

BROOKINGS

MONDAY FEBRUARY 21, 2011

China's One Child Policy at 30

China, Children & Families, Demographics

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The Brookings Institution

SEPTEMBER 24, 2010 —

Thirty years ago today, in what appeared as an open letter to members of the Communist Party and the Communist Youth League, the Chinese government announced publicly its “one child per couple” birth control policy. In thirty years, this most ambitious birth control policy in world’s history has affected the lives of a billion, and changed the face and fate of a nation. Today, the one child policy is still very much in place -- nearly two thirds of all Chinese couples are still required to have only one child.

Even before its inception, the one child policy was questioned for its necessity and its enormous social costs. At the time of the policy’s announcement, China had already achieved a remarkable fertility reduction, halving the number of children per woman from 5.8 in 1970 to 2.7 in 1979. The one child policy, critics warned, would forcefully alter kin relations for Chinese families, and result in accelerated aging, among others. To enforce a policy that is so extreme and unpopular for families who relied on children for labor and old age support, physical abuses and violence would be inevitable.

Many of the feared consequences of the one child policy have now become apparent. China’s recorded sex ratio at birth has been on a rise since the inception of the policy, escalating from 108 in 1980 to over 120 boys for every 100 girls today, resulting in an estimated 20 to 30 million surplus men. Families with only one child are now estimated at around 150 million, accounting for a third of all Chinese households. China’s only children generation will assume the role of sole caretakers of their aging parents, and will be the ones to shoulder rising government expenditure obligations for future pension, health care, and social welfare benefits associated with an increasingly aging population.

China’s one child policy may have hastened a fertility decline that was already well in progress, but it is not the main force accounting for China’s low fertility today. The claim by Chinese officials that the one child policy has helped avert 400 million births simply cannot be substantiated by facts. Most of China’s fertility decline occurred prior to the one child policy. In countries without a forceful and costly policy as China’s, birth rate has declined with similar trajectories and magnitude. South Korea, for instance, had a fertility similar to China’s in 1979, at 2.9 children per woman. In 2008, it dropped to 1.2. Thailand’s fertility dropped from 3.6 in 1979 to 1.8 now. Brazil’s fertility was 4.2 in 1979. In 2008, it was 1.9.

For the same reason, China’s one child policy should not be taken as a model for the world’s environmental preservation and climate control. The rising energy usage and pollution level in China is driven mostly by its economic

development model and change in consumption pattern, not population growth. Between 1990 and 2007, petroleum consumption in China increased by 189 percent, natural gas by 375 percent, and electricity by 424 percent. During the same period, population size grew by only 16 percent. CO2 emission since the mid 1990s increased by over 50 percent in one decade, while population growth during the same time period was only 8.5 percent.

Young couples in China nowadays restrict their childbearing out of economic concerns, as couples elsewhere do. For nearly two decades, China's fertility level has been under the replacement level of 2.1 children per couple, with a fertility level that is widely believed to be around 1.5 in recent years. Such a level resembles that in Italy, Japan, and Russia where population decline has already begun, but much below that in the United States, England, or France. Decades-long very low fertility level is setting China up for a prolonged demographic challenge; had it not been for China's relatively young age structure, China's population would have begun to shrink in size.

The rippling effects of low fertility are increasingly visible everywhere in China today. In 1995, Chinese elementary schools enrolled 25.3 million new students. In 2008, that number shrunk by one-third, to only 16.7 million. Between 1990 and 2008, 60 percent of Chinese elementary schools were closed down, resulting from declining birth numbers and school reorganizations. The number of young laborers aged 20 to 29 has already come down by 14 percent in the last ten years, and is projected to shrink further, by an additional 17 percent, in the next two decades. Chinese elderly aged 60 and older, in contrast, will increase from 165 million now to 240 million in 2020, and over 340 million by 2030, accounting for 25 percent of the total population.

As China's one child policy reaches its thirtieth anniversary, policymakers in China have yet to demonstrate an understanding and leadership to end a policy that was pushed through without much deliberation and debate, and that is clearly out of date today in view of China's new demographics.

Instead of stepping on the brakes in a demographic vehicle that is going downhill, by continuing the one child policy, China's policymakers are still pressing on the gas pedal.