

Can China Afford to Continue Its One-Child Policy?

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S U M M A R Y Twenty-five years after it was launched, China's "One Child" population control policy is credited with cutting population growth to an all time low and contributing to two decades of spectacular economic development. But the costs associated with the policy are also apparent and are rising: a growing proportion of elderly with inadequate government or family support, a disproportionately high number of male births attributable to sex selective abortion, increased female infant and child mortality rates, and the collapse of a credible government birth reporting system. Today, as China contemplates the future of the policy, many argue that a change that allows couples to have two children will not lead to uncontrollable population growth. Instead, it could help meet the fertility desires of most Chinese couples; avoid a worsening of the demographic and social consequences already evident; and relieve the Chinese government of the immense financial and political costs of enforcing an unpopular policy. But changes will need to come soon if China is to avert even greater negative consequences of the policy.

China's one-child-per-couple fertility policy, implemented in 1980, is now a quarter of a century old. Launched as an emergency measure to slow population growth at the start of Chinese economic reforms, this policy is the largest and most extreme social experiment in population growth control via government intervention in human reproduction in world history.

Ever since its inception, the one-child policy has been highly controversial. Proponents of the policy insist that without such an extreme measure, continued population growth would have doomed China's hope for quickly raising per capita income, a political mandate of post-Mao Chinese leadership. Proponents also argue that uncontrolled population growth will result in further depletion of natural resources and bring irreparable harm to the environment.ⁱ Opponents of the policy, both inside and outside of China, point out that significant fertility decline was already achieved by the late 1970s under a less extreme policy. They also warn of the high costs and dire consequences of such an unprecedented policy, including human rights violations, especially regarding women; the forceful alteration of China's traditional family structure; an imbalanced sex ratio, due to a preference for sons; and a rapidly growing number of elderly citizens.

When the controversial policy was being formulated, it was generally agreed that it would not be perpetually enforced. Even the architects of the one-child policy anticipated that "in thirty years, when the current acutely pressing population problem becomes less severe, a different population policy can be adopted."ⁱⁱ Is it now time to explore such a policy? Today, China's fertility rate has dropped to a level that is among the lowest in the world. Its two-decade long spectacular economic growth has increased the per capita living standard of the Chinese population by more than fourfold. As the one-child policy passes its 25th year, observers within China and abroad are reexamining the consequences of this unprecedented government population policy and questioning if, or when, the policy should be amended.

Even the architects of the one-child policy anticipated that it would change

China's Fertility Policy: Myths and Realities

The answer to the question about the future of the one-child policy starts with the answer to another question: What exactly is China's fertility policy today? Reports over the past two and a half decades often portray a conflicting picture. At one extreme, there is a popular impression that China's population policy is nothing but a one-child policy. At the other extreme, media reports frequently suggest that China has relaxed its policy. Both perceptions contain elements of truth, yet neither is accurate.

Soon after its initial implementation, the one-child policy—and the accompanying mass campaign of sterilization and abortionⁱⁱⁱ—caused an uproar among the population and ignited strong resistance, especially in China's vast rural areas. This resistance caused policymakers to reevaluate their decision to impose the one-child policy nationwide. In 1984 and again in 1986, major policy readjustments retreated from the "one-size-fits-all" approach and diversified the policy. For example, many rural residents are now spared from the one-child policy.^{iv} Also, most provinces now allow couples in which both spouses are only children to have two children. More recently, several provinces have allowed couples in which one spouse is an only child to have two children. By the 1990s population control had already become a multipolicy regime (see Fig. 1). Further modifications at local levels continued to produce numerous categories of exceptions, such that the policy's complexity has come to resemble that of the U.S. tax code.

For years urban couples holding a non-agricultural household registration have been required to adhere to the one-child policy. Consisting of slightly more than 20 percent of China's total population, this segment has little choice but to follow the policy, as an unauthorized birth puts at risk a couple's employment, housing allotment, and other state-controlled resources.^v A few exceptions exist for urban residents, mostly for couples whose first child is physically handicapped, couples in a remarriage who do not each have a child from the previous marriage, or members of ethnic minorities.

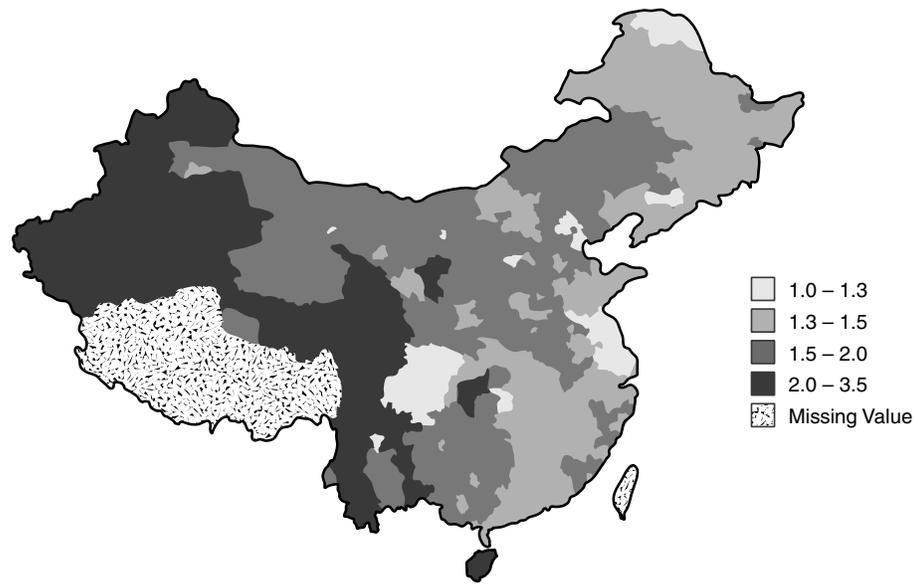


Fig. 1. Number of children per couple allowed by China's multipolicy fertility regime

The policy's complexity has come to resemble that of the U.S. tax code

The majority of Chinese reside in rural areas, and fertility policies covering them fall into three broad categories. In the first category are the six provinces or municipal regions directly under the central government's jurisdiction—Congqing, Jiangsu, Sichuan, Beijing, Shanghai, and Tianjin—some of which contain significant urban centers. All couples are under the one-child policy unless they belong to an ethnic minority or live in an exceptionally impoverished area. The combined population in these rural areas (with their urban cores) and strictly urban areas that are under the one-child policy constitutes about 35 percent of China's total population. A larger share of the population, about 54 percent, falls into a second category, the "1.5 children" policy. This policy, a product of compromise acknowledging Chinese couples' strong desire to have at least one son, stipulates that couples whose first child is a daughter are allowed a second birth. The third and smallest category, accounting for about 11 percent of the total, lives in areas that allow a second or even a third child. These are mostly areas populated by ethnic minorities.

The result of the varying fertility policies is an *effective* national fertility policy of 1.47 children per couple. Since only about half of the couples in the "1.5 children" policy areas meet the requirements to have a second child, the effective coverage of the one-child policy is about 63 percent of the total population.

In other words, nearly two-thirds of all Chinese couples are under the jurisdiction of the one-child policy.^{vi}

Is the One-Child Policy Necessary for Population Control?

Has the one-child policy been necessary for controlling China's population growth? Proponents of the policy initially rationalized it as an emergency control measure, anticipating the large number of births expected from the baby boomers of the 1960s. These proponents have long claimed that without the policy, fertility would have been high or at least would not have declined to the current low level. Such thinking still garners wide currency today and is used as an argument for continuing the one-child policy. But the argument, while appealing, cannot be verified in the absence of evidence from an alternative policy implemented at the same time and within the same national context.

Counterarguments, backed by empirical evidence, question the claim that the one-child policy has been necessary. Critics point out that fertility levels dropped by more than 50 percent in the 1970s, from 5.8 children per woman in 1970 to 2.7 in 1979, in the absence of a policy that forbade couples to have a second child. This decline was associated with the government's "later-longer-fewer" policy; that is, later

marriage, longer birth interval, fewer births. Critics also note that during the 1980s, when the one-child policy was then recently implemented, fertility level hardly changed.^{vii} It was not until the 1990s, in conjunction with institutional changes associated with market reforms, that fertility further declined.

These sweeping changes in China's economic system and social values may have been more important than the stringent population policy in furthering fertility decline in the 1990s. First, in the decades following the imposition of the one-child policy, collective farming was dissolved in the countryside and government-guaranteed employment and housing benefits were phased out in the cities. These changes alone removed the economic security that once lowered the cost of childbearing and encouraged higher fertility rates. Second, new economic opportunities and rising incomes led aspiring young Chinese to direct their energy away from marriage and childbearing. Age at first marriage among women, for instance, rose from 22 to 24 in the 1990s; this is clear evidence of changing demographic preferences not affected by the one-child policy. Third, parents must invest more in their children's education due to market demand for educated labor and intensified competition in the labor market for better employment. This increase in the cost of childrearing may well have further dampened reproductive desires. Since the late 1990s, some couples entitled to have a second child have voluntarily foregone their birth quotas, being content with only one child.

High Costs

Many of the predicted negative social and economic consequences of the one-child policy have materialized. Because of the policy, China faces more serious social and economic consequences than do other nations experiencing rapid fertility decline. In addition to the common problem of rapid population aging, China's problems include a number of social consequences not seen elsewhere: a lopsided sex ratio in infants and young children, increased female infant and child mortality rates, and the collapse of the government birth reporting system.

Rapid increase in population aging. The unusually rapid fertility decline in China has produced a rapidly aging population—one that is expected to become disproportionately older well into this century. Rapid aging, in the absence of a standard of living and a social safety net comparable to other aging societies, has also earned China the distinction of a country that has become old before it has become rich. Two decades ago, when concerns about population aging were first aired, the population was still growing at about 1.5 percent annually. The share of China's population aged 60 and above was only 7.6 percent, and those aged 65 and above constituted only 4.9 percent of the total population. Today, the population growth rate is roughly half what it was 20 years ago. China's 2000 census revealed that the proportion of elderly had risen to 10.5 percent for those aged 60 and above, and 7.1 percent for those 65 and above. While the percentage of the population over 60 is only half that of western industrialized nations, China's per capita income is one quarter to one fifth that of these same countries. There is little doubt that China's aging process will continue to accelerate; this means that China is entering a new historical era.

As a result of the 1970s fertility decline and 25 years of the one-child policy, urban Chinese couples will experience a far more serious aging scenario than rural Chinese (see Fig. 2). Today, 10 percent of the urban population is already aged 65 and over. In slightly more than a decade, this will rise to 15 percent, a level of aging comparable to that in the more developed world now. In 20 years, by 2025, the aging level among urban Chinese will reach 20 percent, a level found today only in Japan and Italy. Assuming fertility rates stay at the current level among urban Chinese, about 1.3 children per couple, 35 percent of the urban population will be aged 65 and older by 2050. While small in proportion to China's total population, urban elderly still account for a large number of people. They were 20.6 million in the year 2000 and will increase to 34.1 million by 2015, 45.6 million by 2025, and 55.9 million by 2050.^{viii} Alarmingly, this aging trend will continue well into the next century.

Changes in the economic system and social values may have been more important than population policy in lowering fertility

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In rural areas, the level of population aging will lag behind that in urban areas by more than a decade. It will not be until 2033 that the population aged 65 and over reaches 15 percent. If fertility and mortality levels stay as assumed, population aging for the majority of the population will level off at about 20 percent by the middle of this century. The number of the elderly in rural China, nevertheless, will still be staggering. It was 67.9 million in 2000 and will grow to 93.3 million by 2015, 128.2 million by 2025, and 229.1 million by 2050. In rural and urban areas combined, the number of those aged 65 and above will be more than 125 million within a decade, and could reach as high as 285 million by 2050.

How prepared is China to cope with such a rapidly aging population? Prior to the modern fertility decline, elderly parents relied almost exclusively on their children for support. The one-child policy began when the centrally planned economy was still in place; therefore, even though the policy removed or reduced the traditional source of support for elderly parents, they could at least count on communes in the countryside and work organizations in urban areas for some economic, though not social or psychological, support. With China's revamping of its economic system societal support has largely disappeared. Welfare provisions from communes and work organizations

are a thing of the past. A small portion of the urban population has been incorporated under an emerging socialized pension system, but critics believe this system to be seriously underfunded. One estimate puts the liabilities of the program equal to 125 to 150 percent of current GDP. Furthermore, the majority of China's elderly reside in the countryside, and even such an underfunded social scheme is beyond their reach. Recently the government initiated an experimental program that provides a monthly subsidy of approximately US\$6 to poor rural elderly with only one child. While this costs the government and taxpayers hundreds of millions, it can hardly be considered substantial help, let alone a substitute for the support of children.

Escalating imbalanced sex ratio. With the adoption of the one-child policy, an imbalance in the sex ratio at birth began a rise that has become increasingly lopsided over the past two decades. This is due largely to the gender-specific fertility policy that permits rural couples with a firstborn daughter to have a second child. In 1982, the sex ratio at birth was 108.5 boys to every 100 girls, already above the normal range of 104–106 boys per 100 girls. After 1982, China's figures rose sharply to 114.1 boys per 100 girls in 1990, and 117.1 to 100 in 1995. The most recent census

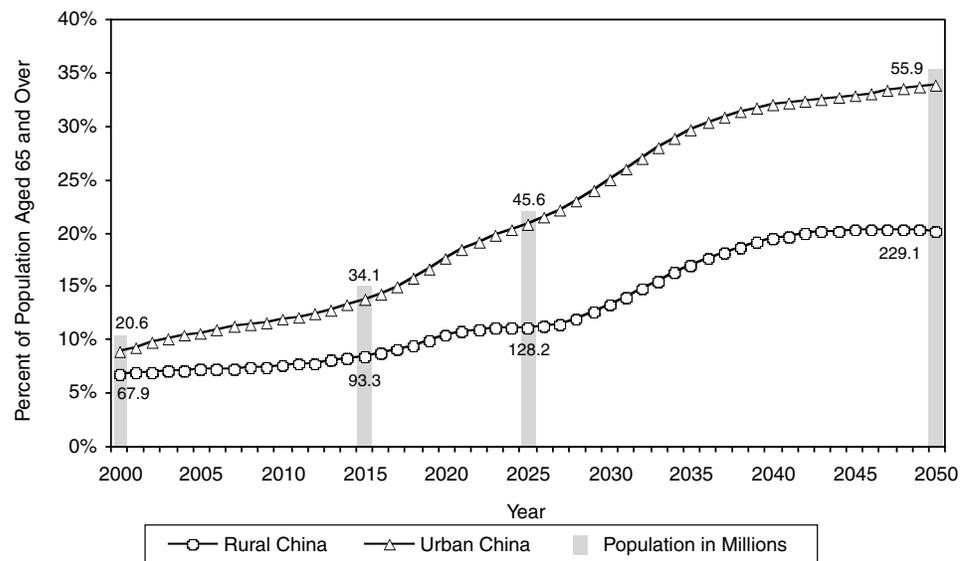


Fig. 2. Aging trend for urban and rural China, 2000–2050

reported a sex ratio at birth of 119.2 boys to every 100 girls in 2000, suggesting over 10 percent excess male births in the population.

The policy contributes to an imbalanced sex ratio in several ways. Some parents, who have not yet had a son or achieved a balanced sex composition among offspring, resort to sex selective abortion in order to have the child of the desired sex. At the same time, some girls are uncounted or “missing” because they are hidden by their parents from government officials and therefore are unrecorded in censuses and surveys.^{ix} The 2000 census, for instance, revealed more surviving individuals aged 10–14 in 2000 than those counted at ages 0–4 in the 1990 census. It also showed a more balanced sex ratio among the same birth cohorts as time passed.^x

Another possible explanation for the skewed sex ratio is the extent to which baby girls are victims of infanticide, abandonment, or deliberate neglect. Over the past two decades, male infant mortality rates declined by a large margin, roughly 40 percent; in comparison, female infant mortality rates declined by only about 15 percent, with all the reduction occurring in the 1990s. Prior to the one-child policy, female infant mortality rates had been declining in China since at least the mid-1930s. By 1982, the mortality rate for females was lower than that for males, similar to most populations without deliberate practices of gender discrimination against female babies. However, in 1990 and 2000, the pattern was reversed. Observed excess female mortality at young ages has been on the rise ever since the implementation of the one-child policy. The difference between the observed and expected female-to-male infant mortality ratio increased from around 10 percent in the late 1970s to as high as 60 percent in the mid-1990s.^{xi} Moreover, female excess mortality is not confined to infants, but extends to children 1–4 years old as well. This injustice is the most glaring form of inequality females experience in China and can be attributed partly to the country’s birth control policy.

The shortage of girls has led to the reappearance of a social phenomenon that was largely eradicated under Chinese socialism: marriage as a marker of social status and social stratification. Bride shortage

is not new. Historically, between 5 to 10 percent of Chinese men lived their lives as bachelors, largely due to the practice of female infanticide and neglect.^{xii} But by the mid-1900s China began to defeat this discrimination and saw decades of rising male marriage rates, during which both the proportion of male bachelors and the link between social status and the likelihood of marriage declined. However, as brides now grow scarce, male marriage once again becomes an indicator of social privilege. In the early 1980s, 15 percent of illiterate or semi-illiterate male peasants at age 40 were still single, whereas among university-educated men the number was only 0.5 percent. In 1990, the share of bachelors among the rural poor at age 40 rose to 19 percent. By 2000, among rural males with the least schooling, 27 percent at age 40 were unmarried, while nationally that figure was only 4 percent. In the same age group, only 1 percent of men with a college degree or higher remained bachelors. This concentration of unmarried males among the rural poor was possibly caused by fertility decline in the 1960s and 1970s that resulted in successively smaller cohorts of brides in comparison to grooms; the situation may well grow worse as cohorts with increasingly imbalanced sex ratios reach their marriage age.

Political costs. To implement a fertility policy that goes against the preferences of the majority of Chinese couples, which is two children per couple, the government has paid a dear cost politically. In the 1980s, it was common to hear reports of violent clashes between local birth control officials and peasants that involved the confiscation or destruction of property and physical abuse. Forced sterilization and induced abortion invited not only hostility and resistance from the population, but also sharp criticism from the international community. Such physical abuses continued into the early 1990s but had largely disappeared by the end of the decade. In the effort to crack down on the physical abuses, China shifted the focus of its birth control program away from administrative coercion toward encouraging voluntary contraception and providing couples with a wider selection of contraceptive methods.^{xiii} This new

As brides grow scarce, male marriage once again becomes an indicator of social privilege

The Original Argument For, and the Current Argument Against, the One-Child Policy

The argument for adopting the one-child fertility policy was made to the Chinese people in *An Open Letter to Members of the Chinese Communist Party and Chinese Communist Youth League on Controlling Population Growth*, published by the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party on September 25th, 1980. The reasons put forward there can be summarized as follows:

Rapid population growth results in difficulties in providing food, clothing, housing, transportation, education, medical care, and employment for the population. More specifically, rapid population growth:

- increases consumption and reduces capital accumulation and investment;
- makes it hard to increase the standard of living for the population;
- means even smaller per capita arable land and reduced food supply;
- results in overuse of natural resources including energy, water, and forests; and
- aggravates environmental pollution and worsens the production and living conditions of the population.

In the 25 years since the Central Committee's Open Letter, the social, economic, and environmental context has changed. Arguments for changes to the one-child policy make the following points:

- Fertility has declined to below replacement level.
- Negative consequences of the policy have emerged and are increasing.
- Chinese couples show a strong and persistent preference for two children.
- The government's birth control program has been successfully re-oriented toward service.
- With the shift in the locus of economic planning from the state to the family, the government is no longer the main guarantor of food, shelter, education, and employment opportunities.
- Rising consumption is no longer a concern but is actually desired as a way to generate market demand and to propel further economic growth.
- Capital accumulation and investment come from multiple sources and their shortage is no longer a concern.
- Though the gap between the richest and poorest sectors of society has broadened, the overall standard of living for the Chinese population has increased rapidly.
- China does not face a food supply problem.
- New energy resources are being created and utilized, including increased imports from overseas.
- Awareness of environmental protection is on the rise and new measures are being taken to reduce pollution.

program orientation may have helped to ease the tension between birth control officials and citizens.

Open opposition to the policy has turned into subversive resistance. For example, citizens and local officials have coordinated efforts to conceal births in the countryside. In the 1980s demographic behavior could be measured with great detail and accuracy; but by the 1990s, the birth reporting system had collapsed. Few could trust demographic data, especially fertility data, collected and released by government agencies. Studies report that as many as 30 percent of births were not counted by the family planning registration system in some locales in the early 1990s. Problems in birth reporting and registration started to spread to other demographic data-gathering activities,

including population censuses, annual population surveys, and special fertility surveys. Not long into the 1990s, the two main agencies responsible for collecting fertility information, the State Family Planning Commission and the National Bureau of Statistics, simply gave up their attempt to provide reliable and detailed information on fertility. Instead, fertility was reported to be "around 1.8 births per woman" for years.

China's most recent census confirmed the suspicion that reliable birth reporting is no longer possible. The reported total fertility rate, a measure of lifetime fertility assuming a woman follows current age-specific fertility rates, was only 1.22, way below the replacement level of 2.1 children per woman. This level

rivals those of Italy and Japan, whose fertility levels, not much above 1.0, are the lowest in the world.

To continue a birth control policy that demands the sustained cooperation and sacrifice of many couples, the government has required an increasingly large amount of financial and organizational resources. Government budget allocation to birth control programs increased 3.6 times in the 1990s alone, from 1.34 billion yuan in 1990 to 4.82 billion in 1998—a rate of increase faster than that for economic construction or national defense.^{xiv} According to the Ministry of Finance, the per capita input has increased in recent years from 2.64 yuan in 1995 to 8.93 yuan in 2002 at the central government level. This amount may represent only a small portion of all government expenditures on birth control, since programs at local levels are financed by fees imposed on peasants and indirect contributions from rural enterprises and urban work organizations.

Over the life of the one-child policy, China has also created one of the fastest-growing bureaucratic sectors in its reform era: an army of birth control officials. In 1980, the year the one-child policy was announced, China had about 60,000 full-time personnel working on birth control down to the level of townships and urban neighborhoods. By 1995, this number rose to over 400,000, nearly a sevenfold increase. While most government ministries were required to reduce the number of employees by half in the late 1990s, the birth control planning system was able to get away with a cut of only a quarter, keeping 300,000 on the government payroll. Again, this number represents only a portion of the organizational resources devoted to birth control. China's Family Planning Association claims a membership of 92 million, organized into more than a million branches. Birth control policy requires the full attention of the Party and government organizations at all levels, not just those directly involved in implementing the policy and in providing services. Where fertility does not reach the stipulated low level, local officials must spend a substantial amount of their time on the issue, as meeting birth control goals is a major criterion used in evaluating their performance and greatly affects their political careers.

Between 1980 and 1995 the number of personnel working full time on birth control increased nearly sevenfold

Time to Change?

Few believe that China's current fertility policy, especially the one-child component, should be kept in perpetuity. The real questions are of how and when to phase out the old policy and implement a new one.

Conditions for change. Several conditions are now in place for China to start phasing out the one-child policy: low fertility; a new economic environment; a strong and persistent preference for two children among the Chinese population; and the recent success in reorienting the government's birth control program away from coercion and toward service.

The population growth rate in China has already declined to a very low level, a level that perhaps the ambitious policymakers two-and-a-half decades ago did not envision. Despite a lack of reliable birth reporting statistics, evidence from multiple sources points to the same conclusion: fertility among Chinese couples declined further in the 1990s. Even after adjusting for possible underreporting, China's current fertility level is likely around 1.5 to 1.6 children per couple, substantially below the replacement level, and at a level that promises net reduction in population size in the long run.^{xv}

No one in China could have predicted 25 years ago that the planned economy would soon become history and that the family, not the government, would again be the locus of economic planning. This fundamental shift, along with rapidly increasing incomes and changing aspirations, provides a new framework within which the Chinese plan their economic, social, and reproductive lives. In contrast to the days under the planned economy system—when food, shelter, and employment came from the government or the collective—parents now must plan more carefully for their childbearing, as they will be assuming the costs of their reproductive decisions.

Despite fluctuations in the fertility level and a stringent policy imposed by the government, Chinese couples' preferred number of children has changed little over the last quarter century (see Fig. 3). Only in the late 1990s was there a modest change toward a preference for fewer children, but this was also within

No longer served by the planned economy, parents are assuming the costs of their reproductive decisions

the context of the new economic changes.^{xvi} Numerous surveys in various locales reveal the same thing: most couples would be happy with two children and, for some of them, having a son is critically important. Having a son may serve an emotional or spiritual purpose for many Chinese families; and for those living in the countryside, the son is also counted as an extremely important source of labor and lifelong support. These largely consistent survey numbers show that the government's one-child fertility policy is in direct conflict with the desires of the people. This also shows that the two-decade long policy has failed to alter core convictions among most Chinese couples regarding the ideal number of children for a family. Not only would the population embrace a policy allowing two children per couple, but this modification would ease the governmental burden of policing birth control. A policy that is consistent with the wishes of the population would be easier to implement and would drastically reduce the political and organizational costs of policy maintenance.

One of the most significant changes in China's official birth control program is its reoriented approach to program implementation. Though it still requires couples to limit the number of births, it has departed from an earlier approach that relied almost exclusively on administrative coercion. Since the mid-1990s the program has shifted its focus to providing client-centered health services. These changes culminated in 2002 with China's first Population and Family Planning Law, making coercion in birth control a

criminal offense.^{xvii} The abatement in administrative coercion has not resulted in any increases in fertility, but has met with wide acceptance and broad support among the population, including local officials. The success of China's population control in the last several decades and recent changes in its birth planning programs in the late 1990s have put the country in a good position to initiate policy changes. Such success should lend confidence to the Chinese government regarding its ability to change the fertility policy.

Window of opportunity. If China is going to phase out its one-child policy, when should it do so? Bureaucratic inertia and political caution would postpone the change for as long as possible, perhaps only after the crisis escalates further. But Chinese demographic profiles show that a further delay will result in higher long-term costs; indeed changes must be made within the next 10 years if China is to avert greater hardship.

Within the next decade, China will see its last substantial labor force increase. Driven by past demographic forces, new entrants to the labor force, as represented by the number of people reaching ages 20 to 24, will show a steady increase. With an expanding economy, these new entrants will be easily absorbed. Their entrance will help support the elderly, whose number is on the rise but whose percentage of the population is still moderate, below 10 percent.

By 2015, the demographic profile for China will be quite different. While population aging will be much more prominent, the annual supply of new labor will start to decline sharply, due to the low fertility of the 1990s. China will enter a long period of demographic crossover: a consistently declining new labor supply coupled with a consistently rising elderly population. Once the labor shortage becomes a serious concern, as it may well be in 10 years, it will be at least 10 years too late to do anything. Though no policy change now can reverse the arrival of this demographic crossover, an early departure from the one-child policy and a gradual increase in fertility could help to lighten population aging pressure 20 to 30 years from now. Phasing out the policy within the next five years could result in a much more favorable

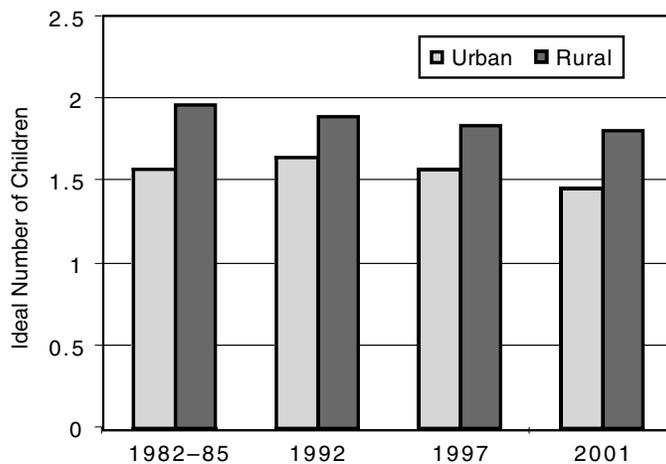


Fig. 3. How many children do Chinese women prefer?

In 10 years when the labor shortage becomes a serious concern, it will be 10 years too late to do anything about it

demographic trajectory (see Fig. 4). In this scenario, the population would peak at around 1.45 billion and stay near that level thereafter. The maximum percentage of people 65 and over would be 21 percent by mid-century. The number of elderly women with only one child to support them would peak at 30 percent in 2040 and then gradually decline.

If China does not alter the one-child policy, its future will look quite different. Assuming no change in the fertility policy and reasonable mortality declines for the near future, the population will reach its peak size in 20 years—1.37 billion in 2025. After that point, the population will start to shrink. At the same time, China's aging process will accelerate, with the share of its population aged 65 and over rising to 14 percent in 2025, 20 percent in 2035, and more than 24 percent in 2050 (reaching a peak of more than 28 percent in 2064). By 2040, 40 percent of all Chinese females age 60 and above will have only one child, and by 2050, this number will increase to 50 percent. With only one child, these elderly women will face a severe lack of familial support during their last years.

Political choices and lessons. Changing a fertility policy that has been part of the core national agenda for the past quarter century will not be easy. It will

require political courage and wisdom. China's recent demographic history contains several cautionary tales. In 1980, the same year that the one-child policy was implemented, China relaxed its strict control over marriage age, allowing couples to marry according to legal ages that were lower than those required by the population control policies of the late 1970s. As young couples rushed to marry, fertility also increased, producing a small baby boom of first births. Then again, in 1984, when a correction of the one-child policy allowed couples in some areas to have two children, families rushed to have the second child. This caused not only a rise in fertility, but also confusion and chaos in birth control program implementation at local levels. Some local birth control officials even experienced retaliation or death threats for their participation in implementing the one-child policy and forced sterilizations and abortions. With these experiences in mind, policymakers are understandably concerned about a potential baby boom resulting from signs of a changing fertility policy.

Recent Chinese history, however, also offers numerous clues as to how changes can be made successfully. The most important economic and political change in China's recent history—abandoning the planned economy—began with experiments in poor rural

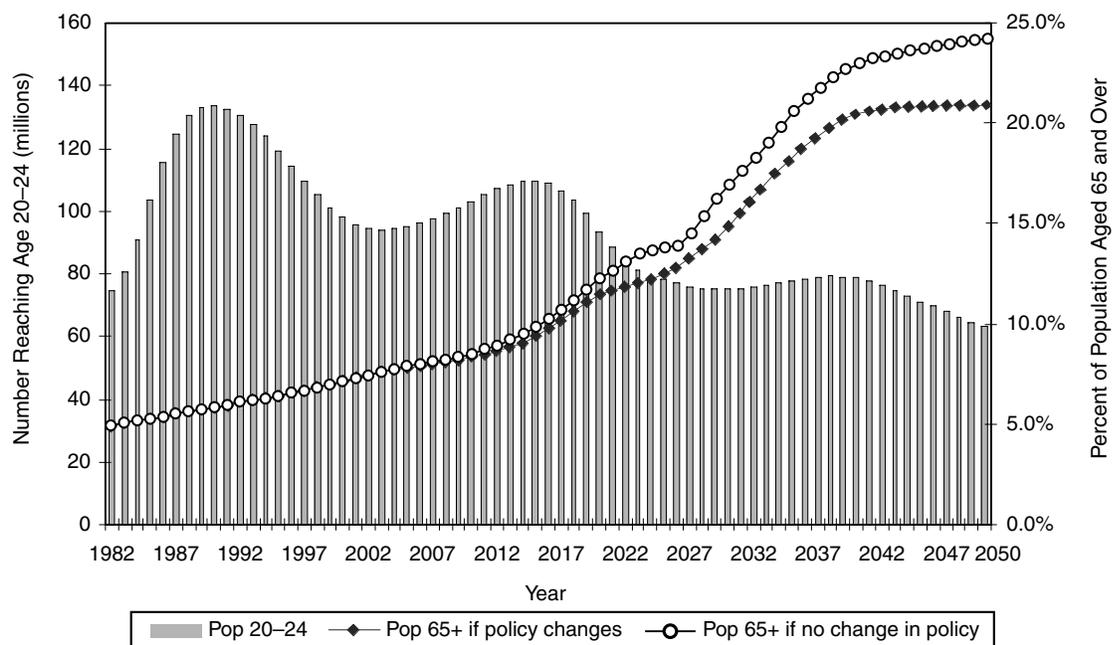


Fig. 4. Divergent demographic paths in China: labor and elderly, 1982-2050

areas and within areas designated as Special Economic Zones. Contracting land to rural families in the late 1970s provided the incentive necessary to increase agricultural output and raise the living standard for farmers. Policies allowing foreign investment and private ownership in Special Economic Zones in the early 1980s brought vitality and economic growth that would not have been possible under the socialist planned economic system. Similarly, the successful reorientation of China's birth control program from administrative coercion to better service was also due to lessons learned in initial experiments. These changes started in a select number of areas, under the close guidance and monitoring of China's recently renamed National Population and Family Planning Commission. Within five years, the new approach was adopted all over China. There is no reason to believe policymakers would not want to benefit from these experiences in returning the rights of demographic decision making to the family and the individual.

After 25 years and with more than 60 million single children already born, the feared consequences of an unprecedented policy have not only come true but have exceeded initial expectations. The one-child policy may have contributed to reducing the number of births annually, but most of that reduction is concentrated in China's urban population—a minority of the total population. Notwithstanding all the benefits derived from the policy, the costs associated with it have become apparent and are rising. If properly executed, a change toward a policy that allows couples the choice of having two children will not lead to uncontrollable population growth. Instead, it could help meet the fertility desires of most; avoid even more serious demographic and social consequences than those already emerging; and relieve the government's burden of funding and enforcing an unpopular policy.

The feared consequences of an unprecedented policy have not only come true but have exceeded expectations

A central difference between production of industrial or agricultural goods and population reproduction lies in the length of the production cycle. The results of a change to production policies for material goods can be seen within one year, even within weeks or months; but the consequences of population reproduction may only show up decades in the future. Today's elderly were born over half a century ago, and workers of today's labor force were born two decades ago or earlier. Demographic decision making bears long-term consequences.

While China's leaders have assumed that the population, like the economy, needs to be planned and produced in balance, they have not accounted for the role of individual volition and consent in human reproduction. A government can pass rules to forbid or restrict certain human behaviors that have demographic consequences, but often such political actions are far more successful in restricting population growth than in inducing it. Whereas numerous examples can be cited for the success of modern states in population control by reducing fertility, no government has yet succeeded in raising fertility once it has declined to the replacement level or below. People simply cannot be forced to have children.

With no open protests and reduced incidences of violent clashes between government officials and peasants, Chinese politicians may believe that the Chinese people have acquiesced to the one-child policy and that it can continue for years. Risks involved in changing the policy also serve as disincentives to any politicians who are entertaining the idea of change. Yet given the long-term and voluntary nature of population reproduction and the clear negative consequences associated with the one-child policy, time is not on the side of those who would avoid change, leaving the problem to the next generation. History, in this case, will not be kind to those who procrastinate.

Notes

ⁱ A prime example of such views can be found in Song Jian and Yu Jingyuan. 1985. *Renkou kongzhilun [Population Control Theory]*. Beijing: Kexue chubanshe. They argue in the introduction of their book that population control is not just a matter for economic development, but also affects resources, environment, and the survival of the human race.

ⁱⁱ Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party. September 1980. *An Open Letter to Members of the Chinese Communist Party and Chinese Communist Youth League on Controlling Population Growth*.

ⁱⁱⁱ Hardee-Cleaveland, Karen and Judith Banister. 1988. "Fertility Policy and Implementation in China, 1986–88." *Population and Development Review* 14(2): 245–286.

- ^{iv} Greenhalgh, Susan. 1986. "Shifts in China's Population Policy, 1984–86: Views from the Central, Provincial, and Local Levels." *Population and Development Review* 12: 491–515; Hardee-Cleaveland, Karen and Judith Banister. Ibid.
- ^v Wang Feng. 1996. "A Decade of One-Child Policy in China: Achievements and Implications." In Goldstein, Alice and Wang Feng (eds.). *China: The Many Facets of Demographic Change*. Boulder: Westview Press: 97–120.
- ^{vi} Guo Zhigang, Zhang Erli, Gu Baochang, Wang Feng. 2003. "Cong zhengce shengyulu kan zhongguo shengyu zhengce de duo yang xing." [Variations in China's fertility policy as seen in policy stipulated fertility levels]. *Renkou Yanjiu [Population Research]* 27: 1–10.
- ^{vii} Feeney, Griffith and Wang Feng. 1993. "Parity Progression and Birth Interval in China: The Influence of Policy in Hastening Fertility Decline." *Population and Development Review* 19(1): 61–101.
- ^{viii} These and subsequent numbers of projected elderly population in urban and rural China are based on the author's calculations.
- ^{ix} Cai Yong and William Lavelly. 2003. "China's Missing Girls: Numerical Estimates and Effects on Population Growth." *The China Review* 3(2): 13–29.
- ^x Li Shuzhou and Sun Fubin. 2003. "Mortality Analysis of China's 2000 Population Census Data: A Preliminary Examination." *The China Review* 3(2): 31–48.
- ^{xi} Zhu Chuzhu and Li Shuzhuo. 2003. "Guanai nuhai, baohu nuhai" [Love girls and protect girls]. *Renkou yanjiu [Population Research]* 5.
- ^{xii} James Lee and Wang Feng. 1999. *One Quarter of Humanity, Malthusian Mythology and Chinese Realities 1700–2000*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- ^{xiii} Winkler, Edwin A. 2002. "Chinese Reproductive Policy at the Turn of the Millennium: Dynamic Stability." *Population and Development Review* 28(3): 379–418.
- ^{xiv} Birth control program budget allocation numbers are from Scharping, Thomas. 2003. *Birth Control in China 1949–2000, Population Policy and Demographic Development*. London and New York: Routledge Curzon. During the same time period, between 1990 and 1998, total government budgetary expenditure increased 3.5 times. Budget allocation for economic construction went up 3.05 times, and for national defense 3.22 times, both less than the increase in birth control (*China Statistical Yearbook 2000*, p. 262).
- ^{xv} Retherford, R.D., M.K. Choe, J. Chen, X. Li, and H. Cui. 2005. "Fertility in China: How Much Has It Really Declined?" *Population and Development Review* 19(1): 57–84; Zhang, Guangyu. 2003. "Estimates of China's fertility in the 1990s: Data sources, regional disparities and underreporting of births." Paper presented to the Workshop on Population Changes in China at the Beginning of the 21st Century, Canberra, Australia, 10–12 December.
- ^{xvi} Merli, Giovanna M. and Herbert L. Smith. 2002. "Has the Chinese Family Planning Policy Been Successful in Changing Fertility Preferences?" *Demography* 39(3): 557–572.
- ^{xvii} Kaufman, Joan. 2003. "Myths and Realities of China's Population Program." *Harvard Asia Quarterly* 7(1): 21–25; Winkler, op. cit.

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