



China's Future and Its One-Child Policy

By Nicholas Eberstadt

China faces many challenges in the future, including the development of more effective financial institutions and managing growing urbanization. But its future success rests on abandoning its destructive "One-Child Policy." The coercive program has been a disastrous mistake, and its consequences are already being felt.

Surveying the policy horizon for China today, there are any number of important challenges that would deserve extensive comment: the need to build and maintain more efficient institutions and arrangements for financial intermediation, for example; or the requirements for making the transition from export-oriented growth to development focused on the domestic Chinese consumer; or the great looming question of how to manage China's prospective urbanization process over the coming generation (with almost 350 million people projected to move from countryside to city between 2005 and 2030, this promises to be the most massive relocation of human beings in just one generation that any country in history has ever experienced).

But one topic above all will have a critical impact upon China's future, and that is its population policy. China's very future hinges on this policy—although not in the way the official formulation suggests. It is hardly an exaggeration to suggest that the program may threaten China's growth and stability—possibly even China's very culture. If the Chinese government could make a single decision today to enhance the nation's long-term outlook and position, it would be to recognize that coercive population control has

been a tragic and historic mistake—and it would abandon it, immediately and without reservation.

On its own terms, China's population program has been an apparent success. In the early 1970s, China's then-current childbearing patterns would have implied nearly five births per woman per lifetime. At the start of the One-Child Policy in 1979, China's total fertility rate was nearly three births per woman. Today, while there are uncertainties about the precise fertility level in China, there is little doubt that it is far below the net replacement rate. The United Nations Population Division (UNPD) estimates that China's fertility level is currently about 1.7 births per woman—over 20 percent below the level necessary for long-term population replacement. Some Chinese demographers believe the true level nationwide may actually be even lower than the UN estimate, and in some major population centers—Beijing, Shanghai, and Tianjin among them—it appears that the average number of births per woman is amazingly low: below one baby per lifetime.

This seeming success, however, comes with immense inadvertent costs and unintended consequences, for China's new birth patterns directly undermine the country's future development potential.

To put a human face on the issue, think of Yao Ming, the world-famous basketball star. He is on the front page of China's newspapers regularly, and he is well known in America, where he is admired by millions of fans. Yao's parents were

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both basketball stars in China. Yao was born in the year 1980 in Shanghai. He is an only child.

Without a One-Child Policy, how many other stars might the Yao family have produced? Who knows, without the One-Child Policy, there might have been a whole team of Yao Mings! But of course that was not to be. That particular possibility has been lost—and we will never know how much more of China’s potential has been lost, thanks to involuntary birth control.

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Of course, some adults will not want to have children at all, and others will be happy with just one baby. For them, the One-Child Policy imposes no hardships, but for those who desire two children or more, restrictive measures that impose a cap on family size amount to a self-evident, profound, and terrible reduction in self-assessed well-being. To be sure, during the era of the One-Child Policy, China has recorded very rapid growth rates—but for the many parents who were forced to forswear the children they wished to have, this growth was not serving human desires. From a development standpoint, economic growth that does not meet the most basic of human needs and desires is low-quality growth.

China’s population policy is making it harder to sustain growth. Thanks to a decade and a half of sub-replacement fertility, China’s working age population is poised to peak in size, and then to decline, more or less indefinitely. In less than a decade—no later than the year 2015—China’s cohort of fifteen- to sixty-four-year-olds will begin this prolonged decline; a generation from now, China’s potential labor force will be no larger than it is today, perhaps smaller. This presages a radical change in China’s growth environment from the past quarter century, during which time (1980–2005) the country’s working-age population expanded by over 55 percent. “Composition effects” only make the picture worse. Until now, young people have been the life force raising the overall level of education and technical attainment in China’s workforce, but between 2005 and 2030, China’s fifteen- to twenty-four-year-old group is slated to slump

in absolute size, with a projected decline of over 20 percent in store. In fact, the *only* part of working age population that stands to increase in size between now and 2030 is the over-fifty-year-old group. Will *they* bring the dynamism we have come to expect from China in recent decades?

On current trajectories, China’s total population is set to commence a prolonged decline around 2030. Between now and 2030, however, China will undergo a population explosion of sorts: a huge increase in its number of senior citizens. Between 2005 and 2030, China’s sixty-five-plus age cohort will likely more than double in size, from about 100 million to 235 million or more. Because of the falloff in young people, China’s age profile will be “graying” in the decades ahead at a pace almost never before witnessed in human history. China is still a fairly youthful society today—but by 2030, by such metrics as median population age, the country will be “grayer” than the United States in 2030.

By 2030, China’s median age may be over forty-one—which is to say, half or more of the nation’s population would be above forty-one years of age by that date. Japan—the world’s most elderly society now—reached a median age of forty-one just a few years ago, around 2000. But in the year 2000, Japan was far more affluent than even the most sanguine of optimists imagine China might be by 2030—and unlike China, Japan has a national pension system. How will the elderly in China get by in the world they will so soon be facing?

Until now, China’s de facto national pension system has been the family—but that social safety net is now unraveling rapidly. Until very recently, thanks to relatively large Chinese families, almost every Chinese woman had given birth to at least one son—and according to the Confucian tradition, it was sons upon whom older parents would rely for their first line of support. Things will be very different in the immediate future. Just two decades from now, thanks to the “success” of the One-Child Policy, roughly a third of China’s women entering their sixties will have no living son.

One can see the making of a slow-motion humanitarian tragedy in these numbers, but the withering away of the Chinese family under population control has even more far-reaching implications. To exaggerate only slightly, over the coming generation, we may see 2,500 years of Chinese family tradition come to an end.

Recall that in Beijing, Shanghai, and other parts of China, extreme sub-replacement fertility has already been in effect for over a generation. If this continues for

another generation, we will see the emergence of a new norm: a “4-2-1 family” composed of four grandparents, only two children, and just one grandchild. The children in these brave new families will have no brothers or sisters, no uncles or aunts, and no cousins. Their only blood relatives will be their ancestors.

There will be many ramifications from this societal sea change. Here, let me dwell only on what this may portend for economic growth. It is no secret that China is a “low trust society”: personal and business transactions still rely heavily upon *guanxi*, the network of personal relations largely demarcated by family ties. What will provide the “social capital” to undergird commercial and economic development in a future China where “families” are, increasingly, little more than atomized households and isolated individuals?

There is one other handmaiden of the population control program that requires comment: this is the eerie, unnatural, and increasingly extreme imbalance between baby boys and baby girls in China. Ordinarily, the human species observes the birth of about 103 to 105 baby boys for every 100 baby girls—this is a natural and biological regularity. Shortly after the advent of the One-Child Policy, however, China began reporting biologically impossible disparities between boys and girls—and the imbalance has only continued to rise. Today China is reporting 123 baby boys for every 100 girls.

Over the coming generation, those same little boys and girls will grow up to be prospective brides and grooms. One need not be a demographer to see from these numbers the massive imbalance in the “marriage market” facing China in a generation or less. How will China cope with the sudden and very rapid emergence of tens of millions of essentially unmarriageable young men?

All of the problems described here are directly associated with China’s population-control program. Even so, some may still wonder: wouldn’t ending the one-child norm bring us back to the days of the four- or five-child

norms (with a whole new set of attendant problems)? It is unlikely. More importantly, some of China’s best demographers also doubt this and have indicated as much in print, albeit cautiously.

Remember, in the absence of coercion, the best predictor of family size is the number of children that parents actually wish to have: that is to say, their desired fertility. Those desires are affected not just by income and education, but by a subtle and complex array of outlooks, attitudes, and expectations. All of these quantities look to have changed dramatically in China since the days of Mao. A scrapping of the restrictive birth control policy would surely ease China’s incipient aging crisis, its looming family structure problems, and its worrisome gender imbalances, but it would be most unlikely to bring us back to pre-industrial norms of fertility.

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In the final analysis, the wealth of nations in the modern world is not to be found in mines, or forests, or deposits of natural resources. The true wealth of modern countries resides in their people—in human resources. And human beings are rational, calculating actors who seek to improve their own circumstances—not heedless beasts who procreate without thought of the future.

China’s people are not a curse—they are a blessing. Trusting them to act in their own self-interest—not least of all, trusting their choices and preferences with respect to their own family size—may very well prove to be the key to whether China succeeds in abolishing poverty and attaining mass affluence in the decades and generations ahead.