

# middle (aged) kingdom

by **deborah carr**

China's "one-child policy" is hailed as the world's most effective overpopulation control policy. It has been so effective, in fact, Chinese population officials now fear their country will lack sufficient numbers of adult children to care for aging parents, the nation may lack the resources to provide other services for its burgeoning elderly population, and a skewed sex ratio—where men increasingly outnumber women—will lead to anti-social behavior among unmarried and socially unconnected men.

Introduced in 1979, the one-child policy dictates that urban residents are allowed to have just one child and rural residents may have two. Farmers often are allowed to have a second child, especially if their first-born is a girl. If both parents are only-children or ethnic minorities, they may be allowed to have a second child.

Local officials receive performance ratings based in part on how well their residents comply with the program's restrictions. In the 1980s, program officials routinely forced women to have abortions if they were pregnant with a second child. Expectant parents eager to have a son aborted female fetuses or put up their first-born infant daughters for adoption. Men and women were often sterilized involuntarily.

Over the past two decades enforcement has become less intrusive, but hefty fines are imposed to help ensure compliance. Wealthier couples are better able to afford such fines, but Chinese officials have recently cracked down on couples who use their money or influence to violate the policy. Not surprisingly, human rights monitors have criticized the highly restrictive nature of the program.

Still, these restrictions effectively transformed the Chinese population. The total fertility rate (TFR), a standard

measure of how many children are born per woman over average child bearing years, averaged about six children per woman in the 1950s and fell to about 2.4 by 1990, which is close to the TFR in the United States today (2.1 in 2006). Demographers put the current TFR somewhere between 1.6 and 1.9 in China. In 2007, China's total population was roughly 1.32 billion. According to estimates from the United Nations, if current conditions persist, the nation's population will increase to 1.39 billion by 2015, 1.43 billion in 2020, and 1.45 billion by 2025.

The one-child policy is credited with preventing an estimated 400 million births and has helped the nation live

within its natural and financial resources. Yet, the success of China's population control efforts has come at a cost, even if the most problematic aspects may not be recognized for several decades. Because the population transformation occurred so drastically and quickly, China is moving toward a demographic crisis: too many older people in need of care, too few young workers paying taxes to support such services, and a further labor shortage developing in the coming decades. Although China is often viewed as a seemingly bottomless pool of young, low-wage labor, several of the nation's major manufacturing regions have reported labor shortages.

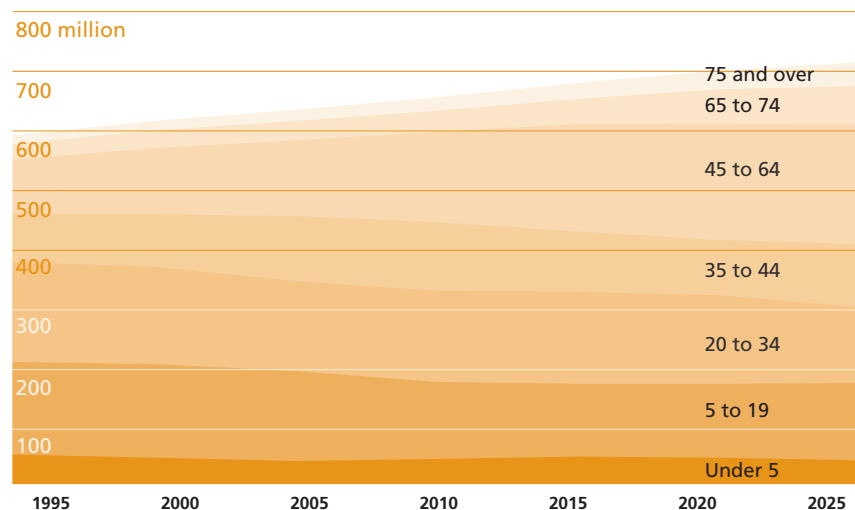
A first problem is the rapid aging of the Chinese population. The proportion of the population aged 65 and older will grow at a much steeper pace than the population under age 19 (see figures

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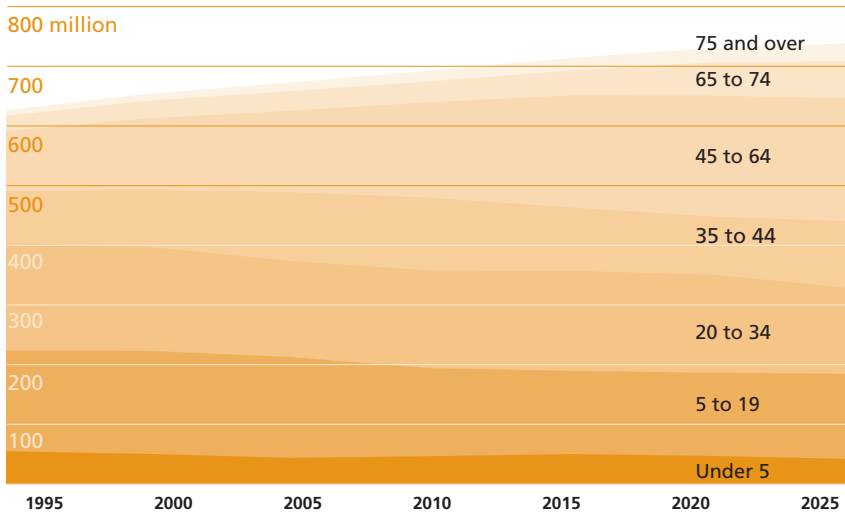
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Female population by age group in China



## Male population by age group in China



continue. Based on these estimates, the proportion of the population aged 65 and older will grow from 99.28 million (or 7.6 percent of the 1.31 billion population) in 2005 to a projected 198.82 million (or 13.7 percent of the 1.45 billion population) by 2025.

The second major problem is the increasingly skewed gender ratio: 117 boys were born for every 100 girls in China in 2006, according to the National Population and Family Planning Commission of China (NPFPC). By contrast, roughly 104 to 107 boys are born per 100 girls in industrialized countries, but the ratio eventually evens out because of infant boys' higher mortality rate. These

imbalanced ratios ultimately translate into a population that is considerably more male than female. In China in 2005 there were 1.06 men aged 20 to 34 for every one woman in that age bracket. By 2025, the ratio will increase to 1.11.

Some observers predict young unmarried men will be more likely to engage in crime and violence because they lack spouses or girlfriends to curb their bad behavior. Others may search beyond the borders of their own country to find spouses. Still other young men, referred to as "bare branches," will spend their lives unmarried and childless—they may lack money, skills, and education, the very traits that make

men appealing to the small and dwindling supply of potential brides.

The personal costs also may be high. Scholars have coined the term "four-two-one problem" to describe the burden placed on only children who may someday have to provide for their two aging parents and four aging grandparents. If young people can't support their elders, then those older adults will have to turn to personal savings, pensions, or state welfare programs. In anticipation of the four-two-one problem, young couples have started to show daughter-preference, with a hope that those girls will take care of them later in life.

Some social critics have worried about the psychological implications for only children. The media has used the term "little emperor" to refer to overly-indulged only-children. Although skeptics predict these singletons will go on to be uncooperative prima donnas at school and in the workplace, no empirical evidence has yet supported such claims. What most demographers and social analysts agree on, however, is that the current population policy must be altered—yet adjustments must not lead to a rapid spike in birth rates.

In March, China's top population officials announced the one-child policy was being re-examined and hinted the country would ultimately change, if not eradicate, it all together. Representatives from NPFPC said teams of researchers would study the strain of China's population on its natural resources and infrastructure, attitudes toward family size, and the types and costs of services the nation can provide to its elderly residents who no longer have large families to support them.

Although the Chinese government has made no formal decisions, experts agree the current policy—and the unintended problems that have resulted—must change.

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## Total population by age group in China

