

China's Population: Frozen Policy and Creeping Aging

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Sometimes a nation's population drops sharply, due to war, disease or famine. Due to a series of rebellions during third quarter of the 19th Century, China experienced negative population growth the hard way, down from about 430 million in 1850 to 370 million in 1873. "Mortality crisis," "food insecurity" and "surplus deaths" are euphemisms used in population studies for deaths from violence, epidemics and starvation. Such terms do not enable the reader to visualize 60 million premature deaths. The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse: war, famine, pestilence and death (Rev. 6:1-8) supply a more vivid picture. The body count during the worst year of the Taiping Rebellion (太平天國) from 1850 to 1864 probably rivaled that of any 12-month period in the Sino-Japanese War of 1937 to 1945, which claimed roughly 30 million lives using more destructive weapons.

At other times, population slowly recovers and reaches new heights. During the final decades of the Qing (清) Dynasty and especially the troubled early years of the Republic of China beginning in 1912, accurate census data could not be obtained. The birth rate and infant mortality rates were obviously high, with a young average age and only a small percentage of seniors (in China, defined as those age 60 or older). In spite of hunger, the educated guess was that births outnumbered deaths in most years. Missionaries saw large numbers of abandoned babies, mostly girls, and opened orphanages. Despite the best efforts of the caregivers, many of those undernourished babies died shortly after being found on the doorstep.

The census of 1953 showed an unexpectedly high head count: 583 million. With basic health care and food security, deaths plummeted while births remained high, until the Great Leap

Forward and ensuing famine of 1958-1961. Then the population explosion resumed.

In 1973, the government began urging later marriages. The key year was 1979, when the One-Child Policy was suddenly and drastically imposed. No other nation on earth tried to imitate China.

The policy was relaxed in the mid-1980s to allow the rural majority two children per couple. Urban birthrates were lower. By 1993, there were one million DINK (double income, no kids) couples in China.¹

The population policy has not changed drastically in a quarter of a century. Almost all urban and many rural brides and grooms of 2011 are only children. They cannot remember a time when the government did not restrict births and warn about the problem of overpopulation. Will the policy change?

The results of China's census of late 2010, released on April 28, 2011, show a total Mainland population of 1.34 billion, growing slowly and with an increasing percentage of seniors. Based on parallels in other parts of the world, we can expect a delay between publishing the numbers, and any change in official policy, and then a much longer lag before the new policies have a big effect on the birthrate. "Demographic momentum" means a baby boom does not pass from the scene for 70 or 80 years. China's senior citizens in the year 2070 have already been born, and their number can be accurately predicted, unless a massive war, epidemic or famine strikes. China had 167 million people age 60 plus at the end of 2009, and will have 336 million in 2030 and 437 million in 2050.²

Conversely, if the birthrate stays extremely low for 25 years, then the day will inevitably come when the number of women age 20 to 45 will be quite small. Even if families start having two or three children each, there will not be enough young families to keep the total population from declining. Older families will outnumber younger families, and later deaths will outnumber births. Just as a high-speed train cannot stop in one second, nor can a large ship go

¹ "Family Planning in China, A Chronology," *Tripod*, Vol. XIV-No. 84 (Nov-Dec 1994), pp. 28-30.

² "An Age-old Old-age Dilemma," *Beijing Review*, Vol. 53, No. 49 (December 9, 2010), p. 32.

from zero to top speed in a minute, neither can surplus or scarcity in a country's age distribution be drastically changed in a decade.

Falling birth rates are hard to raise

A falling birthrate sounded alarm bells in Germany in 1978 and in Japan in 1991. After decades of arguments over how to increase the birthrate, and varying amounts of government subsidies to parents, both countries now are declining. Japan's population is shrinking faster, since Germany has admitted large numbers of immigrants. In Hong Kong, large families are a thing of the past. In early 2005, before he became Chief Executive of the S.A.R., Donald Tsang (曾蔭權) urged all Hong Kong couples to have three children. People just laughed. One local joke goes, "In Hong Kong, the most effective form of birth control is high rent." Why rents are so high is a question for another article, yet expensive rent leads people to postpone marriage, and to have only one or at most two children. Higher housing prices in Mainland cities are causing anxiety for urban men, since many women will not seriously consider a man as a potential husband unless he owns an apartment.

Taiwan's culture also closely resembles that of Mainland China, and the authorities in Taipei are worried now about the island's ultra-low birthrate. In the mid-1960s, Taiwan was one of the first places to promote IUDs for birth control. At a time when export-processing zones needed more hands, the idea was to free women from their homes and to allow them into factories. The slogan in the early 1980s was "two children is the ideal number, boys and girls are equally good." (兩個孩子恰恰好，男的女的一樣好) The propaganda campaign succeeded too well. A decade later, couples were told, "Three children are not too many," but by then the birthrate was in free fall. For the first time in Chinese history, many young couples were choosing to forego children. In a triumph of consumerism, these DINKs in Taiwan jokingly call themselves the Dinosaur Clan, because they are willing to face extinction rather than face the expense and hard work of raising even one child. Perhaps they can more accurately be called the Dog and Cat Clan, since pet stores have multiplied while kindergartens, primary schools and now middle schools are closing. Taiwan

expects a baby boom in 2012, just as in 2000, the previous Year of the Dragon, but the number of babies might slump in 2013.

Hunger and climate change

Worries about food security featured in Taiwan's drive to end the population explosion. One poster showed tall apartments next to rice fields on the edge of a city, with the caption, "After we build on all the land, where will the food come from?"

The Mainland's population is 58 times that of Taiwan. Officials in Beijing know there is not enough grain on the world market to feed everyone in China. Last summer, a record heat wave in Russia, a flood in Pakistan and extreme weather in various provinces of China were reported in the context of global climate change. As January turned to February 2011, an unusually dry winter continued across the North China Plain and even south of the Yangtze (長江). This year looks to be a year of rising global hunger.

Unlike in Western countries, news media in China are not skeptical that increasing atmospheric carbon dioxide (CO₂) generated by burning fossil fuels is partly to blame. Fear of inadequate harvests, water shortages, global warming and resulting higher food prices will cause global leaders to lose sleep at night in the coming years. Future hunger and unrest are arguments in favor of keeping the birth rate low, leading eventually to negative population growth.

Who wants more babies?

Economists and politicians believe in growth, forever and ever. Amen. If an economy slows and then stops growing, it means there are fewer and fewer places to invest money and earn a good return. Eventually banks, corporations and stockholders get zero return on their capital, and so net interest rates also fall to zero. Karl Marx (1818-1883) was the first to see this link. An economy grows because of better education, improved physical infrastructure, new technologies and also population growth. If the number of consumers starts to decline, it becomes harder to sustain 8% or 10% economic growth.

India will replace China as the world's most populous country in 25 or 30 years. That in itself will prove nothing. Most Chinese view India as so poor and poorly governed that it can never overtake China in any area except in the number of mouths to feed. Time will tell.

The average age in China will certainly increase. Those who were born in the 1950s and 1960s will retire before long. Smaller annual cohorts (those born in the same year) since 1980 mean the total labor force will peak and slowly decline. News articles are already describing this or that individual who got old and retired before getting rich. The foreign analysis, "China will get old before it gets rich," seems to be too sensitive to be quoted inside China. On the micro-level, this is called the "4-2-1 problem": four grandparents and two parents will look to one child for support. Since that young adult will also be concerned about finding a spouse and starting a family, the financial and emotional demands will be intense.

Pro and anti-natal pressures

A few years before the One Child Policy started, the entire Confucian heritage was being loudly and publicly denounced as feudal superstition (封建迷信). Confucianism has recently made a comeback. One of the most commonly cited lines in the Four Books (四書) actually comes from Mencius (孟子): "Three things are unfilial, and the greatest is not to have a son." (不孝有三，無後爲大) Today, what is the status of that admonition to continue the family line? When a wife gets pregnant, and all four potential grandparents urge an ultrasound test to determine the sex in utero, can the young couple reply, "Your thinking is feudal superstition! Boys and girls are equally good!" Abortion for sex selection is illegal, yet it remains widespread. Judging from the continued imbalanced sex ratio at birth, young couples are still under enormous pressure to produce a son.

Numerous bachelors look for an international bride, and many women in poorer countries dream of a better life in a more

prosperous land. In 2009, 7,249 Vietnamese brides went to Korea.³ More went to China for marriage. Others were victims of human trafficking. No census bureau in the world can get an accurate count of people trapped in sweatshops or prostitution. Such evils exist in every nation, yet an unbalanced sex ratio worsens the problem. The traditional belief in the superiority of baby boys over baby girls, and the One-Child Policy, combine to make the low status of women the most serious human rights problem in China.

When two only children marry, they are allowed to have two children. They are not forced to have two children. Bodily complications prevent many people from having even one baby. Due to older age at marriage and previous abortions, more couples in China are suffering fertility problems. Somewhere between 8 to 10 percent of couples cannot have children unless they resort to artificial techniques.⁴ Cigarette smoking, air pollution, chemicals in food, and the stress of modern urban life also contribute to the problem. Infertility is an especially heavy burden when both husband and wife are only children. Doctors tell patients to use the latest techniques and have a baby, while the Church tells Catholics NO because of the artificial means employed.

“Reproductive freedom” means different things in different countries. In the West, it is a euphemism for abortion. A secondary meaning is that a marriage license is not a requirement for having a baby. In the USA in January 2009, the “Octomom,” who already had 6 children, used fertility-enhancing technology and gave birth to eight more children all at once. Most people called her highly irresponsible, and a few even made death threats, but the Octomom did not do break any US law.

It's safe to predict there will never be an Octomom in China. Even triplets are extremely rare. In China, almost all babies are born after the parents marry. There is still a stigma to out-of-wedlock births. More seriously, family planning officials put heavy pressure on unwed women to abort. The emphasis is not so much

³ Aude Genet, AFP, August 4, 2010.

⁴ “Country’s infertility rate ‘on the rise’,” *China Daily — Hong Kong Edition*, February 27-28, 2010, p. 1.

on freedom, whether reproductive or in another area, as on one's duty to society.

The word "freedom" is occasionally mentioned in connection with having a baby. Article 47 of the *Law on Protection of the Rights and Interests of Women* [1992] reads "Women have the right to child-bearing in accordance with relevant regulations of the state, as well as the freedom not to bear any child."⁵ Those who drafted this law were thinking about the micro-level: family pressure on a young wife to have a child or two. Looking ahead 20 years, at the macro-level, the surging numbers of elderly and declining numbers of children may make DINKs appear anti-social. In China, what rights the state bestows on citizens now can be legislated away later.

Governments around the world have found it surprisingly difficult to legislate families to have babies. As long ago as December 6, 1926, Mussolini imposed a tax on Italian bachelors, and increased it until in 1936 they were paying twice the income tax of married men, yet the birth rate hardly rose. In China, this would have to be a tax on single women, since bachelors could rightly complain they want to find a wife, but cannot. Thankfully, no one has mentioned such a tax yet. Due to an unnatural sex ratio at birth for the last 30 years, men of prime marriageable age outnumber women today. This surplus of males will continue until 2035, 2040, or even longer.

What will happen next?

Does China have too many people, too few, or just the right number? This question has attracted some debate, with demographers and economists arguing "It's time for families to have two children," "We need to reduce, not increase, population," and "Ease one-child policy and invite disaster."⁶ Who will decide the answer to this question?

At the national level, the Party will decide policy. Implementing it at the local level is another matter. A generation

⁵ "Law of the People's Republic of China on Protection of the Rights and Interests of Women [1992]," *Tripod*, Vol. XXI-No.121 (Spring 2001), p. 69.

⁶ Li Jianxin, Li Xiaoping and Lu Ming in *China Daily — Hong Kong Edition*, February 1, 2010, p. 9.

ago, farmers said, "The government has a five-year plan to reduce the birth rate. We have a seven-year plan to get an extra farmhand." Enforcing the One-Child Policy in the 1980s and 1990s required maximum effort from all levels of government.

The Vatican will certainly not be allowed to have the final word on the fertility of two or three million Catholic families. China does not even permit the Holy See to have the final word on two or three dozen bishops. In the early 1980s, underground Catholics complained that they should be allowed to "be fruitful and multiply" (Gen. 1:28) because having children was part of their religion. Instead, they had to live with Article 49 of the national Constitution: "Both husband and wife have the duty to practice family planning." Under these restrictions, the church can still minister to couples by promoting natural family planning in a low-key manner.⁷

Bureaucratic interests and institutional inertia might have the final say. Suppose a few people at the top woke up tomorrow morning and decided to scrap all the regulations on family planning. Let anyone over age 18, married or single, who wants to bring a child into this world, go ahead and have a first, second, third or fourth baby, without asking for official permission, taking a medical exam, or getting a certificate chopped by some clerk. How many inspectors and office workers would lose their jobs? Fines levied for "out of plan" babies are a significant source of income in some localities. No one knows the total amount in RMB, nor is that number likely to be published. It's safe to predict there will be institutional resistance to any relaxation of regulations on family planning.

This whole issue will continue to pose a pastoral challenge to the Catholic Church, and to other religions. Statistics are lacking, but anecdotal evidence suggests that both Christians and Muslims in China are having the natural balance of baby boys and girls; they are not preventing the birth of girls. Despite their differences, the two monotheistic religions in China are giving good lessons to their members on the dignity of human life.

⁷ "China and Natural Family Planning," by Peter Brady, SJ, *Tripod*, Vol. XIV, No. 84 (Nov-Dec 1994), pp. 7-12.