

Population Policy and Situation in China

A Note

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Chinese population policy has had two major programmes to control births; the later-longer-fewer campaign launched in the early 1970s and the one-child family campaign introduced in 1979. The immediate demographic results of these campaigns have been undoubtedly impressive, surpassing the achievements of even Japan in terms of fertility reduction.

Even so, it is unlikely that the goal of limiting the country's population to 1.2 billion in the year 2000 set by the Chinese government will be achieved. Opposition to the one-child family programme has been widespread, especially since the introduction of the 'responsibility-system' changing the unit of economic management from the production team to the family. The one-child family norm has also been found to clash with traditional Chinese social and cultural beliefs and practices.

The author concludes by asking whether, by seeking to drastically restrict child-bearing, the Chinese government may not be undermining its ability to foster the kind of development that it now believes to be crucial for achieving the four modernisations.

THE Chinese population was estimated to be 410 million in 1840. By 1949, when the People's Republic of China was founded, the population had grown to 540 million, showing an annual net increase of 1.19 million, or an average annual growth rate of only 0.25 per cent. High birth rate accompanied by high death rate accounted for the low growth rate of population during this pre-liberation period.

After the establishment of the People's Republic, the country's population situation showed a dramatic change. The death rate which was well above 20 per thousand (28 per thousand in 1936) dropped to 10-18 per thousand in the 1950s and then came down further to a little over 7 per thousand by 1970. This change was brought about by improvement in sanitation, public health, medical care and consequent elimination of several infectious diseases.

An even more marked change was noticed in infant mortality. The infant mortality rate (IMR), which was well over 200 per 1,000 births during the pre-liberation period, came down to 70.9 by 1957. In 1970 the urban IMR was 11 to 13 and in the rural areas it was around 30.

The birth rate continued to be high and till 1970 it was above 33 per thousand. This high birth rate coupled with the low death rate resulted in rapidly growing population. In the six years between 1966 and 1971, the population of China increased by 120 million, a figure close to that of the growth during 1840 to 1949, a period of 109 years.

During the early years of the People's Republic from 1949 to 1952, a period considered to be one of economic restoration, the rise in the natural growth of population was regarded as an indication of prosperity and improvement in the standard of life of the people under socialism. During this period neither abortion nor sterilisation was permitted.

Unchecked population growth and its effects on planned economic development attracted the attention of leaders and scholars and that influenced the change in Chinese population policy. In August 1953 the Government Administration Council approved "regulation of contraception and induced abortion". However, at this time neither was any definite family planning programme formulated, nor was there any education of the people for planning and limitation of births.

Family Planning Policy

A specific family planning policy was formulated in the early 1960s. In 1962 the Central Committee of the Com-

munist Party of China and the State Council stipulated the 'Instructions on Conscientious Advocacy of Family Planning'. These advocated controlling of births. Family planning projects were undertaken in cities. Production and distribution of contraceptives was systematically planned. The urban birth rate showed a definite decline as a result. However, preoccupation with the Cultural Revolution in 1966 halted all other work, including that of family planning, thus resulting in the earlier mentioned rapid growth in population during 1966-71.

In the early 1970s a vigorous family planning movement was launched which had the motto "later, longer and fewer". The programme advocated later marriage, longer spacing between births and fewer children. The age at marriage was meant to be 25 for men and 23 for women in rural areas and 26 for men and 24 for women in urban areas—a five-year postponement from the 20 for men and 18 for women stipulated under the Marriage Law of the early 1950s. A spacing of at least four years between births was expected. And finally the expected number of children per couple was two.

In 1978 family planning work in China entered a new stage and in 1979 the "one couple, one child" policy was put forth. The new Constitution stipulated "the control of population quantity, the improvement of population quality, and the mutual adaptation of population and socio-economic development". In keeping with this objective it was officially announced that "the State promotes family planning so that population growth may adapt to the plans for economic and social development... Both husband and wife are obliged to practice family planning... Late marriage, and late childbirth should be encouraged". Simultaneously, close kin and persons with congenital and genetic diseases were prohibited from marriage.

China now has a goal of keeping the average rate of population growth to 1.2 million per annum till 2000 AD. It has a policy that advocates one child per couple, strict control of second births and resolute prevention of third births. Strict action is expected against families not following this policy.

Impressive Results

Demographers point out that the achievements of the family planning programme of China are incomparable.

Upto 1970 Chinese women bore an average six children; by 1980 this number had dropped to 2.2. In 1981 and 1982 Chinese fertility showed a minor increase, but in 1984 the number of births per woman was 2. It is expected that Chinese fertility will show a further decline in the future. The previous world record holder in fertility decline, Japan, had shown a reduction of 'only' 56 per cent during a comparable period and the number of births per woman in Japan had come down from 4.5 in 1947 to 2 in 1957.

From the discussion so far it is seen that the Chinese population policy has had two large-scale programmes to control births, the later-longer-fewer campaign introduced in the early 1970s and the one-child campaign introduced in 1979. Obstacles to the implementation of the one-child family programme include the agricultural responsibility system which strengthened the motivation for large families by shifting responsibility for production from the collective to the household. Chinese culture also advocated "more sons, more blessings" and the Marriage Law of 1980 in effect lowered the age at marriage. Facing public resistance, in early 1984 the Party Central Committee reviewed its stand on fertility control and on 13th April issued a Central Document.

The Central Document reaffirmed the critical importance of family planning and re-emphasised the need to promote the one-child family in order to achieve the four modernisations, quadruple industrial and agricultural output, raise per capita income to \$ 800, and hold the population at 1.2 billion by end of the century.

The immediate demographic results of the later-longer-fewer and the one-child campaigns are most readily measured by the recent rapid reduction in fertility. Bongaarts and Greenhalgh have analysed the effects of the two policies on the Chinese population. They state that as a result of the socio-economic development during the post-revolution period, the fertility of the Chinese population would have undoubtedly declined, though at a much lower rate than the observed one. These authors observed that replacement fertility (family size of two children) would have been achieved at the beginning of 21st century, instead of in the early 1980s as actually observed because of government efforts to reduce fertility.

Bongaarts and Greenhalgh estimated that without the later-longer-fewer campaign of the 1970s, the Chinese population would have grown from 0.818 billion in 1970 to 1.58 billion in 2000 and 2.41 billion in 2050. In contrast, the later-longer-fewer policy, by itself, would bring about a population size of 1.28 billion in 2000 and 1.81 billion in the year 2050.

Thus the implementation of the later-longer-fewer policy still leaves an eventual population size well in excess of 1.2 billion in the year 2000—the goal stipulated by the Chinese leadership. The one-child campaign is expected to solve this problem. A completely successful implementation of this policy would virtually stop growth of population. The population would reach 1.04 billion in 2000, 1.06 billion in 2025, and then fall to 917 million in 2050.

Opposition to One-Child Family Norm

Experience for the five-year period from 1980 to 1984, the period after launching of the one-child family policy, shows that in reality the population size is higher than expected. It was observed that the average number of children per

woman was 2.3 and not 1. This difference was in part an effect of a change in the timing of first births that resulted from the enactment of the new Marriage Law of 1980. Though the law had raised the legal age of marriage as fixed by the Marriage Law of the early 1950s, from 18 to 20 for girls and from 20 to 22 for boys, in effect the new legal age of marriage was lower than that stipulated under the later-longer-fewer campaign. Thus the passing of the law has lowered the age of marriage in reality.

Another problem in implementation of the policy of the one-child family has been the decentralisation of the administrative responsibility for enforcing it. Individual localities are responsible for propagating and implementing the regulations. Top-down pressures for stricter enforcement combined with bottom-up demands for more children have resulted in several lacunae in the implementation of the policy. Another problem in the implementation of the policy is related to the economic incentives, such as wage supplements and priority in housing, schooling, medical care, etc. These costs are expected to be borne by the local authorities. Where the local authorities are rich, many couples sign up and as a result eat into the local funds.

Another difficulty has been that local cadres have many incentives to manipulate figures to match the officially prescribed quota whereas the higher level cadres have few incentives to uncover these errors. As a result, the data deficiencies created at the bottom of the administrative hierarchy are passed upwards, multiplying as they go up.

Also, official policies pronounced over time have had conflicting effects. The responsibility system introduced in 1980-82 shifted the unit of management and accounting from the production team (a unit of 20 to 30 households) to the family. This system also reduced the common funds of teams and increased the private wealth of families. The economic value of children has been increased and there is a strong motivation for larger families. Encouragement to small-scale enterprises and sideline activities has also motivated larger families. In the light of improved prosperity, the incentives for the one-child family have become ineffective.

In the light of the experience so far, UN estimates suggest that on an average the Chinese family is more likely to have 1.9 children by 1990-95 instead of the officially prescribed 1. The Chinese population, according to UN projections, is therefore estimated to be 1.23 billion by 2000 and 1.43 billion by 2025. These figures are higher than the target of 1.2 billion for 2000. Further, the Chinese population is expected to continue to grow after 2025, against the government's goal of a decline to 917 million by 2050.

Social and Cultural Consequences

Sociologists predict many detrimental effects of the one-child policy in terms of its effects on intra-familial relations, gender inequality and the psychological characteristics of only children. They also opine that by fundamentally altering the basic social and economic unit, the one-child policy may tear the fabric of Chinese society in a way that uproots people's sense of their place in the world and the family's ability to take care of the old. These problems have already begun to emerge and are likely to grow more severe if the one-child policy is successfully implemented.

In the accepted system the unit of family is concerned with short-term tasks of production and consumption and the line

is concerned with long-term matters of inheritance, succession and inter-generational continuity. An individual's place in the descent line gives him a sense of immortality and meaning to his existence. Among the basic duties of an individual to his family is to produce a son for the continuance of the family line. Since the sex-ratio at birth is around 105 boys to 100 girls, the one-child family policy will leave almost half the couples without a son and prevent the men from performing their duties to their ancestors, thereby uprooting their sense of the continuity and purpose of life. The resistance of the Chinese population to the one-child family is noticeable everywhere. Cases of female infanticide and physical abuse of mothers who give birth to daughters have also been widely reported.

The Chinese Constitution makes its obligatory for daughters to support their parents. Acceptance of this change at the cultural level is obviously not easy. Even in families with sons, the benefits for only-children are provided by the State or the collective work unit, rather than the parents. Thus the work units supplant parents as providers and the earlier prevalent system of the mutual obligations of generations is disturbed. This change is bound to affect the old-age support which, under the traditional system, is provided by the family.

Since late 1978 China has moved to expand the role of the private sector, not only in agriculture but also in commerce, services and industry. Since the family has proved to be the

most effective production unit in such a set-up, the one-child family policy will work against the success of the role of the private sector. A family with one son is too small to be efficient and that with one daughter will face restrictions on vertical extension:

In short, by drastically restricting child-bearing, China may be limiting its productive capacity and undermining its ability to foster the kind of development that it now believes is crucial for achieving the four modernisations.

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