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Ending China's One-Child Policy: Too Little, Too Late?

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In October 2015 the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party announced that the controversial one-child policy, in force since 1980, would end. Starting on January 1 2016, couples would be allowed to have two children (but still not three or more). A year later, statistics were released on the initial popular response to this change: in 2016 there were 1.3 million more births than in the previous year, and more than 45% of all births were second or higher order births. Officials proclaimed that the policy relaxation "came in time and worked effectively." However, the serious social problems China is facing as a result of its peculiar demographic experiences belie the happy optimism of such statements. In order to understand why, it is necessary to briefly review the tortured history of China's enforcement of mandatory birth limits.

A large number of myths surround that history. It is often claimed that China's population was growing out of control until after Mao Zedong died in 1976 and that a highly coercive national campaign was justified in order to reduce fertility rates to manageable levels. In this view, however regrettable were the massive human rights abuses unleashed by enforcement of the one-child policy, it did result in a sharp decline in birth rates, a decline from which China and the world benefited. Maintaining that policy for thirty-five years, so this argument goes, was necessary in order to prevent a new baby boom. Finally in 2016, as the "came in time" phrase suggests, popular family size desires had fallen enough that permitting couples to have two children would not unleash a new baby boom.

Setting the historical record straight

The historical facts are starkly different. The shift from voluntary family planning campaigns to mandatory birth limits actually began in 1970, when Mao was still in charge, with urban families only allowed to have two children and rural families three. These new birth limits, as well as mandatory targets for late marriage and spacing between births (hence the slogan, "later, longer, fewer"), were enforced using many of the coercive techniques that would become familiar and notorious in the one-child era (when they were applied even more systematically and brutally), with the number of abortions, sterilisations, and IUD insertions increasing sharply during the 1970s as a consequence. The "later, longer, fewer" campaign was highly effective in achieving its goal, with estimates of how many babies the average mother would have in her lifetime (called the total fertility rate, or TFR) declining from close to 6 in 1970 to 2.7-2.8 by the end of the decade. This means that more than 70% of the

fertility decline from 1970 to the present was accomplished in that first decade, prior to the launch of the one-child campaign. So coercive enforcement of strict birth limits has an even longer history in China than many realise - of forty-five years.

Obviously China's birth rates were not "out of control" when Deng Xiaoping and his colleagues took charge at the end of the 1970s, but the new leadership nonetheless was adamant that even more strict birth limits were needed in order to promote rapid economic growth per capita. The result was the launching of the one-child campaign. However, contrary to myth, the campaign was not followed by a further reduction in birth rates, at least initially. The reasons are complex, including the demographic "echo" from the post-Great Leap Forward baby boom of the early 1960s and the fact that the "later" (marriage) portion of the 1970s campaign was abandoned, allowing ages of first marriage to drop by two years right after 1980. As a result of these two factors, millions of additional women entered the potential childbearing pool each year. The birth rate did drop initially in 1980, but then rose again and fluctuated through the middle of the decade, remaining at a level higher than before the campaign was launched.

More effective enforcement efforts were launched toward the end of the 1980s, in part by making success in lowering births one of the key performance indicators used to evaluate local officials. But the primary driver of the decline in fertility since the mid-1980s has not been the one-child policy, but China's extraordinarily rapid economic development - the same force that produced declines to extremely low fertility rates in East Asian countries lacking mandatory birth limits. China's TFR fell below replacement level (TFR=2.1) by the early 1990s and has declined further since. Estimates of China's TFR currently vary, with some claiming that it is as low as 1.2, but most demographers estimate that due to under-reporting, the true figure is more likely 1.5-1.6 (which is still much lower than the TFR in developed countries such as the US and Australia). To summarise, for the past forty-five years China has had unusually low birth rates, due in part to the coercive enforcement of the one-child campaign, but much more to the combination of the already coercive birth limits of the 1970s and spectacular economic growth since the 1980s.

Looming crises

Even as the one-child policy was being launched from on high, there were dissenting voices pointing both to the high levels of coercion necessary to enforce the policy, as well as the harmful social consequences that state distortion of normal demographic behaviour would produce. Some Chinese demographers warned of smaller future birth cohorts imperilling familial support for the elderly, of excess male births, and of eventual labour shortages. When such warnings were ignored, in 2001 about two dozen Chinese population specialists began a concerted effort to conduct research in experimental locales that permitted two births as well to calculate demographic projections into the future. They also drafted policy briefs arguing for the pressing need to abandon the one-child policy. Two appeals this group sent upward to the Chinese leadership, in 2004 and 2009, were rejected out of continuing fear of unleashing a new baby boom. The group's third appeal, sent upward in January 2015, probably played a

role in the decision later that year to finally end the one-child birth limit. However, there are reasons to view this policy change as too little, too late.

The first reason concerns the initial response in 2016 to allowing two children. Although there was a modest increase in the total number of births, the impressive-sounding "more than 45% second and higher order births" is somewhat misleading, since it is partly the result of a smaller number of first births, indicating that Chinese couples are still delaying having children and expecting to have very few. The proportion of second and higher order births had already been increasing, from 34% in 2011 to 47% in 2015, so it is not really clear that ending the one-child policy had much impact on the 2016 birth numbers. Fertility rates remain well below replacement level, and it will be impossible for China to avoid an unprecedented situation: within roughly a decade, China's population will reach its maximum size (at around 1.4 billion) and then start declining. After many decades of the world worrying primarily about overpopulation, an increasing number of countries, such as Japan, Italy, and Russia, are now facing uncharted challenges in adapting to a declining population. But none of the other countries coping with sub-replacement fertility are as relatively poor still as China, and none have China's distorted demography.

A more important reason for viewing the policy change as too little, too late involves the looming challenges China already faces. The number of Chinese who are aged 60 and older is a little over 200 million currently, but it is projected to grow to about 360 million by 2030, with many having only one grown child to provide support (and even a substantial number who can expect to outlive their only child). China enjoyed a "demographic dividend" during recent decades due to increases each year in the number of new workers entering the labour force, but that trend has recently been thrown into reverse, with the number of Chinese in the young worker ages of 20-29 expected to decline by a quarter within the next decade, from about 200 million currently to 150 million. Already this reversal in the labour supply is contributing to rising wages and a declining ability of China to compete for foreign investment and export markets with lower wage countries such as Vietnam, Cambodia, and Bangladesh. A third major challenge concerns men who are unable to get married. As a result of excess male births made possible by prenatal sex selective abortions (despite being illegal), in recent years 15-20% more boy babies than girls have been born annually. China already has about 30 million excess males, with the numbers expected to grow.

Some have called the one-child policy "China's worst policy mistake", surpassing the disasters caused by the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. The reason is not the severity of the suffering involved, but how long-lasting and difficult it will be to overcome the effects. China is now discovering what other governments have already learned - that it is much more difficult to implement policies that will induce citizens to have more babies than it is to get them to have fewer. And births today do not produce their full effects until decades from now. China is already facing a distorted demographic profile as a result of forty-five years of mandatory birth limits, and a modest number of additional births in years to come will do little to reverse the looming crises the country faces as a result of enforcing misguided population policies for so many years.