

The end of one child per family in China?

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In 2015, the Chinese government announced the end of its one-child policy, which had been highly controversial in that country since China's fertility had become one of the lowest in the world. Will the new "two-child policy" bring fertility back up? Isabelle Attané says it won't, because of the increasing costs of raising children and the difficulties Chinese women currently have in reconciling family life and a job.

Fertility in China started falling in the early 1970s, at the time of the third birth control campaign imposing delayed marriage, birth spacing and a maximum family size of two or three children.⁽¹⁾ Implemented in a context of strong social control, these measures were associated with one of the sharpest declines in fertility ever recorded in the world in such a short space of time, with the mean number of children per woman dropping from 5.8 in 1970 to 2.8 in 1979 (Figure 1). In Chinese cities, it was already well below replacement level by that year (1.4 children per woman).

Yet despite the Chinese authorities' determination to impose even stricter birth control with the one-child policy introduced in 1979, fertility levelled off in the 1980s, and the mean number of children per woman hovered above two throughout the decade. For all the heavy sanctions on families who failed to comply with the injunction to limit family size, the one-child policy met with strong resistance in rural areas and the authorities were forced to relax the rules in 1984. From then on, a second child was generally authorized in rural areas, notably if the first one was a girl, although the rules varied across provinces (Figure 2).

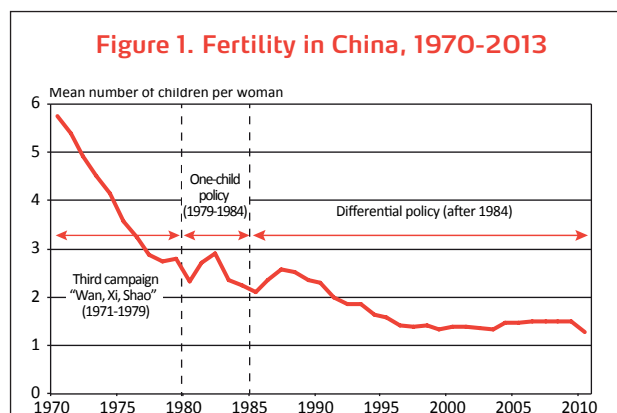
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(1) At that time some ethnic minorities were not subject to birth control policy.

Chinese fertility now very low

Chinese fertility started falling again in the 1990s, and then dropped lastingly below replacement level. Birth control played a decisive role in this decrease, but the social and economic changes that were taking place (health improvements, higher cost of living, rise in educational levels, etc.) and the resulting shift in family norms, were also drivers of fertility reduction. Most

Figure 1. Fertility in China, 1970-2013

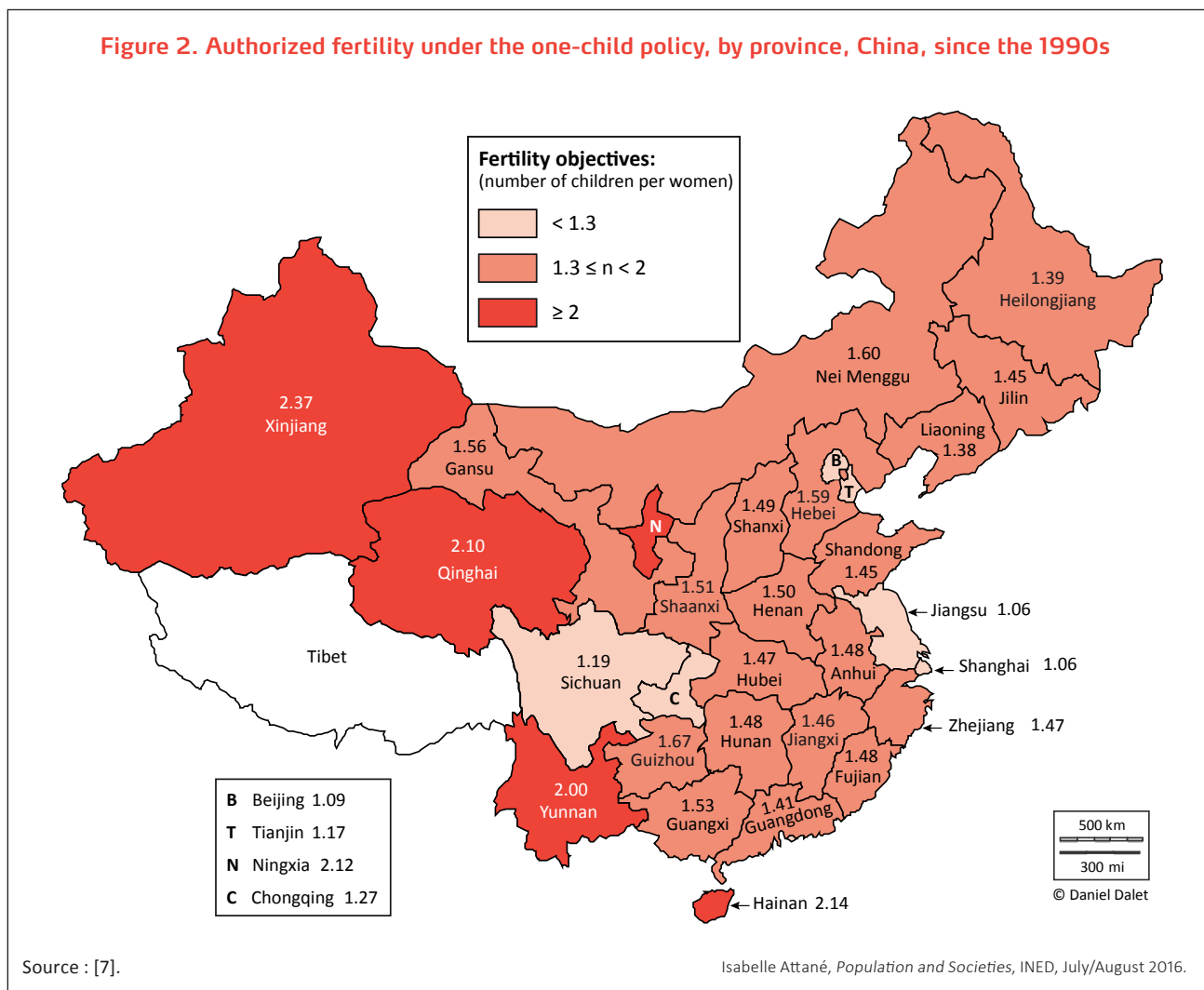


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Sources: 1970-1990: Chen S., Coale, A., 1993, *Fertility Data in the Chinese Provinces, 1940-1990*. Beijing: Zhongguo renkou chubanshe; 1991-2010: [1]; 2011-2013: National Bureau of Statistics official data available at:

<http://www.renkou.org.cn/countries/zhongguo/2015/2680.html>

Figure 2. Authorized fertility under the one-child policy, by province, China, since the 1990s



Chinese sources agree that fertility fell below 1.5 children per woman in the late 1990s, subsequently reaching a level of between 1.2 and 1.5,[1] among the lowest in the world. This situation heralds not only the end of population growth in China, but also exceptionally rapid population ageing and a substantial reduction in the number of working-age adults (Table).

Fertility decline and skewed sex ratios

The aim of the one-child policy was to slow population growth in order to promote economic development following the reforms launched in 1978. In the years that followed, with the liberalization of education and health systems, couples were increasingly faced with a trade-off between the desire for children and the ever-growing cost of raising a family.

Against this backdrop, the decline in fertility and the growing availability of prenatal ultrasound scans from the late 1980s led to a massive increase in sex-selective abortions, intended to eliminate female fetuses within a sociocultural context of son preference. The proportion of male births started increasing sharply as a result. The

sex ratio at birth is normally around 105 boys per 100 girls, and in 1981 it was still 107.2 in China. It then started to rise, peaking at 120.6 in 2008 before slowly falling to 113.5 boys per 100 girls in 2015. This skewed sex ratio at birth was reinforced by excess female infant mortality since the 1980s (the infant mortality rate was 25‰ for boys and 29‰ for girls in 1990, and 13‰ and 14‰ in 2009), and is now affecting the adult population as the cohorts with a deficit of girls advance in age. The social consequences of this phenomenon, combined with those of population ageing, are a major concern for the Chinese authorities, and this explains why the one-child policy has recently been abandoned.

New “two-child policy”

The one-child policy adopted in 1979 was always intended to be temporary. However, it was not until 2012 (the year in which the 2010 census results were published) that the previously inflexible line of the Chinese authorities finally began to change. The political ambition to “stabilize fertility at a low level” gave way to a new objective of “perfecting population policy to promote

Table. Indicators of ageing in China, 1970, 2010 and 2050

	1970	2010	2050 (median scenario)
Total population (millions)			
0-14	328.9	240.0	182.1
15-59	430.3	915.2	674.4
60 +	49.3	177.6	491.5
Total	808.0	1 333.0	1 348.0
Age distribution (%)			
Under 15	40.7	16.6	13.5
15-59	53.2	70.1	50.0
60 +	6.1	13.3	36.5
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
Median age (years)			
	19.2	35.2	49.6
Sources: 2010, Chinese census; 1970 and 2050, United Nations Population Division.			

balanced population growth over the long term”.[1] By the end of 2013, the one-child policy was relaxed by a provision authorizing urban couples where at least one spouse is an only child to have two children. Up to then, only couples where both spouses were only children had the right to a second child. This measure was gradually extended to all provinces during the first half of 2014 [2], bringing the number of couples eligible for a second child up to around 11 million.

Two years later, in October 2015, the Chinese authorities announced the end of the one-child policy. Under the new policy, introduced in the hope of slowing ageing and restoring a balanced sex ratio, each couple is allowed two children. They must still obtain prior authorization from family planning offices, however. The adoption of the two-child policy has raised the number of eligible couples (i.e. those with one child) to around 90 million. In addition, the revision in early 2016 of the 2002 law on population and birth control has removed two major barriers to a fertility recovery by abandoning two pillars of the Chinese birth control system since the 1970s, namely the promotion of late marriage and childbearing, and compulsory contraception.

Will birth rates start rising again?

The end of the one-child policy is too recent to measure its effects on fertility. However, available statistics, while incomplete, suggest that the easing of the rule in 2013 did not reverse the trend: by the end of 2014, of the 11 million or so eligible couples, only slightly more than a million had applied to have a second child; by September 2015, a month before the one-child policy was abandoned, the number was still only 1.8 million, around 16% of eligible couples.

This result is below the level predicted by two surveys

conducted by the National Bureau of Statistics (in 2014) and the National Health and Family Planning Commission (in 2015), in which respectively 43% and 39% of couples concerned by the 2013 easing of rules reported planning to have a second – now authorized – child. Moreover, the enthusiasm shown in the months following the adoption of the measure in late 2013 rapidly died down: some 150,000 applications for permission to have a second child were submitted in July 2014, and a similar number in August, but one year later, the number had fallen to just 80-90,000 each month.

In 2014, China registered 16.9 million births (470,000 more than in 2013), but in 2015 the number fell to 16.6 million (320,000 fewer than in 2014, due partly to a drop of 5 million between 2014 and 2015 in the number of women of reproductive age, and to a long-term trend of increasing age at marriage). According to the National Health and Family Planning Commission, 800,000 additional children were born in 2015 as a result of the new two-child policy – a figure well below the 2 million or more annual births that were forecast after the law was relaxed in late 2013. In Shanghai, the city where population ageing is the most advanced in China but where, from 2009, couples where both partners were only children were actively encouraged to have a second child, fertility is still exceptionally low (0.7 children per woman in 2014). Based on the scant data available, the easing of the birth control policy appears in the short term to have had a negligible impact on births.

Low fertility paradox

In Japan and South Korea, the exceptionally low fertility (1.4 and 1.2 children per woman, respectively, in 2013) is the result of a paradox: continued gender inequality within the family, in parallel with a gradual shift towards greater gender equality in the public sphere. This incompatibility between career and family discourages couples from having children.[3] A similar situation is emerging in China, where women have become more independent since the 1950s, and now have more control over their personal and professional life choices. The period of Communist economic policy encouraged women to enter the workforce, but did not eradicate gender stereotypes. The roles of the husband as the family breadwinner, and the wife as a mother and homemaker remain strongly ingrained, not only in conjugal practices, but also in the partners’ mutual expectations.

Yet the still highly valued image of motherhood was not sufficient to produce an upturn in births after 2013. This situation is especially puzzling given that the share of female city-dwellers in paid employment has decreased significantly, from 76% in 1990 to 61% in 2010. It is only in rural areas (where more than eight in ten women have

a job) that female employment, a major priority of Mao's government, has withstood the structural reforms of the labour market. In the cities, women's unemployment rate is twice that of men, and they are often discriminated against (lower wages for equivalent jobs, unfair dismissal after maternity leave, recruitment discrimination, forced early retirement).[4] Inadequate protection on the labour market and the lack of state support for childcare make it increasingly difficult and costly for women to reconcile work and family life. Couples are obliged to make choices, and this often results in delayed parenthood or, in some cases, permanent childlessness.

Priorities that favour small families

The drop in fertility since the 1970s has had a considerable impact on children's lives too. The various components of family transmission, both material and symbolic, are now concentrated on a few children; they are subject to higher expectations, are listened to more and enjoy more focused attention and care. Rising living standards and the development of consumer society have led to greater investment in the child. But since the 1980s, when schooling and healthcare stopped being free, Chinese parents have had to make major financial sacrifices for their children. This continually rising expenditure cuts into family budgets: school fees (+12% annually on average from 1995 to 2007), housing (+16%) and healthcare (+15%) have risen faster than wages (+9% annually on average over the same period) [5].

Sharp rises in the cost of living and greater insecurity in the labour market (particularly for women) are disincentives for couples eligible for a second child to have one. Having children is no longer the priority it once was in China: young couples want to decide for themselves when to start a family and increasingly put their careers first and have children later. In the five years from 2005 to 2010, the average age of first-time Chinese mothers rose two years, from 24.6 to 26.6 [1], and couples' preferences are for smaller families. A 2001 survey showed that 35% of women between 20 and 49 only wanted one child and 57% wanted two. In Shanghai in 2008, the mean number of children desired was 1.07 [6]. Possible pro-natalist measures

Most Chinese demographers agree that the new "two-child policy" will not ensure a sufficient increase in fertility to significantly affect demographic ageing and

the fall in the active population. One way of inciting Chinese couples to have larger families would be to make it easier to have as many children as they wish, by supporting a better work-life balance and reducing the impact of economic conditions on the decision to have a child. Any sustained upturn in fertility will require at the very least protecting women's position in the labour market and providing more help for families to care for their dependants, whether children or old people.

References

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Abstract

New Chinese policy currently allows couples to have two children. It was introduced in the hope that it would slow population ageing and reduce the skewed sex ratio at birth. It is too soon for its effects on fertility to be measured. But the sharply higher cost of living and insecurity in the labour market, especially for women, are disincentives for most eligible couples to have a second child.