



1

POPULATION DEMOGRAPHICS

OVERVIEW

China's population has more than doubled during the last six decades, from 583 million in 1953 to 1.39 billion people in 2017.¹ Today, China is home to about 20 per cent of the world's population, and it is the most populous country in the world.

China is a multi-ethnic country comprising 56 ethnic groups. The Han ethnic group represents 91.5 per cent of the population, while the 55 ethnic minority groups² accounting for the remaining 8.5 per cent.³

In 2015, China had the world's second-largest child population (aged 0–17 years), with an estimated 271 million children, including 147 million boys and 124 million girls. Child population accounts for 20 per cent of the country's total population or 13 per cent of the world's children. The number of children in China has declined considerably in the past decades, decreasing by a third between 1982 and 2015. However, during the 2010–2015 period, the child population remained relatively stable, decreasing only slightly.⁴

The long-term population trend of children in China is, to some extent, aligned with the transition of its family planning policy. China began to implement its family planning policy in the 1970s, and the Government toughened family planning regulations in 1980 with the promotion of the one-child policy. In just 10 years, the total fertility rate (TFR)⁵ among women of childbearing age dropped from 4.8 during the 1970–1975 period to 2.6 during the 1980–1985 period. Between 1990 and 1995, the TFR had fallen below the replacement level of 2.1 and has remained at a low level since then. The TFR is currently estimated at 1.6 for the 2010–2015 period, making China one of the world's low-fertility countries.⁶ In order to promote the long-term balanced development of the population, China began to implement a new population policy in 2014, allowing couples to have a second child if one or both parents are the only child of their respective families. At the end of 2015, the policy was further liberalized to become the universal second-child policy, allowing couples across China to have two children.

In 2017, the birth rate in China was 12.4 per thousand,⁷ 32 per cent lower than in 1980. The rate of natural increase⁸ in 2017 dropped to 5.3 per thousand, less than half of that in 1980.⁹

The sex ratio at birth (SRB) is skewed, a trend that has kept increasing since the 1980s. Rising from 108.5 in 1982, it reached a peak of 118.6 males for 100 females around 2005. Although the SRB dropped to 113.5 in 2015 and declined further to 111.9 in 2017 due to gradual relaxation of the family planning policy in recent years, China still has one of severely imbalanced SRBs in the world.¹⁰ Globally, the SRB generally ranges between 103 and 107 male births to every 100 female births in the absence of an intervention.¹¹

Due to the long-term SRB imbalance, there were 33 million¹² fewer females in China in 2017. This imbalance has implications for China's future social and economic development, changing gender relations and triggering various social issues, including a 'marriage squeeze' due to the imbalance between the number of men and women available to marry. This will have a far-reaching impact on future population development.

Currently, China's population is ageing due to its long-term low TFR and prolonged life expectancy at birth. While the population aged 0–14 years represented 33.6 per cent of the total population in 1982, that same age group constituted 16.8 per cent of China's population in 2017. In contrast, the percentage of people aged 65 years and above increased from 4.9 per cent of the total population in 1982 to 11.4 per cent in 2017.¹³ Globally, a population is defined as 'aged' if people aged 60 years and above account for more than 10 per cent of the total population, or people aged 65 years and above account for more than 7 per cent. According to this standard, China became an ageing society in 2000. The significantly increased proportion of people over 65 years and the expected continued increase in the future will have implications for the nature and scope of social protection and public services that are needed, and the enormous pressure experienced by younger generations to care for and support elderly parents and grandparents.

China has experienced rapid urbanization, with the proportion of urban residents increasing from 21.1 per cent in 1982 to 58.5 per cent in 2017.¹⁴ Along with urbanization, there has been large-scale population migration since the 1980s. By 2017, China's migrant population reached 244 million, accounting for 17.6 per cent of the total population.¹⁵

The large migrant population played an important role in pushing forward China's economic growth and social advancement. However, due to the segmented urban-rural *hukou* registration system, many people who moved from rural areas are not registered with *hukou* in the urban places where they reside, limiting the pathways for them to access the same basic public services (also known as essential social services) as urban residents in terms of education, employment, health care, pension and subsidized housing. Thus, they are unable to fully integrate into urban society.

Figure 1.1
Geographic regions of China



Source: National Bureau of Statistics

Figure 1.1

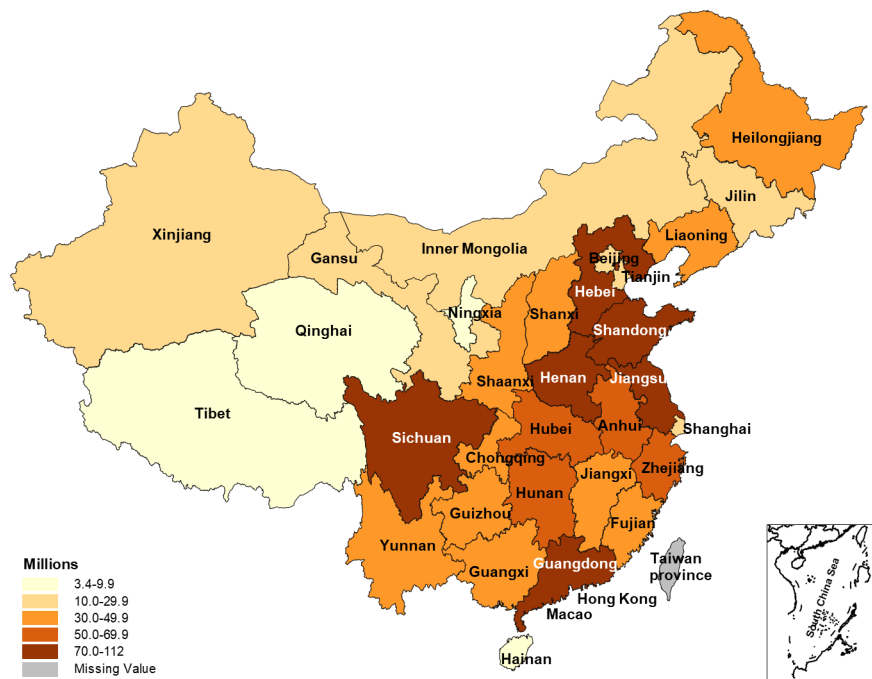
Administratively, China¹⁶ is divided into 23 provinces, 5 autonomous regions (Inner Mongolia, Guangxi, Tibet, Ningxia, Xinjiang), 4 municipalities (Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai, Chongqing) and 2 Special Administrative Regions (Hong Kong, Macao). Mainland China is also classified into different geographic areas, specifically eastern, central and western regions.^a Many economic and human development indicators are lower in the western region, compared to the eastern region.

^a Eastern region includes 11 provinces (municipalities): Beijing, Tianjin, Hebei, Liaoning, Shanghai, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Fujian, Shandong, Guangdong and Hainan.

Central region includes 8 provinces: Shanxi, Jilin, Heilongjiang, Anhui, Jiangxi, Henan, Hubei and Hunan.

Western region includes 12 provinces (autonomous regions, municipalities): Inner Mongolia, Guangxi, Chongqing, Sichuan, Guizhou, Yunnan, Tibet, Shaanxi, Gansu, Qinghai, Ningxia and Xinjiang.

Figure 1.2
Total population, by province, 2017

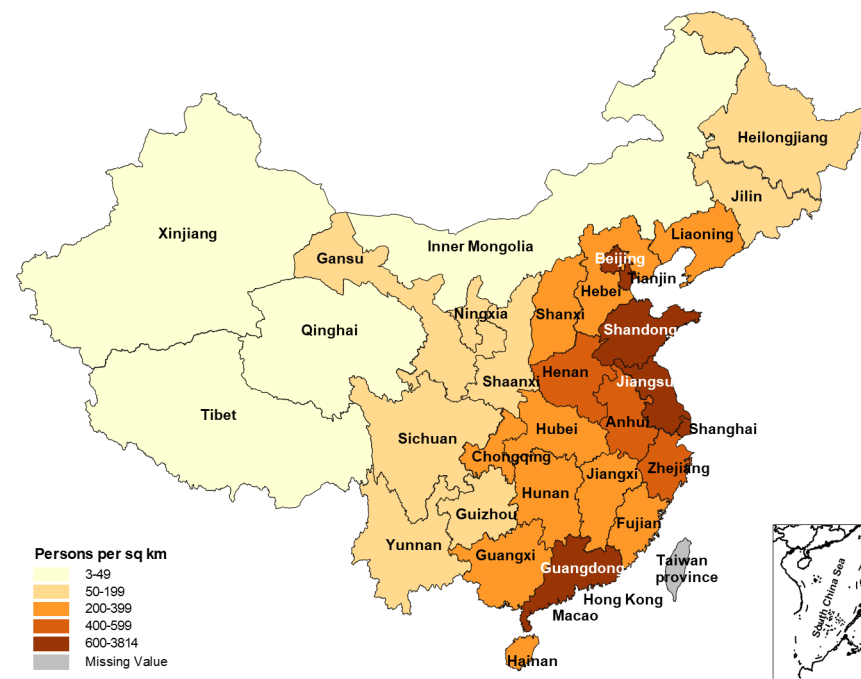


Source: National Bureau of Statistics, *China Statistical Yearbook*, 2018

Figure 1.2

With a total population of 1.39 billion, China is the world's most populous country. China's population distribution is uneven, with 70 per cent living on 30 per cent of the country's land area. In 2017, Guangdong (112 million) was the most populous province while Tibet (3.37 million) was the least.

Figure 1.3
Population density, by province, 2017



Source: (Derived from) National Bureau of Statistics, *China Statistical Yearbook*, 2018

Figure 1.3

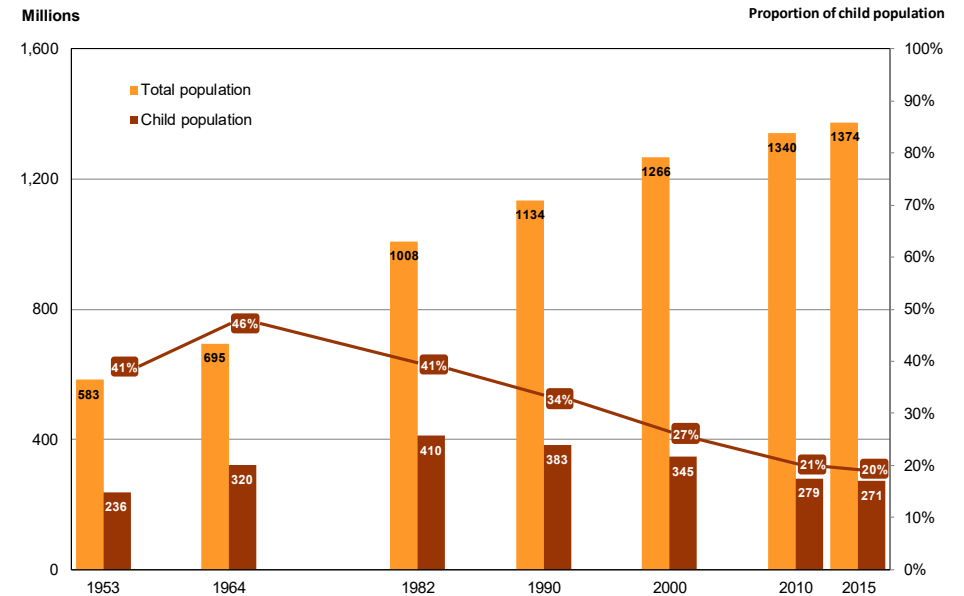
The average population density is 148 people per sq km, but it varies greatly across the country. While Shanghai has an average of 3,800 persons per sq km, Tibet, Qinghai and Xinjiang have fewer than 15 persons per sq km. The vast majority of people live in the country's historic heartland – the plateaus, plains and basins of eastern and central China – where fertile soils and water resources make it the country's most productive agricultural region. In contrast, western China, with its high mountains and harsh weather conditions, is sparsely populated.

Figure 1.4
Percentage of ethnic minority groups, by province, 2015



Source: National Bureau of Statistics, *Tabulation on the 2015 1% National Population Sample Survey*, 2016

Figure 1.5
Total population and child population, 1953–2015



Sources: National Bureau of Statistics, 1953, 1964, 1982, 1990, 2000 and 2010 *Tabulation on the Population Census of China* (respectively published in 1955, 1966, 1985, 1993, 2002 and 2012); *Tabulation on the 2015 1% National Population Sample Survey*, 2016

Figure 1.4

China is comprised of 56 ethnic groups, including Han and 55 ethnic minority groups. In 2015, the total population of the ethnic minority groups was 117 million, accounting for 8.5 per cent of the total population and mostly residing in western China. Four ethnic minority groups had a population over 10 million, namely Zhuang, Hui, Uyghur and Manchu. Among all provinces in 2015, the population of Tibet had the highest proportion of ethnic minorities (95 per cent), while Guangxi was home to 18 million people of ethnic minority status, who were mainly Zhuang. This is the largest population of a single ethnic minority group within a province.

Figure 1.5

According to the 2015 1% National Population Sample Survey, the child population aged 0–17 in China was estimated to be 271 million in 2015, accounting for 20 per cent of the total population. Although the total population in China keeps rising, the size and proportion of China’s child population has continually declined since 1982, though it did become more stable during the period between 2010 and 2015. This is due to rapid economic development and changing demographic structures, together with sustained low birth rates since the implementation of the family planning policy in the late 1970s.

Figure 1.6
Family size and distribution of families with children,
2000, 2010 and 2015

Year		2000	2010	2015
Average family size (number of persons)		3.4	3.1	3.1
Proportion of families with children (per cent)		63.4	47.2	45.0
Distribution by number of children (per cent)	One	59.3	66.6	65.6
	Two	30.8	27.3	28.4
	Three or more	9.9	6.1	6.0
	Total	100	100	100

Figure 1.7
Child population, by province, 2015



Source: National Bureau of Statistics, UNICEF China, UNFPA China, 'Population Status of Children in China in 2015: Facts and Figures', 2017

Source: National Bureau of Statistics, UNICEF China, UNFPA China, 'Population Status of Children in China in 2015: Facts and Figures', 2017

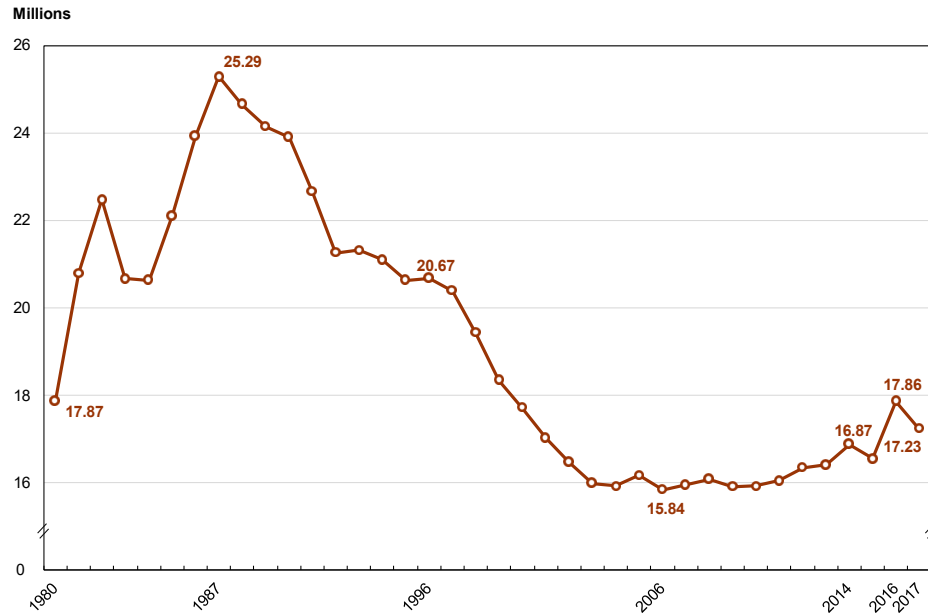
Figure 1.6

The size of families in China is shrinking, from 3.4 persons per family in 2000 to 3.1 persons per family in 2015. Moreover, the number of families with children is declining, and the number of children in a given family is also changing. In 2015, among the 410 million families in China, 45 per cent had children aged 0–17. Families with only one child accounted for 65.6 per cent of all families with children, while families with two children accounted for 28.4 per cent, and those with three or more children accounted for the remaining 6.0 per cent.

Figure 1.7

Seventy per cent of the child population is concentrated in the eastern and central regions. Henan province has a child population of 24.01 million, the largest among all provinces, while Tibet has the smallest with only 910,000. Although the child population in absolute numbers is smaller in the western region, the proportion of children among the total population is higher in the western region (22 per cent), as compared to the eastern region (18 per cent) and the central region (21 per cent). The proportion of families with children in all of China's provinces varied significantly in 2015. Only one-quarter of households in Shanghai had children, and one-third of households in Beijing and Tianjin had children. In contrast, in Tibet, more than 60 per cent of families had children, and its average family size also ranked highest among the provinces, reaching 4.1 persons.

Figure 1.8
Total number of births, 1980–2017

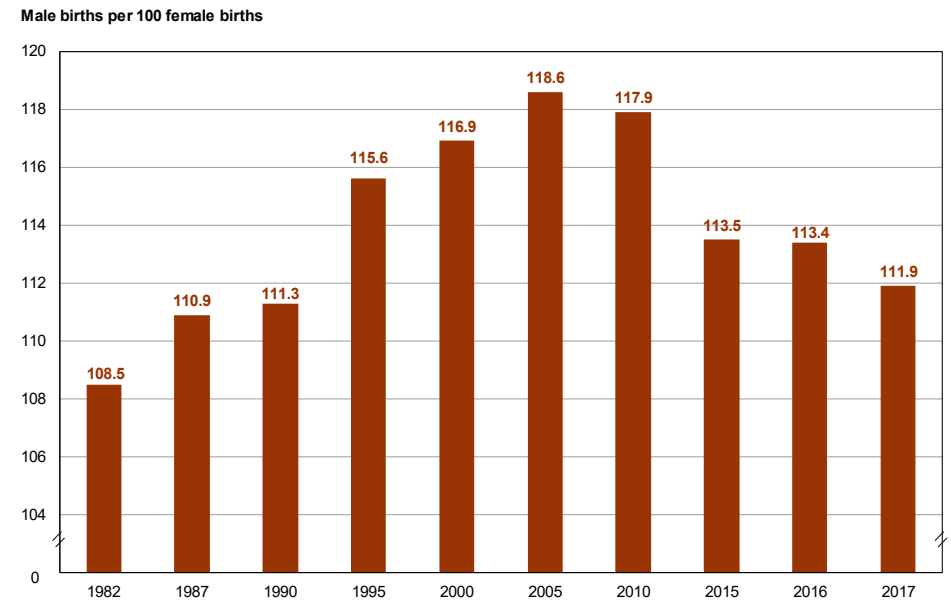


Sources: National Bureau of Statistics, *China Statistical Yearbook*, 1980–2010 data (calculated by mid-year population and birth rate); 'Statistical Communiqué on the National Economic and Social Development', 2011–2017 data

Figure 1.8

The total number of births shows a long-term decline with some fluctuations, reflecting the influence of family planning policy adjustments in different periods. In the mid-1980s, there was a small peak in the total number of births when the family planning policy was slightly relaxed. After 2014, when the Government issued the second-child policy, followed by the universal second-child policy, the total number of births in 2016 reached 17.86 million, the highest total since 2000. In 2017, the total number of births was 17.23 million. Although this is a slight decrease from the figures in 2016, it was still higher than the average level of 16.44 million during the Twelfth Five-Year Plan (FYP) period between 2011 and 2015, and it was the second-highest total since 2000. The effects of the universal second-child policy remain evident.

Figure 1.9
Sex ratio at birth, 1982–2017

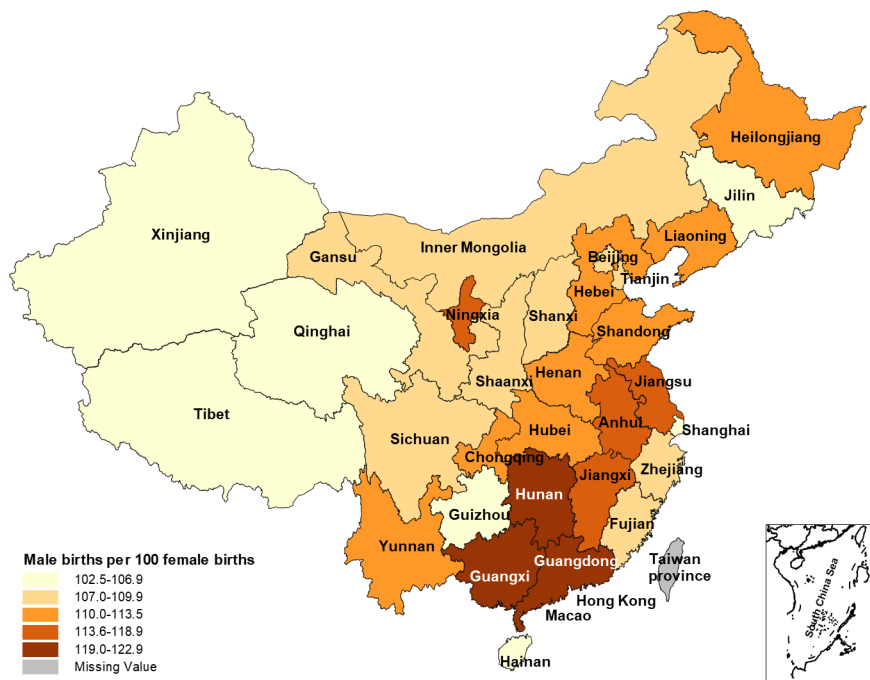


Sources: National Bureau of Statistics, 1982, 1990, 2000, and 2010 *Tabulation on the Population Census of China* (respectively published in 1985, 1993, 2002 and 2012); 1987, 1995, 2005 and 2015 *1% Tabulation on the National Population Sample Survey* (respectively published in 1988, 1997, 2007 and 2016); *Statistics on Women and Children in China*, 2018 (2016–2017 data)

Figure 1.9

In the absence of intervention, the SRB generally ranges between 103 and 107 male births per 100 female births. China's SRB has become progressively skewed, increasing from 108.5 males per 100 females in 1982 to the peak of 118.6 males per 100 females in 2005. Although it dropped to 113.5 in 2015 and declined further to 111.9 in 2017 due to gradual relaxation of the family planning policy in recent years, China still has one of severely imbalanced SRBs in the world. The abnormally high SRB highlights the extent to which girls are denied the right to life and reflects deep-seated sex discrimination that adversely affects girls' development.

Figure 1.10
Sex ratio at birth, by province, 2015

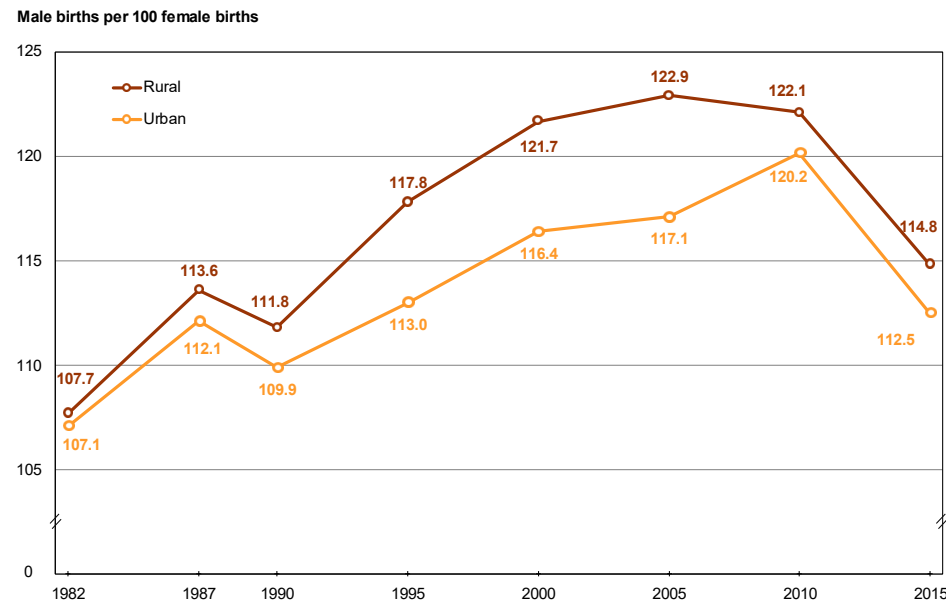


Source: (Derived from) National Bureau of Statistics, *Tabulation on the 2015 1% National Population Sample Survey*, 2016

Figure 1.10

The degree of imbalance in the SRB differs across regions. SRB in seven provinces and autonomous regions including Shanghai was within 107, while the SRB in provinces such as Guangxi, Hunan and Guangdong were still seriously imbalanced. The direct and indirect factors that resulted in a high SRB include son preference and corresponding sex selection practices, the influence of the family planning policy, unequal social and family status of females, and incomplete coverage of and access to the social protection system, particularly in rural areas and certain provinces.

Figure 1.11
Sex ratio at birth, by urban-rural, 1982–2015

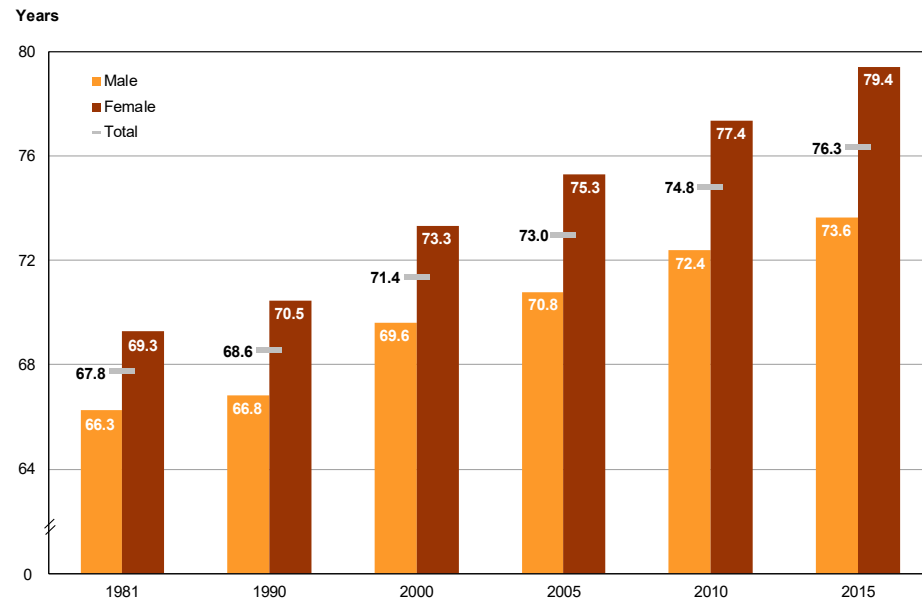


Sources: (Derived from) National Bureau of Statistics, 1982, 1990, 2000, and 2010 *Tabulation on the Population Census of China* (respectively published in 1985, 1993, 2002 and 2012); 1987, 1995, 2005 and 2015 *Tabulation on the 1% National Population Sample Survey* (respectively published in 1988, 1997, 2007 and 2016)

Figure 1.11

The SRB is higher in rural areas than in urban areas. Since 1982, the SRB has increased in both urban and rural areas, but more rapidly in rural areas until 2005. In 2010, the SRB decreased in rural areas, and the urban-rural disparity began to decrease. During the 2010–2015 period, the SRB in both urban and rural areas decreased greatly.

Figure 1.12
Life expectancy at birth, 1981–2015

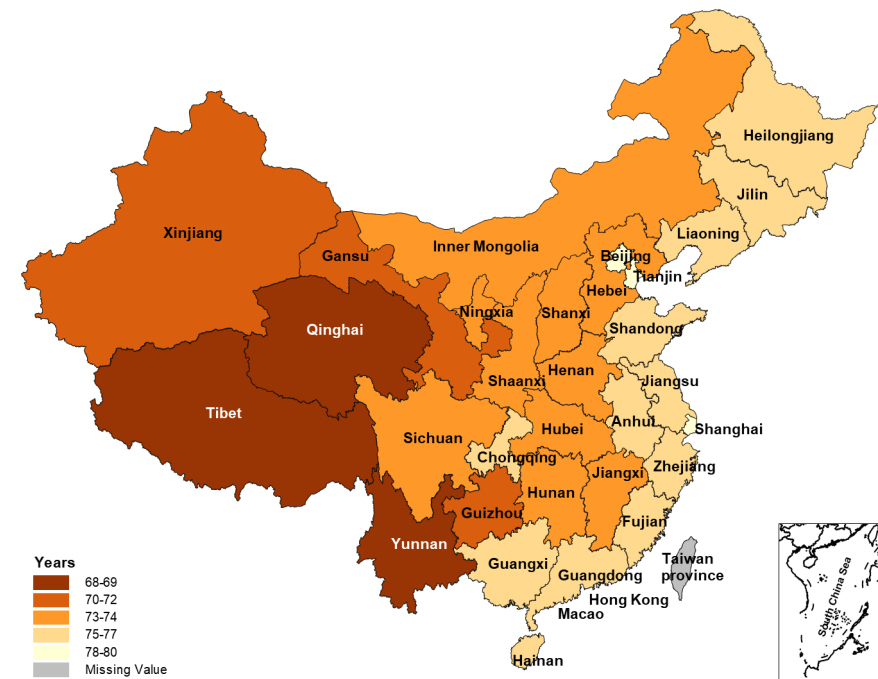


Sources: National Bureau of Statistics, 1982, 1990, 2000, and 2010 *Tabulation on the Population Census of China* (respectively published in 1985, 1993, 2002 and 2012); 2005 and 2015 *Tabulation on the 1% National Population Sample Survey* (respectively published in 2007 and 2016)

Figure 1.12

According to the National Health Commission (formerly the Ministry of Health), the average life expectancy at birth¹⁷ was only 35 years in 1949,¹⁸ when the People's Republic of China was founded. By 2015, this had risen to 76 years. Between 1981 and 2015, life expectancy increased by 10 years for men and 7 years for women. Average life expectancy at birth in China is higher than many other countries with a similar Gross National Income (GNI) per capita.¹⁹

Figure 1.13
Life expectancy at birth, by province, 2010

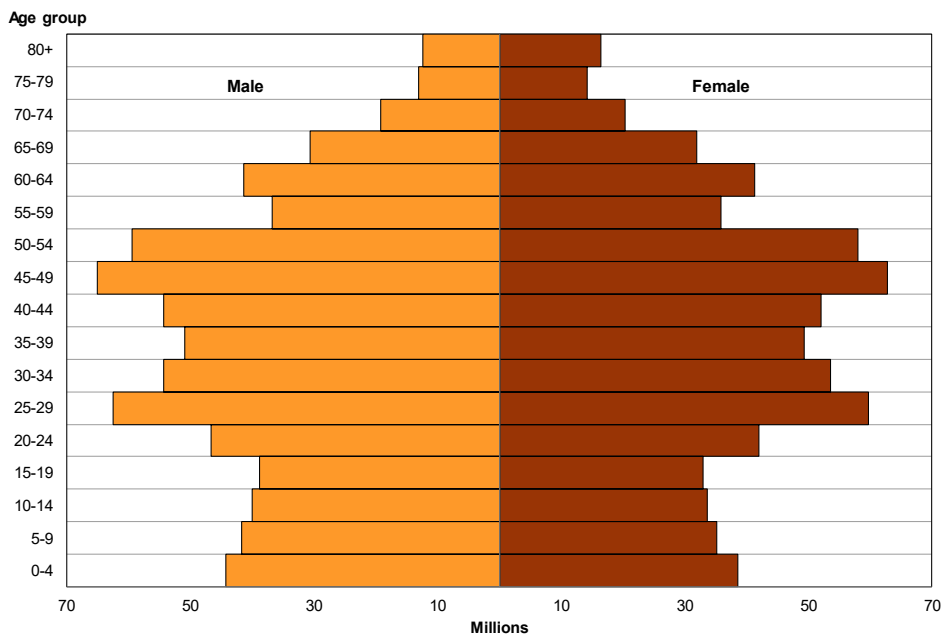


Source: National Bureau of Statistics, *China Statistical Yearbook*, 2012

Figure 1.13

There are significant disparities in life expectancy at birth between western and eastern provinces. Life expectancy at birth in Beijing and Shanghai has reached 80 years, while in western provinces such as Tibet, Yunnan and Qinghai, it still lags over 10 years behind, although it increased by four to five years between 2000 and 2010.

Figure 1.14
Population pyramid, 2017

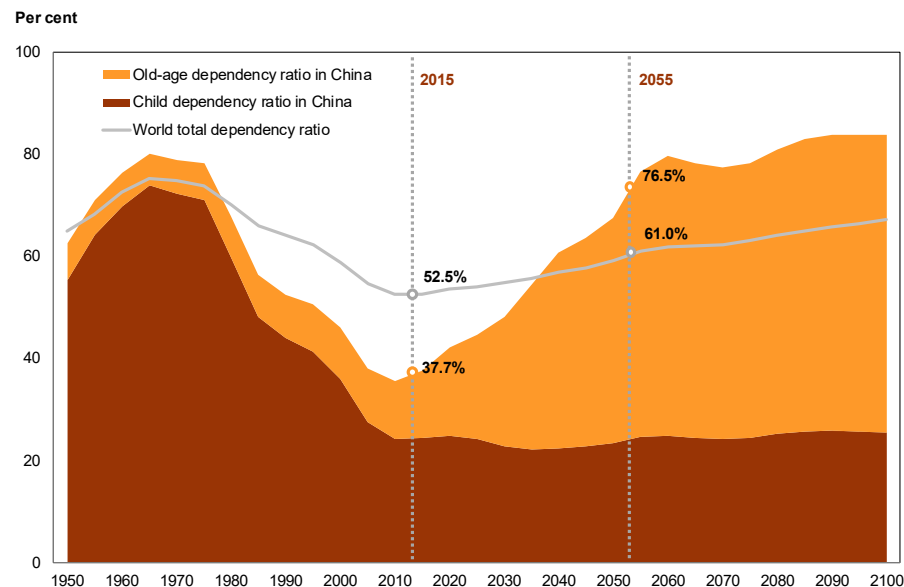


Source: National Bureau of Statistics, *China Statistical Yearbook*, 2018

Figure 1.14

China's population is ageing due to its long-term low fertility rate and the increase in life expectancy. This is reflected in the shape of the population pyramid where the bottom bars are narrower, and the top bars are wider than a standard pyramid.

Figure 1.15
Dependency ratio, 1950–2100

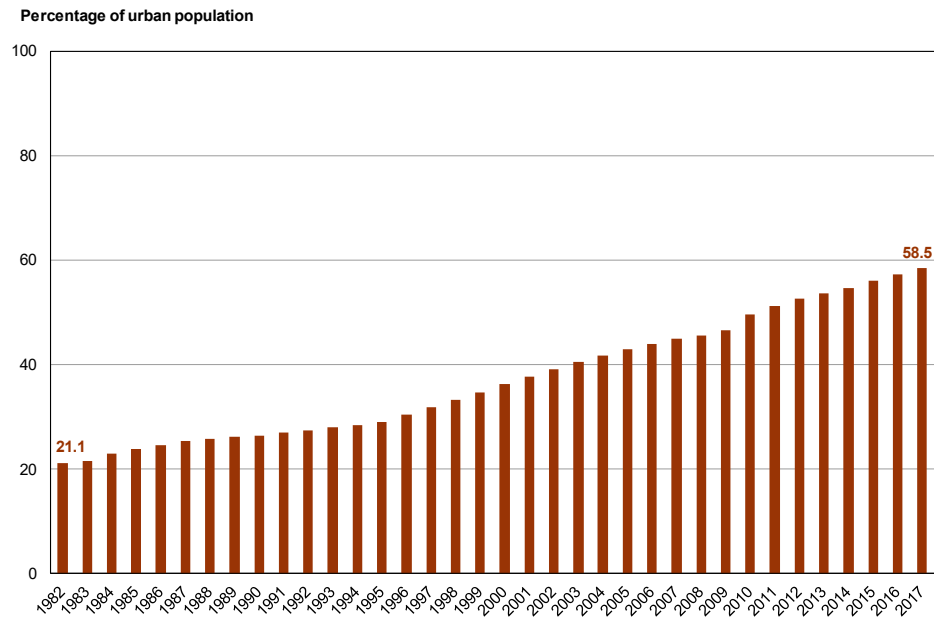


Source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, *World Population Prospects: The 2017 Revision*, 2017

Figure 1.15

According to estimates by the United Nations Population Division (UNPD) of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, China now has one of the lowest child dependency ratios (the ratio of the population aged 0–14 to the population aged 15–64), as its child dependency ratio declined 60 per cent during the 1980–2015 period. Meanwhile, China's old-age dependency ratio (the ratio of the population aged 65 years or over to the population aged 15–64) keeps increasing, and its population ageing is accelerating. Currently, the total dependency ratio in China is about 38 per cent, which is considered low globally. With further demographic transition and the decline of the 'demographic dividend', it is estimated that China's total dependency ratio will exceed 75 per cent by 2055, much higher than the estimated global average.

Figure 1.16
Urban share of population, 1982–2017



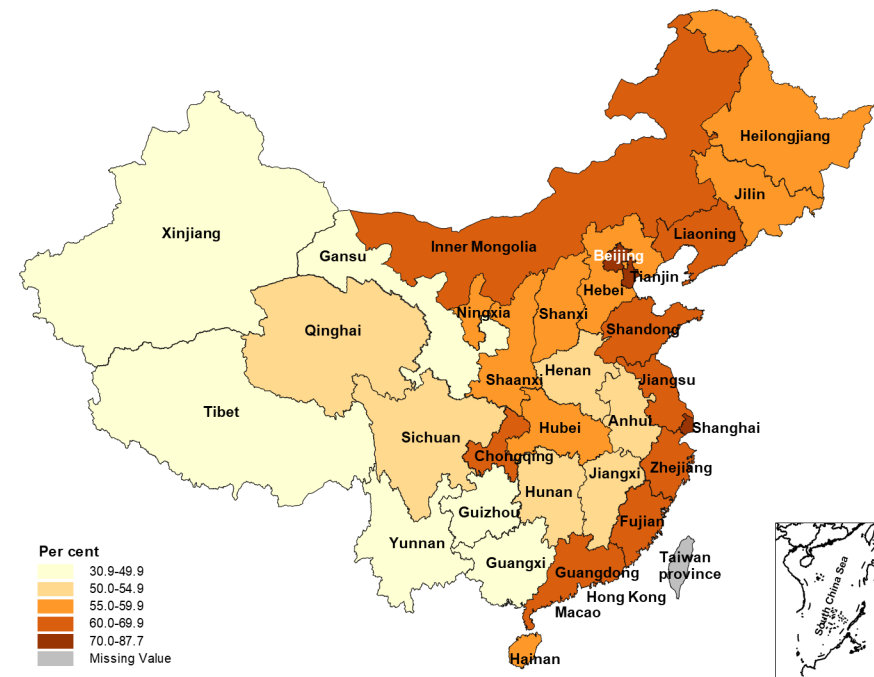
Source: National Bureau of Statistics, *China Statistical Yearbook, 2018*

Figure 1.16

The urbanization rate (the urban share of population²⁰) increased from 21.2 per cent in 1982 to over 50 per cent in 2011 for the first time, and rose further to 58.5 per cent in 2017, corresponding to 813 million urban population. Beginning in the early 1980s, this increase was fuelled by the migration of large numbers of surplus agricultural workers and rural populations seeking better economic opportunities in cities.^a

^a Since 1987, China has implemented a strategy to manage urbanization by supporting the growth of small cities, developing medium-sized cities and limiting the size of big cities. In order to promote steady urbanization at this stage, help the migrant population to settle in cities and ensure they are gradually covered by urban basic public services, the Government issued the *Opinions on Further Promoting Reform of Household Registration System* in 2014. One of its measures was to adjust the household registration policy for migrants. The country will relax overall control of farmers settling in towns and small cities (cities with fewer than 500,000 people), reduce restrictions on settling in medium-sized cities (500,000–1,000,000 people) in an orderly manner, set requirements for rural residents to obtain *hukou* in large cities (1–5 million people), and control the size of population in megacities (over 5 million people).

Figure 1.17
Urban share of population, by province, 2017

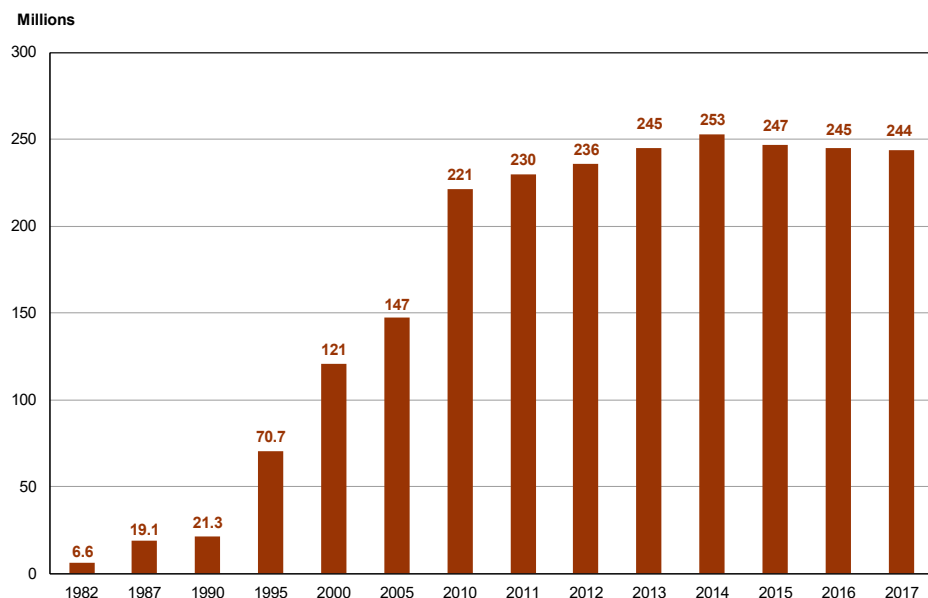


Source: National Bureau of Statistics, *China Statistical Yearbook, 2018*

Figure 1.17

Provinces in China's eastern region have the highest rates of urbanization. Municipalities including Shanghai, Beijing and Tianjin have urbanization rates of between 80 and 90 per cent, while other eastern provinces such as Guangdong, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Liaoning, Fujian and Shandong have urbanization rates of between 60 and 70 per cent. Some western provinces like Inner Mongolia and Chongqing also have urbanization rates of over 60 per cent.

Figure 1.18
Migrant population, 1982–2017



Sources: National Bureau of Statistics, 1982, 1990, 2000, and 2010 *Tabulation on the Population Census of China* (respectively published in 1985, 1993, 2002 and 2012); 1987, 1995, 2005 and 2015 *Tabulation on the 1% National Population Sample Survey* (respectively published in 1988, 1997, 2007 and 2016); 'Statistical Communiqué on the National Economic and Social Development' (other years)

Figure 1.18

China has been experiencing large-scale population migration. In 1982, the migrant population totalled only 6.6 million. From the 1990s, the migrant population increased substantially, reaching a high of 253 million in 2014, and now appears to be slowly decreasing. In 2017, the migrant population was 244 million, accounting for 17.6 per cent of the total population. Around 100 million children were affected by migration.^a

^a Specific data on children affected by migration can be found in chapter 10 of this ATLAS.

Figure 1.19
Migrant population, by province, 2015



Population Demographics

Data sources and references

¹ National Bureau of Statistics, *China Statistical Yearbook*, 2018.

² According to the 2010 National Population Census, China's ethnic minority groups are, by population size: Zhuang, Hui, Manchu, Uyghur, Miao, Yi, Tujia, Tibetan, Mongolian, Dong, Bouyei, Yao, Bai, Korean, Hani, Li, Kazak, Dai, She, Lisu, Dongxiang, Gelao, Lahu, Va, Shui, Naxi, Qiang, Tu, Mulam, Xibe, Kirgiz, Jingpo, Daur, Salar, Blang, Maonan, Tajik, Pumi, Achang, Nu, Ewenki, Jing, Jino, De'ang, Bonan, Russian, Yugur, Ozbek, Moinba, Oroqen, Drung, Hezhen, Gaoshan, Lhoba and Tatar. (National Bureau of Statistics, *China Statistical Yearbook*, 2013).

³ National Bureau of Statistics, *Tabulation on the 2015 1% National Population Sample Survey*, 2016.

⁴ National Bureau of Statistics, UNICEF China, UNFPA China, 'Population Status of Children in China in 2015: Facts and Figures', 2017.

⁵ **Total fertility rate** – The mean number of children a woman would have by age 50 if she survived to age 50 and was subject, throughout her life, to the age-specific fertility rates observed in a given year (UNPD).

⁶ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, *World Population Prospects: The 2017 Revision*, 2017.

⁷ **Birth rate (also called crude birth rate)** – Annual number of births per 1,000 population (UNPD).

⁸ **Rate of natural increase** – Crude birth rate minus the crude death rate. Represents the portion of population growth determined exclusively by births and deaths (UNPD).

⁹ National Bureau of Statistics, *China Statistical Yearbook*, 2018.

¹⁰ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, *World Population Prospects: The 2017 Revision*, 2017.

¹¹ James H. William, 'The Human Sex Ratio. Part 1: A review of the literature', *Human Biology*, vol. 59, no. 5, 1987, pp. 721–725.

¹² National Bureau of Statistics, *China Statistical Yearbook*, 2018.

¹³ National Bureau of Statistics, *China Statistical Yearbook*, 2018.

¹⁴ National Bureau of Statistics, *China Statistical Yearbook*, 2018.

¹⁵ National Bureau of Statistics, *China Statistical Yearbook*, 2018.

¹⁶ Located in the east of the Asian continent on the western shore of the Pacific Ocean, the People's Republic of China has a land area of 9.6 million sq km, the third largest in the world. China's territory stretches about 5,500 km from north to south and around 5,000 km from east to west, and shares land borders with 14 countries. Its neighbours are North Korea to the north-east; Russia and Mongolia to the north; Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan to the west; and India, Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar, Laos and Vietnam to the south.

¹⁷ **Life expectancy at birth** – The average number of years a new-born would live if current age-specific mortality rates were to continue (UNPD).

¹⁸ National Health Commission (formerly the Ministry of Health), *China Health Statistical Yearbook*, 2009.

¹⁹ World Bank, World Bank Open Data, <https://data.worldbank.org/>, accessed November 2018.

GNI per capita – Gross national income (GNI) is the sum of value added by all resident producers, plus any product taxes (less subsidies) not included in the valuation of output, plus net receipts of primary income (compensation of employees and property income) from abroad. GNI per capita is gross national income divided by mid-year population. GNI per capita in US dollars is converted using the World Bank Atlas method (World Bank).

²⁰ **Urban share of population** – Percentage of the population living in urban areas as defined according to the national definition used in the most recent National Population Census (UNPD).

