Population
AND ITS DISCONTENTS

One of 12 features in this special issue

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The Chinese population-control policy of one child per family is 25 years old this year. A generation has come of age under the plan, which is the official expression of the Chinese quest to achieve zero population growth. China’s adoption of the one-child policy has avoided some 300 million births during its tenure; without it, the Chinese population would currently be roughly 1.6 billion—the number at which the country hopes to stabilize its population around 2050. Many experts agree that it is also the maximum number that China’s resources and carrying capacity can support. Standing now at a pivotal anniversary of the strategy, China is asking itself, Where to from here?

China’s struggle with population has long been linked to the politics of national survival. China scholar Thomas Scharping has written that contradictory threads of historical consciousness have struggled to mold Chinese attitudes toward population issues. China possesses a “deeply ingrained notion of dynastic cycles” that casts large populations as “a symbol of prosperity, power, and the ability to cope with outside threat.” At the same time, though, “historical memory has also interpreted a large population as an omen of approaching crisis and downfall.” It was not until economic and development issues re-emerged as priorities in post-Mao Zedong’s China that the impetus toward the one-child policy began to build rapidly. During Mao’s rule population control was often seen as inhibiting the potential of a large population, but in the years following his death it became apparent that China’s population presented itself as more of a liability than an asset. Policymakers eager to reverse the country’s backwardness saw population control as necessary to ensure improved economic performance. (In 1982, China’s per-capita GDP stood at US$218, according to the World Bank. The U.S. per-capita GDP, by way of comparison, was about $14,000.)

The campaign bore fruit when Mao’s successor, Hua Guofeng, along with the State Council, including senior leaders such as Deng Xiaoping, decided on demographic targets that would curb the nation’s high fertility rates. In 1979 the government announced that population growth must be lowered to a rate of natural increase of 0.5 percent per year by 1985. In fact, it took almost 20 years to reach a rate of 1 percent per year. (The overestimating was in part due to the lack of appropriate census data in 1979; it had been 15 years since the last population count and even then the numbers provided only a crude overview of the country’s demography.) Nevertheless the Chinese government knew that promoting birth-planning policies was the only way to manifest their dedication and responsibility for future generations. In 1982 a new census was taken, allowing for more detailed planning. The government then affirmed the target of 1.2 billion Chinese for the year 2000. Demographers, however, were skeptical, predicting a resurgence in fertility levels at the turn of the century.

The promotion of such ambitious population plans went hand in hand with the need for modernization. Though vast and rich in resources, China’s quantitative advantages shrink when viewed from the per-capita perspective, and the heavy burden placed on its resources by China’s sheer numbers dictates that population planning remain high on the national agenda. The government has also stressed the correlation between population control and the improved health and education of its citizens, as well as the ability to feed and employ them. In September 2003, the Chinese magazine Qiushi noted that “since population has always been at the core of sustainable development, it is precisely the growth of population and its demands that have led to the depletion of resources and the degradation of the environment. The reduction in birth rate, the changes in the population age structure, especially the improvement in the quality of the population, can effectively control...
and relieve the pressure on our nation’s environment and resources and strengthen our nation’s capability to sustain development.”

**The Reach of the One-Child Policy**

Despite the sense of urgency, the implementation of such a large-scale family planning program proved difficult to control, especially as directives and regulations were passed on to lower levels. In 1981, the State Council’s Leading Group for Birth Planning was transformed into the State Population and Family Planning Commission. This allowed for the establishment of organizational arrangements to help turn the one-child campaign into a professional state family planning mechanism. Birth-planning bureaus were set up in all counties to manage the directives handed down from the central government.

Documentation on how the policy was implemented and received by the population varies from area to area. There are accounts of heavy sanctions for non-compliance, including the doubling of health insurance and long-term income deductions as well as forced abortions and sterilizations. Peasant families offered the most significant opposition; rural families with only one daughter often insisted that they be given the right to have a second child, in hopes of producing a son. On the other hand, in some regions married couples submitted written commitments to the birth-planning bureaus stating they would respect the one-child policy. Despite this variation, it is commonly accepted that preferential treatment in public services (education, health, and housing) was normally given to one-child families. Parents abiding by the one-child policy often obtained monthly bonuses, usually paid until the child reached the age of 14.

Especially in urban areas it has become commonplace for couples to willingly limit themselves to one child. Cities like Shanghai have recently eased the restrictions so that divorcees who remarry may have a second child, but there, as well as in Beijing and elsewhere, a second child is considered a luxury for many middle-class couples. In addition to the cost of food and clothing, educational expenses weigh heavily: As in many other countries, parents’ desire to boost their children’s odds of entering the top universities dictates the best available education from the beginning—and that is not cheap. The end of free schooling in China—another recent landmark—may prove to be an even more effective tool for restricting population growth than any family planning policy. Interestingly, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* has reported that Chinese students who manage to obtain a university education abroad often marry foreigners and end up having more than one child; when they return to China with a foreign spouse and passport they are exempt from the one-child policy.

There are other exceptions as well—it is rumored that couples in which both members are only children will be permitted to have two children of their own, for instance—and it is clear that during the policy’s existence it has not been applied even-handedly to all. Chinese national minorities have consistently been subject to less restrictive birth planning. There also appears to have been a greater concentration of family planning efforts in urban centers than in rural areas. By early 1980, policy demanded that 95 percent of urban women and 90 percent of rural women be allowed only one child. In the December 1982 revision of the Chinese constitution, the commitment to population control was strengthened by including birth planning among citizens’ responsibilities as well as among the tasks of lower level civil administrators. It is a common belief among many Chinese scholars who support the one-child policy that if population is not effectively controlled the pressures it imposes on the environment will not be relieved even if the economy grows.

**More Services, Fewer Sanctions**

Over time, Chinese population policy appears to have evolved toward a more service-based approach consistent with the consensus developed at the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo. According to Ru Xiao-mei of the State Population and Family Planning Commission, “We are no longer preaching population control. Instead, we are emphasizing quality of care and better meeting the needs of clients.” Family planning clinics across the country are giving women and men wider access to contraceptive methods, including condoms and birth-control pills, thereby going beyond the more traditional use of intrauterine devices and/or sterilization after the birth of the first child. The Commission is also banking on the improved use of counseling to help keep fertility rates down.

Within China, one of the most prevalent criticisms of the one-child policy has been its implications for social security, particularly old-age support. One leading scholar envisions a scenario in which one grandchild must support two parents and four grandparents (the 4–2–1 constellation). This development is a grave concern for Chinese policymakers (as in other countries where aging populations stand to place a heavy burden on social security infrastructures as well as the generations now working to support them).

A related concern, especially in rural China where there is a lack of appropriate pension systems and among families whose only child is a daughter, is that it is sons who have traditionally supported parents in old age. The one-child policy and the preference for sons has also widened the ratio of males to females, raising
alarms as the first children born into the one-child generation approach marriage age. The disparity is aggravated by modern ultrasound technology, which enables couples to abort female fetuses in hopes that the next pregnancy produces a son; although this practice is illegal, it remains in use. The 2000 census put the sex ratio at 117 boys to 100 girls, and according to The Guardian newspaper, China may have as many as 40 million single men by 2020. (There are several countries where the disparity is even greater. The UN Population Fund reports that countries such as Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and United Arab Emirates have male-to-female ratios ranging between 116:100 and 186:100.)

A Younger Generation: Adapting Tradition

However, the traditional Chinese preference for sons may be on the decline. Dr. Zhang Rong Zhou of the Shanghai Population Information Center has argued that the preference for boys is weakening among the younger generation, in Shanghai at least, in part because girls cost less and are easier to raise. The sex ratio in Shanghai accordingly stands at 105 boys to every 100 girls, which is the international average. Shanghai has distinguished itself over the past 25 years as one of the first urban centers to adopt the one-child policy, and it promises to be a pioneer in gradually relaxing the restrictions in the years to come. Shanghai was the first region in China to have negative fertility growth; 2000 census data indicated that the rate of natural increase was −0.9 per 1,000.

A major concern remains that as the birth rate drops a smaller pool of young workers will be left to support a large population of retirees. Shanghai’s decision to allow divorced Chinese who remarry to have a second child is taking advantage of the central government’s policy, which lets local governments decide how to apply the one-child rule. Although Shanghai has devoted much effort to implementing the one-child policy over the past 25 years, the city is now allowing qualifying couples to explore the luxury of having a second child. This is a response to rising incomes (GDP has grown about 7 percent per year over the past 20 years) and divorce rates. As noted above, however, many couples, although often better off then their parents, remain hesitant to have more than one child because of the expense.

The first generation of only children in China is approaching parenthood accustomed to a level of economic wealth and spending power—and thus often to lifestyles—that previous generations could not even have imagined. However, China also faces a rapidly aging population. In the larger scheme of things, this may be the true test of the government’s ability to provide for its citizens. The fate of China’s family planning strategy—in a context in which social security is no longer provided by family members alone but by a network of government and/or private services—may be decided by the tension between the cost of children and the cost of the elderly. There seems little doubt, however, that family planning will be a key element of Chinese policymaking for many years to come.

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