

The Misconceived One-Child Policy Lives On

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Recently I gave a talk on China's one-child policy at London's Asia House. When the time came for questions, a young woman in her early twenties stood up. She identified herself as a Chinese national studying in London, and said, "Without the one-child policy China couldn't have advanced economically. Without the one-child policy we would have too many people." She finished by asserting that the one-child policy had been unquestionably good for China. "Without the one-child policy, I wouldn't be here," she said.

From Los Angeles to London, I've encountered similar statements from audience members, invariably Chinese students who are genuine beneficiaries of the one-child policy. Thanks to their country's economic rise, and without additional children to support, more parents have been able to afford an education abroad for China's singleton generation.

Fine and good, I replied to the student in London. But she might have a very different response if she were a woman who'd been forced to undergo a late-term abortion. Or if she had been one of the 30 million men in China doomed to perpetual bachelorhood because of a female shortage that the one-child policy has wrought. Her experience is valid, but so are theirs.

Whose reality reflects the truth of the one-child policy? Our understanding of its effects is still evolving, even though it has been in place for over three decades.

Last October, Beijing announced a shift to a nationwide two-child policy. But the move is not, as it commonly is understood to be, the end of the one-child policy—an unwieldy and misleading name applied to the set of policies governing reproduction in China since 1980. Strictly speaking, only about a third of Chinese households were bound by the one child per household rule before

the October announcement. Others were already entitled to more children under a network of exemptions that depended on where they lived, their ethnicity, and their vocation.

The move to a two-child limit merely extended the boundaries of China's reproductive rules, without removing them. As long as families who exceed these boundaries are subject to punitive measures, the "one-child" policy lives on, though I believe it is on its last legs.

BABY BOOM

Was the one-child policy responsible for China's concurrent run of unprecedented economic expansion, as the student in London believed? In truth, China's explosive growth was the result of *more* people, not less. The country's rise as a manufacturing powerhouse could not have happened without abundant cheap labor from workers born during the Chinese baby boom of the 1960s and 70s, before the one-child policy was conceived.

Many economists agree that China's rapid economic rise had more to do with Beijing's moves to encourage foreign investment and private entrepreneurship than the quota on babies. Privatizing lumbering state-owned enterprises, for example, spurred private-sector growth and by 2005 accounted for as much as 70 percent of gross domestic product. Economist Arthur Kroeber commented, "Let's say China grew 10 percent; I would be surprised if more than 0.1 percent of this is due to the one-child policy."

I said as much to the student in London, but I doubt if I convinced her. For anyone growing up in modern urban China, where reality is a crush of humanity vying for spots in schools, hospitals, and public transportation, the case for fewer people is an easy one to make.

Could China have reduced its population significantly without the one-child policy and all its harsh strictures? The answer is very likely yes. By the 1970s, a full decade before it was introduced, China already had in place a highly effective and less coercive family planning policy, called the "Later, Longer, Fewer" campaign. During the 10

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years of that campaign, women in China went from having six children on average to three.

It's probable that this pattern of falling fertility would have continued without the imposition of the one-child policy, especially considering fertility trajectories among other Asian nations. China's neighbors also managed to slow population growth—and turbocharge their economies in the process—without resorting to similarly traumatic measures. (In the mid-1980s, some 20 percent of abortions performed in Guangdong province were late-term, some as late as the ninth month, because it took that long for officials to get reluctant women into clinics, reported the *Washington Post's* Michael Weisskopf.)

POOR LITTLE EMPERORS

I didn't see that student again, but I met many like her. I wish I'd had the time to explain to her, and them, that while they are the "Little Emperors" who have enjoyed some of the one-child policy's benefits, the bill will have to be paid eventually.

Their cohort will be the first to shoulder the burden of the world's largest aging society. By 2050, one in every third person in China will be over 60. Pension shortfalls will rise, as will the demands of caring for the elderly. China already has more than a quarter of the world's sufferers of Parkinson's disease; by 2030, this will rise to almost 60 percent. Similarly huge increases in the numbers of Alzheimer's and cancer sufferers will occur. China, with the world's second-largest economy, consistently ranks near the bottom in the *Economist's* quality-of-death rankings.

The one-child policy has distorted gender and age ratios in China so much that in a little under a decade there will be 30 million surplus Chinese men. Some demographers have called the current situation, in all seriousness, a male youth bulge. It's not certain if a China with an excess male population will be a more warlike nation, as some social scientists predict, but it will certainly be a more unstable and unhappy place, with more restive males than the generation that launched the Arab Spring in the Middle East.

Women, the traditional caretakers of the elderly, will have a heavier share of the burden. While China's only daughters made significant gains during the years of the one-child policy—enroll-

ing in graduate schools in record numbers, for example—similar advances have been made by their peers in Asian countries such as South Korea, Thailand, Singapore, and Taiwan.

Some academics argue that China's woman shortage reflects a growing movement to claw back some of feminism's gains. In the past five years, there has been a rise in state-sponsored propaganda encouraging college-educated women to marry early, known as the *sheng nu*, or "left-over women," campaign. Leta Hong Fincher of the Chinese University of Hong Kong attributes this push to Beijing's desire to increase population growth, particularly among the educated elite. "What better way to upgrade population quality than to frighten 'high-quality' women into marrying and having a child for the good of the nation?" she wrote in an October 2012 *New York Times* opinion piece.

NOT ROCKET SCIENCE

If Beijing is unable to change the trend, China's population (currently over 1.3 billion) will peak and start to decline sometime in the decade between 2020 and 2030. By 2100, it may fall to 1950 levels, or about 500 million, according to Nanjing University's Chen

Youhua, based on figures from the 2010 census. That would be a startling reversal for the world's most populous nation. No other country has ever shed so much of its population without the impact of war or pestilence.

You might think that Beijing must have foreseen some of these side effects years ago. After all, it's no great stretch to figure out that people get older, Chinese families favor sons, and a workforce shrinks when people have fewer kids.

But China's one-child policy was crafted by rocket scientists, who believed that side effects could be swiftly mitigated and women's fertility rates easily adjusted. Song Jian, a Russian-trained missile expert whose calculations were instrumental in the policy's implementation, airily dismissed concerns. Science, he wrote in a *Xinhua* op-ed in 1980, could easily avert the aging of the population before it became a serious problem "in the distant future"; authorities could "adjust women's average fertility rate in advance" to keep population growth stable. China's economists, sociologists, and demographers, who might have injected

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more wisdom and balance, were largely left out of the decision making, since the Cultural Revolution had starved social scientists of resources and prestige.

It was not until 20 years later that a group of Chinese social scientists began mobilizing to undo the effects of the one-child policy. The prime movers included people like Gu Baochang, head of Renmin University's demographics unit. Another well-connected member was Zhang Erli, a retired top official of the National Family Planning Commission. Some reformers were from China's first generation of Western-trained demographers, such as Wang Feng, a professor at the University of California, Irvine.

Their goal was to collect and collate compelling evidence to show that the one-child policy no longer served the nation's purposes economically or socially. In 2004, they began presenting Beijing with data showing that China's fertility rate had plunged below the replacement level. But authorities were not convinced. Many still believed the population could rebound with another baby boom. Also, the structure of family-

planning enforcement had grown into such a complex and economically important machine that dismantling it would significantly distort local governance. Violators of the one-child policy were typically fined several multiples of their annual household income, and these fines became a significant revenue source for many local governments, especially poorer ones that derived less from other sources, such as land sales.

I met Zhang in Beijing in 2014. He told me, "It could have been a better policy. . . . [I]t is already useless." I wish I had the presence of mind, the eloquence, and the time to have summed this up for the student in London. Above all, I wish someone else could have been there in that room with us.

Feng Jianmei was seven months pregnant with her second child when she was taken away from her village in Shaanxing province for a forced abortion. Feng's story became a national scandal after a relative snapped a picture of her lying next to the fetus and posted it online. This happened in 2012, just four years before the switch to a two-child policy. The sheer arbitrariness of it all still overwhelms me. ■