic development plan, only the 12th since the Communist Party took power in 1949.

Clearly, the situation is becoming urgent. Already the country's population is ageing fast. The first children born under the one-child policy face the prospect of caring for an ever-increasing number of pensioners.

China also faces the daunting prospect of many men who can't find wives as many female foetuses have been aborted, resulting in a huge gender imbalance.

The clock is ticking.