

Modifying China's One-Child Policy

Written by Martin King Whyte

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MARTIN KING WHYTE, FEB 2 2014

In November 2013, the new leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) announced with some fanfare a “softening” of China’s controversial “one child policy” (launched nationwide in 1980). Previously, couples in which each spouse had no siblings were allowed to have two children without facing penalties. The “softening” involves couples in which only one spouse is a “singleton,” but the other has a sibling, now being allowed to have two children. Why is this modification being adopted now, and how significant is it? Before trying to answer these questions, it is important to correct common misperceptions regarding the origins of China’s one child policy.

The Bizarre Origins of China's One Child Policy

Many believe that Mao Zedong (China's leader from 1949 until his death in 1976) was an ardent pro-natalist, and that the launching of the one child policy in 1980 was a drastic but necessary measure in order to bring the runaway population growth of the Mao era under control. The record indicates otherwise. While Mao is on record in the 1950s and 1960s dismissing the idea that population growth was a problem for China, official family planning policy during those years had very little relationship to actual fertility trends. However, Mao was still in charge in 1970 when a fundamental switch from voluntary to mandatory and highly coercive enforcement of family planning occurred. Official policy in the 1970s was that urban couples could have at most two children, and rural couples three, with late marriage and spacing between births also required. Vigorous enforcement of these “later, longer, fewer” rules contributed to a dramatic decline in China's total fertility rate (TFR)[1], from close to 6 in 1970 to only 2.7-2.8 in the late 1970s. Although this was still modestly above “replacement level fertility” (TFR=2.1), clearly China's population increase rate was down sharply prior to the launching of the one child policy. Indeed, something like 75% of the total reduction of China's TFR from 1970 up to the present occurred prior to the launching of the one child policy.

If China's population growth rate was being successfully brought under control, why was an even more coercive family planning regime, the one child policy, implemented starting in 1980? The post-Mao leaders of the CCP, anxious to recover from the chaos of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), and with a laser-like focus on anything that could increase the growth rate of the economy in per capita terms, were eager to find ways to restrict the fertility of the population even more sharply, perhaps even to a single child per family. At roughly the same time, as Susan Greenhalgh's fascinating research (2008) shows, a powerful and well-connected rocket scientist, Song Jian, influenced by doomsday population scenarios then being circulated in the West by the Club of Rome (Meadows et. al, 1972), ran computer projections of China's population over the next century under a variety of TFRs. Contending that China's optimal population ca. 2070 was around 750 million (even though China's current population was already approaching 1 billion), Song calculated that a TFR closer to 1 than to 2 was necessary to enable China to reach this optimal future population target. Song and his supporters provided a supposedly scientific rationale for sustained enforcement of a one child policy. In other words, a pseudo-scientific set of theories and projections since largely discredited in the West became the rationale the CCP leaders were looking for to launch a national policy designed to eventually reverse population growth and produce a substantially smaller population (rather than to simply continue to slow the rate of population growth). As a result, under current projections China's population will top out about a decade from now and then begin declining (Wang 2011).

Implementation of the One Child Policy

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Although having only one child was advocated for all, the one child limit was mandatory almost entirely only for urbanites. That limit has been very rigidly enforced, with over 90% of all births in large cities over the years being only children. In the countryside, although specifics vary somewhat from place to place, by the mid-1980s most localities enforced a policy that if the first child is a boy, then the parents should stop and accept IUD insertion or sterilization. However, if the first child is a girl, they can obtain approval for one more birth in an attempt to have a son (Johnson, 2004), after which they are supposed to stop. So for the bulk of the population, with Chinese villagers 80% of the total in 1978, although less than 50% today, there evolved a less restrictive set of fertility rules, with most rural families proceeding to give birth to two children. Family planning policy and enforcement was even less strict for the 8% of the population classified as national minorities. And among Han Chinese, from the beginning the rule was that if two singletons married (not a very common situation in the 1980s, given the high pre-1970 fertility rates), they were allowed to have two children. In other words, saying that China has enforced a one child policy since 1980 is an oversimplification of a complex reality.

As of the 1970s, a wide range of monitoring and sanctioning measures were employed to enforce birth limits, leading to widespread abuses that continue up to the present (e.g., intrusive menstrual monitoring, coerced sterilizations and abortions, staggering monetary fines for "over-quota" births, smashing of furniture and housing of those who resist, withholding registration for babies born outside the plan, etc.) By the late 1980s, meeting low fertility targets became one of the basic criteria used to evaluate local officials, adding to the pressure to achieve low birth targets no matter what.

After fluctuating during the 1980s, China's TFR dipped below replacement level by the early 1990s and has remained there since, although the exact figures remain subject to debate (estimates of TFR vary between 1.4 and 1.8 for recent years). However, since the one child policy period overlaps with China's extraordinarily rapid economic growth, with annual increases in economic output of close to 10% annually for much of the past three-plus decades, demographers generally agree that fertility rates would have fallen sharply even without the one-child policy. In other words, China's relatively low fertility rates today are due less to the coercive enforcement of the one child policy, and more due to the normal incentives produced by rising incomes and educational levels, than was the case during the 1970s and 1980s.

Challenging the Sacrosanct: Domestic Critiques of the One-Child Policy

China's draconian one child policy has drawn widespread criticism since its inception, not only from human rights critics outside, but even within China. One major critical attack on the policy has come from Chinese demographers. For more than a decade a determined group of demographers has been engaged in pilot research, demographic analyses, and the drafting of academic papers and policy briefs aimed at the CCP leadership, all designed to push for a substantial modification of the one child policy. They feel that the one child policy has already done serious harm to Chinese society and that it will take not only abandonment of that policy, but also serious repair work over decades, to recover from that damage. Oversimplifying a complex reality, their efforts have been designed to advance several important claims:

- (1) strict enforcement of the one child policy for more than three decades has already contributed to a serious weakening of familial support for China's rapidly growing elderly population;
- (2) that same enforcement has produced highly distorted sex ratios at birth, with close to 20% more boys than girls born each year, leading to millions of extra males who are unable to marry, and to the social problems associated with such an extreme demographic imbalance;
- (3) sub-replacement fertility is beginning to contribute to sharp increases in wages and labor costs, harming China's economic competitiveness;
- (4) given the fact that demographic changes take a long time to show their effects due to demographic momentum, even if the one child policy were abandoned today, these harmful effects would still be felt for decades to come (Wang et al., 2012);

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(5) for all of these reasons, China should immediately abandon the one child policy and switch to the advocacy of two children, with spacing between births;

(6) if the one child policy were abandoned in favor of a general two child policy, local pilot experiments indicate that most Chinese already do not want to have more than that, so that a two child rule would not produce a new baby boom; and finally,

(7) carrying out a two-child-with-spacing family planning program could be accomplished without the widespread coercion that has done such damage to China's reputation internationally and caused so much abuse and suffering of Chinese citizens.

The Significance of the 2013 "Softening" of the One Child Policy

Until 2013 the advocacy by Chinese demographers and other critics of the one child policy was unsuccessful, with multiple attempts to persuade the CCP to modify that policy rejected. It appeared that leadership fears of the danger of a new baby boom if the policy were relaxed always trumped concerns about the long term damage caused by that policy's continued enforcement. It is in this context that the November 2013 announcement of a "softening" of the one child policy is significant. Considered demographically, the impact of starting to allow couples in which only one spouse is an only child to have two children, will be fairly trivial. For one thing, the number of couples who will benefit from this minor relaxation is quite small. Most newly married urban couples involve two singletons, so they are already allowed to have two children. In the countryside most newly marrying couples have at least one sibling on both sides, and such couples will not benefit from this minor change in the rules. A more important reason to see the demographic impact as minor is that even if it leads to a modest number of additional births, the newly allowed second children will not mature and begin to have any impact on things like support for the elderly and labor costs for more than two decades.

Although this is a relatively trivial policy change from a demographic point of view, its real importance is political and symbolic. For the first time the CCP has been willing to take a policy that has been considered sacrosanct for more than three decades (despite all of its problems) and to begin to introduce modifications. By the same token, for the first time the leadership shows signs of taking seriously the harmful consequences produced by the one child policy, as well as the necessity of addressing those problems. In sending these signals, China's leadership is giving its critics and ordinary citizens hope that this relatively minor softening of the policy may only be the first step leading to the ultimate abandonment of China's highly coercive one child policy. Given the complex history involved, only time will tell whether such hopes will turn into a more sane Chinese demographic policy reality.

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[1] The total fertility rate is a projection of how many babies the average woman would be expected to give birth to during her lifetime if current fertility rates persisted.

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Martin King Whyte is John Zwaanstra Professor of International Studies and Sociology at Harvard University. He specializes in the sociology of the family, the sociology of development, the sociological study of contemporary China, and the comparative analysis of post-socialist transitions in China and Eastern Europe. His most recent books are **Myth of the Social Volcano: Perceptions of Inequality and Distributive Injustice in Contemporary China** (Stanford University Press) and **One Country, Two Societies: Rural-Urban Inequality in Contemporary China** (Harvard University Press), both published in 2010.