

Population Policy of China

Since 1949, Chinese population policy has attracted attention both because its growth has been so large, and because of the controversial One Child Policy. With a population of 1.3 billion, China adds 8 million every year. Since 1979 the government has limited a family to only one child. The government takes harsh measures because of the strain on food and housing, and to protect the environment.

In fact China is not the greatest contributor to world population increase. That dubious honour belongs to India with just more than one billion people. Each year 15 million more Indians are born than die. The difference is due both to the birth rate and the number of women of child bearing age. China has 16 births per thousand, while India has 25 births per thousand. Because China has more women of child bearing age, the difference in the annual rate of growth is not so great. The total fertility rate is 1.8 for Chinese and 3.1 for Indians, meaning that China is well below the replacement level of 2.1 and India is far above it.

The population of China in 1945 at the end of War against Japanese Aggression is not known accurately. The Nationalist government estimated 475 million. Some believed it was as low as 350 million, an actual reduction due to war and famine. In ancient times from the Han dynasty to the Song dynasty it fluctuated in the range of 40-50 million. The period from 1751 to 1851 was one of dramatic growth from 207 million to 417 million, about 1 percent a year. Writing in 1798 (the same year as Thomas Malthus), Hong Liangzhi railed against the dangers of over-population.

For thousands of years, the Confucian culture emphasized that strong families were the natural order. Children and wives were to obey the husband. The eldest son was to inherit the property, which was held in common, and the younger sons were to obey him. Upon marriage, the bride would move to the husband's household, where she would obey her mother-in-law. Her chief function was to produce a son and heir. Daughters were held in low esteem, because they were expensive to raise, and after marriage would no longer contribute to the family. Matchmakers arranged the marriages. Men often took second and third wives, and child brides were common. The individual families were integrated into the clan, which in turn were supposed to be subject to the emperor. This rigid system loosened after the 1911 Revolution overthrew the emperor and established the Republic. Western ideas penetrated, factories gave employment, young men and women moved to cities, and education improved. Legislation gave women a share of the family property. Moreover, among the poorest peasants, the lack of land undercut the economic basis of the family. During the World War II, the government was eager for women to work in industry so men could serve in the army.

As soon as the war against Japan ended in 1945, the Communists under Mao Zedong resumed their civil war against the Nationalist army of Chang Kai Sheik, achieving victory in 1949. The next year they enacted a new Marriage Law stating in its first article: The feudal system, based on arbitrary and compulsory arrangements and the supremacy of man over woman, and in disregard for the interests of the children, is abolished. The man and woman were to choose each other, not a matchmaker. Women had equal rights. The marriage ceremony, which was registered by the government, was to take place in front of a portrait of

Mao Zedong. The government encouraged later marriages, recommending age 23-25 for women and 25-28 for men.

At the time he came to power in 1949, Mao Zedong favoured a large population. The Communists had needed manpower for their army, and feared a counter attack by the Nationalists. The whole country had just expelled the Japanese after a decade of warfare. In the year right after the war, the country had suffered a severe famine, with millions dying. Mao rejected the idea that the cause was too many people. He wrote that:

It is a good thing that China has a large population. Even if China's population multiplies many times, she is fully capable of finding a solution: the solution is production. The absurd argument of western bourgeois economists, like Malthus, that increase of population cannot keep pace with increase in production was not only thoroughly refuted in theory by Marxists long ago, but has also been completely exploded by the realities in the Soviet Union and the Liberated areas of China after their revolutions.

This policy shifted in 1955 when the Communist Party announced that reproduction be appropriately restricted. The purposes were to improve maternal health and provide for education. The effort was modest due to a squeamishness of the party cadres to discuss sexual behaviour, and a lack of contraceptives. As the Communists consolidated power, however, population control seemed a more appropriate function of the government. More than a million people were resettled in Mongolia and the northern and western frontiers in order both to strengthen their defence against the Soviet Union and to relieve crowding in the east. The growth of the cities seemed to be getting out of control. In three years, 840,000 people moved into Shanghai. Food had been short when the 1952 harvest was poor. In 1957 Mao Zedong announced a ten year program for family planning. Almost at once, the policy got lost with Mao's Great Leap Forward, a scheme for instant industrialization. Rural communes were supposed to improve farming. According to official doctrine, agricultural and industrial productivity would solve the problem of poverty. At the same time, China felt threatened militarily. The Soviets withdrew their friendship and ended economic aid. Tibet began an armed revolt, border warfare began with India, and the Nationalists seemed to threaten an invasion. The Chinese leaders feared that the United States and the Soviet Union would begin a suicidal nuclear war. A larger population seemed to offer at least some protection.

By 1963 the birth control program was back on track. The Great Leap Forward proved a great disaster, an estimated 30 million died, and the military threats passed. Food was scarce, and deaths exceeded births in at least one year. From 1966 to 1969 China suffered another convulsion of Communist direction with its Cultural Revolution. Mao Zedong suddenly decided that the country had lost its Marxist zeal, and had fallen into bourgeois error. His remedy was to order professional cadres from the cities to move to rural areas where they could be redacted. Millions were sent to the countryside. Part of the rejection of urban expertise was to create thousands of barefoot doctors, who were supposed to care for the medical ailments with few professional qualifications. While overall the Cultural Revolution was another disaster, it did expose the experts to the poverty and backwardness of the countryside. Moreover the barefoot doctors were ideal for the low level medical functions of running a birth control program.

China's return to normalcy after the Cultural Revolution saw renewed concern about population size. It no longer seemed so vulnerable militarily, and its growth rate was an astounding 22 percent a year. The Fourth Five Year Plan called for an urban growth rate of 1

percent by 1975. The Fifth Five Year Plan continued the 1 percent rate, and projected a reduction to 2 of one percent by 1985, and a zero rate by the end of the century. The methods were to be delayed marriages, greater space between children, and fewer children overall. Its slogan was one is good, two is all right and three is too many. Contraceptives were now to be distributed free, and women could get free hospital care for abortions, IUD insertions, and sterilizations. Propaganda attacked the Confucian beliefs about fertility, including the preference for sons.

By the end of the 1970s, the policy was working. The birth rate had declined from 34 per thousand to 18 per thousand. But this was not enough. Because of the baby boom of the 1950s, more young women were of child bearing age. The total numbers were going up sharply. The only solution was one child families. This required both positive and negative incentives. First, a couple who wanted to have a child needed to get permission. The rewards for complying were a monthly subsidy, priority in housing, free medical care, maternity leave, exemption from tuition and additional vacation. Those who did not register their marriages, or had a baby without permission, or had too many babies did not get these benefits and had to pay a fine.

The One Child Policy was unpopular, particularly in rural areas. Parents wanted more than one, and they especially wanted sons. For a peasant, a son has a duty to care for his old parents, whereas a daughter does not. One consequence of the One Child Policy was, of course, abortion, but when that did not occur, another option was to kill the unwanted babies. A second or third child might be smothered at birth or drowned in a pond. In cities, obstetricians would give the mother an injection with would cause a stillbirth. Hospitals were penalized if unauthorized babies were born. Because of the desire to have sons, parents might kill their baby daughters. This is, however, against the official government policy. Because the government will make an exception and permit a second birth when the first child is deformed, some parents maim their daughters. The only child, the product of this policy, ended up smothered in attention from by their parents and grandparents. If he were a boy, he gained the nickname of the Little Emperor. More sympathetic observers concluded these only children were not brats, but were thriving from the love of their families. Another consequence of aborting female foetuses is a shortage of women for marriage. The sex ratio is 113 males to 100 females.

In recent years, the government has eased its program slightly in response to domestic and foreign opposition. A few localities have permitted a second child, but this does not have the sanction of the Beijing regime. Because parents have tested the sex of their foetuses in the uterus with ultrasound or chromosome tests in order to assure a boy, the practice has been made illegal. Ethnic minorities, like the Tibetans and the Uighurs, who comprise 8 percent of the population, are supposed to be exempt from the limits on the numbers of children, but in fact, the government demands that they use IUDs and abortions. In answer to foreign criticism, the government has soft peddled its programs, denying that quotas are rigid or that women are forced to abort or be sterilized. Few critics accept these protestations. The Tenth Five Year Plan, which was forced to revise the population projection to 1.3 billion, reiterates the One Child Policy.

In November 2013, China announced reforms to its family planning policies whereby couples would be allowed to have a second child if either parent is an only child. The announcement garnered worldwide media coverage, and stimulated academic and popular discussion.