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5

The Population Factor: China's Family Planning Policy in the 1990s

Tyrene White

In 1980 China's leaders announced two economic goals for the year 2000: quadrupling the 1980 gross value of output and achieving a per capita gross national product of US\$1,000. To achieve those goals, the leadership took its first steps toward implementing a major economic reform program, steps that quickly began to stimulate economic growth. In some countries, the institution of a new set of economic policies and structures might have been enough to ensure the achievement of the long-term goals for the year 2000. In China, however, the leadership believed that economic growth was only half of the equation. The other half was a huge population that had already grown to 1 billion and threatened to grow to 1.4 billion or more by the year 2000. Achieving long-term economic goals, particularly per capita goals, meant finding a way to control the denominator (population base) as well as the numerator (gross economic indicators). With that in mind, the leadership set a specific population goal for the year 2000—to hold the total population within 1.2 billion. To achieve that goal, they called on all couples of childbearing age to have only one child, granting exceptions only for minority nationalities and a few narrowly defined categories of Han nationality couples.

A decade later, the blunt policy of 1980 had become more complex, with different localities and regions implementing their own policies. Generally speaking, however, the state continued to limit almost all urban couples to one child, while treating rural couples more leniently. By the late 1980s, rural couples with a single female child (*dunu hu*, or "single-daughter households") were allowed to have a second child after an interval of five years. Regardless of the sex of the second child, a third child was forbidden.

This "one-son-or-two-child" policy brought central policies into better alignment with rural realities, improving the climate for rural en-

forcement. Nevertheless, by the late 1980s higher-than-desired population growth rates had begun to cast strong doubt on China's ability to meet the population target of 1.2 billion by the year 2000, or even the more relaxed target of 1.25 billion that was adopted in the mid-1980s. In 1990 the fourth national census showed that the population had grown to 1.13 billion by July 1, and by the end of the year it reached 1.143 billion, exceeding the population target for the Seventh Five Year Plan period (1986–90) by 30 million. With another fertility peak coming in the early 1990s, experts predicted an annual average population increase of at least 16 million during the 1991–2000 period, a rate of growth that forced official recognition of what had become increasingly obvious: despite relentless efforts to enforce a strict birth limitation policy, China's population is very likely to exceed 1.3 billion by the year 2000 and grow to 1.6 billion by the middle of the 21st century.

This realization brought another round of urgent calls for strict control of population growth, demands that population targets for 1991 be met, and a flurry of family planning meetings to plot new strategies for reducing rural birth rates. These activities were reinforced by a new "Decision" on family planning, issued by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee and State Council in May 1991.¹ While stating that China's existing policy would not change, it stressed the need for strict implementation of that policy, particularly in the countryside. As a result, evidence of a new family planning propaganda campaign could be found in many towns and villages in the summer of 1991;² whether the campaign rhetoric could be translated into improved performance, however, remained an open question.

The Evolution of China's Birth Planning Policy

In 1949 the first and most basic task that confronted the CCP was to provide basic subsistence for more than 500 million people. At the time, Mao Zedong was confident that once the class exploitation, foreign imperialism, and bureaucratic corruption of previous regimes were eradicated, the new people's dictatorship could feed, clothe, educate, and gainfully employ China's growing population while simulta-

¹ "Decision of the CCP Central Committee State Council on Stepping Up Family Planning Work, Strictly Controlling Population Growth," Xinhua Domestic Service, June 12, 1991, in FBIS (Foreign Broadcast Information Service), *Daily Report, China*, June 20, 1991, pp. 33–36.

² Personal observations during June and July 1991. New banners and freshly painted signs were visible in towns and villages across Hebei, Shandong, and Hubei.

neously maintaining a high rate of investment in social and economic development. Over the next several years, however, some within the leadership came to believe that even rapid economic gains could be consumed, literally, by an expanding population base, and that comprehensive economic planning along Stalinist lines required a certain degree of predictability about population growth and population movement. With that in mind, in the early 1950s they began a modest program that sanctioned contraceptive use and provided contraceptive education. Eventually, however, they began to focus on comprehensive birth planning as the best approach to population issues.

Unlike the concept of family planning that gained currency in the West in the postwar era, birth planning (*jihua shengyu*) in China did not rest on the liberal premise that couples have the ability and right to exercise personal control over the number and spacing of their children. Instead, birth planning was viewed as part of the larger process of socialist economic planning. It was feared that unregulated population growth might endanger the successful fulfillment of annual and five-year economic plans. That threat could be stemmed by bringing population issues into the central planning process and regulating population growth in a predictable fashion.

Although individual leaders (most notably, Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping) embraced birth planning and population control from the start, the Malthusian overtones of any population-control policy made the idea extremely controversial.³ After the Great Leap Forward (1958–60), however, soaring birth rates and economic difficulties led Prime Minister Zhou Enlai to press hard for the incorporation of population targets into the planning process. Propelled by sample surveys that indicated population growth rates over 27 per thousand in 1962 and over 33 per thousand in 1963, it was decided that the rate of urban population growth should be brought under 20 per thousand by 1965, 15 per thousand by 1970, and 10 per thousand by 1975. During the third and fourth five-year plans (1966–70 and 1971–75), population growth rates were scheduled to continue their descent, with an average

³ One of the foremost advocates of population control, Ma Yinchu, was personally attacked by Mao Zedong and branded as a rightist in 1957. Despite Mao's behavior in this case, however, he did not reject birth planning. On the contrary, he was the first among China's senior leaders to embrace the idea; and despite the glorification of human labor power during the Great Leap Forward, he never repudiated the concept. What he rejected was the need to reduce population growth rates or the overall size of the population, not the notion of linking material planning with population planning. Mao's place in the evolution of the birth planning program is explored in more detail in the author's forthcoming book, *Against the Grain: The State-Peasant Struggle over Child-Bearing in Contemporary China*.

annual drop of one per thousand.⁴ And finally, in September 1965, Zhou Enlai set China's first long-range population goal: reducing population growth to ten per thousand by the end of the 20th century. This ambitious goal marked the first step toward including family planning in the state economic planning process and set the stage for more aggressive efforts to reduce fertility rates.⁵

The pursuit of these goals was disrupted by the first phase of the Cultural Revolution (1966–69), which brought all regular government functions to a standstill. By the early 1970s, however, the population question was back on the agenda and China's first serious and sustained birth limitation campaign got under way. In the radicalized political climate of the day, the health and welfare of women and children continued to serve as the public justification for family planning and birth control programs until after Mao's death in 1976. In practical terms, however, from 1970 onward the logic of centralized economic planning provided the rationale for population-control plans.

Placing birth control under the rubric of comprehensive economic planning meant a change in specific birth control measures and practices during the 1970s. First, the State Council called for the establishment of family planning offices (*jihua shengyu bangongshi*) within the public health bureaucracy at each level of government. Subsequently, leading groups for family planning were established in 1973, with subordinate staff offices to support their work. Unlike the specialized family planning offices, the leading groups were ad hoc committees composed of leading CCP and government cadres, usually deputy party secretaries and vice governors. In addition, they included representatives of every bureaucratic system involved in family planning work and of relevant organizations such as the Women's Federation and the Communist Youth League. Their function was to coordinate family planning work within their territorial jurisdiction and to guarantee that local officials would provide leadership to the effort. Finally, basic-level units—factories, enterprises, neighborhoods, rural people's communes, and production brigades—were required to create a "family planning work network" (*jihua shengyu gongzuo wang*). Most of the cadres who staffed this extensive system of offices lacked specific training in family planning work, and many had concurrent

⁴ Deng Lichun and Ma Hong, eds., *Dangdai zhongguode weisheng shiye* (Health work in contemporary China, volume 2) (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1986), p. 234; Fang Weizhong, ed., *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo jingji dashi (1949–1980)* (Compilation of major economic events of the People's Republic of China, 1949–1980) (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1984), pp. 347–48.

⁵ *Zhongguo gongchandang zhizheng sishinian* (Forty years of administration by the Chinese Communist Party) (Beijing: Zhonggong dangshi ziliao chubanshe, 1989), p. 264.

responsibilities for one or more additional government jobs. Nevertheless, this top-to-bottom system was a critical first step toward the promotion of universal birth planning.

The new family planning drive also benefited from Mao's emphasis on the development of basic health services in the rural areas. To rectify what Mao saw as the gross neglect of rural health care by the urban-oriented public health bureaucracy, beginning in the mid-1960s barefoot doctors with basic skills were trained and sent into rural villages, where they established clinics and provided basic health services. In addition, hospitals were built in the communes and staffed with medical personnel. This system was essential to the provision of door-to-door birth control supplies and medical services, but funds were scarce. To deal with that problem, beginning in August 1970 the government moved to subsidize the cost of family planning work by providing birth control supplies free of charge and offering reimbursement for the cost of medical procedures.

The combination of attention from the center and the development of local organizations made it possible to promote effectively the "late, sparse, and few" (*wan, xi, shao*) policy of the early and mid-1970s, which stressed late marriage and fewer, more widely spaced births. The policy originated in February 1972 at a national work conference held in Hebei province and attended by delegates from 17 provinces. With state approval, Hebei province developed the specific guidelines that were adopted by most localities in 1973 and 1974. They called for a delay in marriage until ages 27 and 25 for urban men and women, respectively, and ages 25 and 23 for rural men and women. After marriage, couples were urged to have only two children; Hebei does not appear to have discriminated between urban and rural couples on this issue. In some other provinces, however, couples in rural areas were permitted to have three children. Finally, births were to be spaced at least four years apart, and to ensure this, campaigns to promote birth control and sterilization were carried out during 1973 and 1974.

By 1975 the goal, structure, and content of China's birth control program had been firmly established. The goal was to gradually bring China's population growth rate down to 1 percent through annual, incremental reductions of one-tenth of 1 percent. The structure of the program paralleled that of China's state-planned economic sector, with the family planning organs of the public health bureaucracy responsible for national oversight and coordination, and with administrative regions (provinces, municipalities, counties) responsible for local performance. The focus of the program was to delay childbirth, reduce the average number of children per couple to two (perhaps

three in rural areas), and increase their spacing to at least four years apart. By 1980, however, a new leadership intent on raising standards of living and achieving modernization concluded that China could not afford the "luxury" of a two-child policy; with an estimated population of one billion and a fertility peak looming in the 1980s, only a one-child policy could break the demographic momentum that spelled disaster.

This "radicalization" of China's birth control program is sometimes attributed to reckless decisions made by the post-Mao leadership, decisions influenced by flawed demographic projections, a climate of population hysteria, and fears about economic performance. In fact, China's shift to a one-child policy is better understood as the product of the entrenched "planning" approach to population growth; if a two-child limit was insufficient to bring population growth down to 1 percent and achieve the desired economic goals by the year 2000, then there was no alternative to a one-child policy. In other words, the one-child limit was a radical means to achieve long-established goals.

Implementation of the One-Child Policy

When the one-child limit was first promoted in 1979, two basic methods were used to gain mass compliance. First and most important, the CCP relied on well-honed campaign methods of implementation, including: the use of mass propaganda in all available media; mobilization of all party cadres and activists to take the lead in pledging to have only one child; organization of medical teams to move into the countryside to carry out abortions, sterilizations, IUD insertions, and other medical procedures; and mobilization of the local population for study of the new policy, followed by its immediate implementation under heavy pressure from local officials (up to and including the use of coercion). Second, the party also offered political and economic rewards for compliance, including preferred housing, better jobs, longer maternity leaves, free medical care, and educational opportunities.

In the late 1970s and the early 1980s, these methods were effective in gaining compliance, since administrative controls over the population were tight and pervasive. In urban areas, couples of childbearing age were closely supervised in their workplaces or neighborhoods. Fertile women were monitored for pregnancy, and a permit system was established to determine who was allowed to have a child in a given year; those with unplanned pregnancies faced heavy fines, loss of their jobs and apartments, and political ostracism if they refused to

abort the pregnancy. In rural areas a similar permit system was established, identifying couples who were eligible to have a child in a given year. Women's leaders often made menstrual cycles a matter of public record, posting the names of all women of childbearing age and checking monthly to ensure that they did not become pregnant "outside the plan." Those who failed to comply could be compelled to attend study sessions daily without pay. Moreover, rural cadres, who controlled all aspects of the local economy, had the power to deny couples a means of livelihood.

As China's leaders began to implement more far-reaching reforms in the 1980s, however, campaign methods were increasingly at odds with other regime goals, making it difficult to rely solely on "shock drives" to enforce the one-child limit. In urban areas, campaigns were replaced by a permanent, institutionalized system of administrative control. Although many residents in overcrowded cities were willing to stop at one child, the administrative control system was a formidable deterrent to those who were less willing.

Rural Resistance

In the vast countryside, home to 800 million peasants (80 percent of China's population), it was a different story. Rural reforms introduced between 1980 and 1985 decollectivized agriculture, reintroduced private markets, and encouraged peasant entrepreneurship, changes that complicated family planning work in several respects.

First, the reforms stripped village cadres of much of their power over rural households; they no longer had the power to delegate collective work tasks or determine income levels. With income flowing more directly into peasant hands, their livelihood no longer depended entirely on the whims of village leaders. And as some households became more prosperous, they could no longer be threatened into compliance with the local birth plan; couples simply paid the steep fines for an "unplanned" child rather than forego the opportunity to have a second child, particularly if the first was a girl.⁶

Second, village cadres were often content to collect these fines. Some sympathized with the desire of their fellow villagers to have additional children, and others set negative examples by having "unplanned" children of their own. Still others had a different motive for collecting fines rather than enforcing birth limits—fear of retaliation.

⁶ According to one former township-level family planning cadre, couples who had an "illegal" son took pride in paying the fine, and cadres would ceremoniously accept it. Cadres felt sorry for those who had a daughter, however, and would not attempt to collect a fine. Interview file, July 1990.

In some villages, peasants exacted their revenge against aggressive enforcers of the birth limit through vandalism, physical assault, and even murder.⁷

Third, along with the economic reforms came political changes; the number of rural cadres was reduced, and many localities stopped employing the "women's leaders" who had played a crucial role in disseminating birth control supplies and monitoring village women for unplanned pregnancies. This reduction in administrative personnel made it harder to enforce the policy, particularly since the remaining rural cadres were busy tilling their own fields or developing lucrative family sidelines.

Fourth, as peasants gained the right to peddle their goods in free markets, they also gained the right to travel beyond the borders of their local commune town. As peasant mobility increased, the task of controlling childbearing became far more complicated. Keeping tabs on this "floating population," which numbered 60 million by 1989, became a constant headache for family planning personnel. Some localities became notorious as "safe havens" for this "excess birth guerrilla corps," and their offspring swelled the ranks of the "illegal" or "black market" children who exist on the fringes of Chinese society.⁸

Fifth, the reforms laid bare a major contradiction between the propaganda of the one-child campaign and the reality of rural life. To promote the one-child policy, propagandists attempted to demonstrate the economic utility of having only one child, and prosperous one-child families were put forward as models for emulation. These rational arguments were often countered by what could be observed within the village, however, where the division of land according to the size and labor power of the household gave early advantage to large families. Campaign propaganda also took great pains to persuade peasants that sons and daughters were of equal value; it condemned the "feudal" but widespread views that men are inherently superior to women—that having a son is necessary to maintain the ancestral line and that men have greater economic value. In practice, however, in

⁷ Personal interview files from Hebei and Hubei provinces, fall 1990 and summer 1991; Su Suining, "There Are Many Causes of Strained Relations between Cadres and Masses in the Countryside," *Nongmin ribao* (Peasants' Daily), September 26, 1988, p. 1, in FBIS, *Daily Report, China*, October 7, 1988, p. 13; Fan Xiangguo and Huang Yuan, "Zhongguo 'hei' renkou" (China's "illegal" population), *Xin guancha* (New Observer) 4, February 25, 1989, pp. 28–32.

⁸ For a moving discussion of this problem, see Fan and Huang, pp. 28–32. See also "Couples with More Than One Child Seek Shelter along the Borders of Hunan, Hubei, Sichuan, and Guizhou," *Zhongguo tongxun she* (January 20, 1989), in *Joint Publications Research Service* (JPRS) 89–014, February 15, 1989, pp. 44–45.

many villages women were allotted smaller portions of land than were men when the land was divided among village households, reinforcing a long-standing system of wage inequality in the countryside. Moreover, rural couples depended entirely on their sons for support during old age; by tradition, daughters would marry and become a part of their husband's household, and any income their daughter earned would be beyond the reach of her parents. Although the state promised young couples that a new social-security system would be in place by the time they reached retirement, few were willing to depend on such a distant and uncertain solution. Some responded by defying the state and having two or more children, particularly if the first child was a girl. Others were simply unwilling to accept the birth of a daughter; in the early 1980s, female infanticide became a serious problem in some areas of the country, and in the later 1980s, selective abortion based on the sex of the fetus became an increasingly common practice.⁹

Finally, with a changing social climate in the village, many couples worried that having only one child (especially one female child) would leave them weak and vulnerable to larger families. This fear of sustained bullying from hostile or dominant households sometimes outweighed peasant fears of the state.

These cultural norms and economic realities generated great resistance to the one-child limit at precisely the time it was being enforced most vigorously in the early 1980s. Rather than confront that resistance through even tougher measures against those who desired a second child, a decision was made in late 1982 to focus instead on reducing rapidly the number of couples having a third or additional child. In 1983 a major sterilization campaign got under way, targeted at all couples who were under 40 and had two children. Reasoning that this was the most efficient and effective way to make rapid progress on reducing population growth, the central government brought heavy pressures to bear during 1983 and 1984; each locality was given a "sterilization target," and mobile medical teams were sent into the countryside to perform sterilizations on those who had been "mobilized." The results of this campaign can be seen in the figures for contraceptive procedures listed in Table 1. In 1983 the numbers of IUD insertions and abortions were much higher than in preceding or sub-

⁹ Data collection problems make it difficult to estimate just how widespread these practices are nationwide. However, data from the 1990 census showing an unusual sex ratio among children under age 10 have raised this issue anew. See "Percentages of Population of Different Ages of Both Sexes in 30 Provinces, Autonomous Regions, and Municipalities in Mainland China," *People's Daily*, May 21, 1991, p. 3, in FBIS, *Daily Report, China*, June 5, 1991, pp. 35-36.

TABLE 1

<i>Birth Control Procedures, 1980–1988 (in millions)</i>						
<i>Year</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>IUD Insertions</i>	<i>IUD Removals</i>	<i>Vasectomies</i>	<i>Tubal Ligations</i>	<i>Abortions</i>
1980	28.6	11.5	2.4	1.4	3.8	9.5
1981	22.8	10.3	1.5	0.6	1.6	8.7
1982	33.7	14.1	2.1	1.2	3.9	12.4
1983	58.2	17.8	5.3	4.4	16.4	14.4
1984	31.7	11.8	4.4	1.3	5.4	8.9
1985	25.6	9.6	2.3	0.5	2.3	10.9
1986	28.5	10.6	2.3	1.0	2.9	11.6
1987	34.2	13.3	2.4	1.7	3.8	10.4
1988	31.8	12.2	2.3	1.1	3.6	12.7

Source: Judith Banister, "Population Changes and the Economy," in Joint Economic Committee, U.S. Congress, *China's Economic Dilemmas in the 1990s: The Problems of Reforms, Modernization, and Interdependence*, Vol. I (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1991), Table 2.

sequent years. Most dramatic, however, are the 1983 figures for vasectomies and tubal ligations, which show a fourfold increase over the preceding year.

Although the campaign was a success in terms of the numbers of sterilizations performed, it entailed heavy costs. The heaviest cost was imposed on those who were caught in the net of the campaign, many of whom were women in their middle to late thirties who had no intention of having another child but were now required to undergo tubal ligation. Apart from this human toll, however, the campaign had at least four negative consequences. First, it was costly, leaving local governments down to the village level with big bills that the central government was unwilling to pay. Second, cadre-peasant relations became very tense at a time when rural stability was of the utmost importance to reformers. Third, the campaign generated an angry backlash in the form of letters and complaints to all levels of government. And fourth, international reaction, particularly in the United States, was extremely negative.

Relaxation of the Policy and Its Enforcement

By 1984 these unforeseen problems led to subtle but important changes in China's family planning policy, changes that were formal-

ized in two policy documents issued in 1984 and 1986.¹⁰ One change related to tactics. Cadres were informed that heavy-handed coercion was no longer acceptable to enforce birth limits; peasants had to be persuaded, not forced, to comply with the policy. In addition, peasant demands for a second child were taken into account. Whereas only about 5 percent of all Han nationality couples (urban or rural) had been eligible for a second child under the official 1980 policy, the number of exceptions to the one-child limit had expanded to about 10 percent of all single-child households by 1984, 20 percent by 1985, and nearly 50 percent by 1986. Although many of these exceptions were designed to account for special circumstances, by 1986 the state had gone halfway toward meeting peasant demands for male offspring. It did so by allowing individual provinces more leeway to implement a two-child policy in some rural areas, and by allowing almost all rural couples with one daughter to have a second child. By 1988 the State Family Planning Commission declared that the policy of giving preferential treatment to "single-daughter households" had become the standard policy across the countryside, and by 1989 four distinct policies were in force: (1) a two-child policy (in Guangdong, Hainan, Yunnan, Ningxia, Qinghai, and Xinjiang); (2) a one-son-or-two-child policy (in force in 18 provinces, plus less-developed areas of Jiangsu and Sichuan); (3) a one-child policy with some concessions for second births (in Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai, and most rural areas in Jiangsu and Sichuan); and (4) a policy allowing two or more births per couple (in force among couples of minority nationality).¹¹

The purpose of this relaxation of birth limits was to make the policy more "acceptable to the peasants," and thus more enforceable by rural cadres, without sacrificing the overall national objective. As birth rates began to climb after 1985, however, it became clear that rural enforcement remained problematic (see Table 2). The increased mobility of the peasantry was a part of the problem, of course. But viewed from the center, the most serious problem was lax enforcement on the

¹⁰ For more on these family planning documents, see Tyrene White, "Birth Planning Between Plan and Market: The Impact of Reform on China's One-Child Policy," in U.S. Congress, Joint Economic Committee, *China's Economic Dilemmas in the 1990s: The Problems of Reforms, Modernization, and Interdependence*, Vol. I (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1991), pp. 255-61. For the text of the documents, see Zhong-gong zhongyang dangxiao jihua shengyu weiyuanhui, *Shiyizhou sanzong quanhui yilai jihua shengyu zhongyao wenjian xuanbian* (Selected important documents on birth planning since the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee) (Beijing: Central Party School Publishers, 1989).

¹¹ Zeng Yi, "Family Planning Program 'Tightening Up'?" *Population and Development Review* 2 (June 1989), p. 335.

TABLE 2

Official Statistics for Urban and Rural Birth Rates and Natural Population Growth Rates, 1971–1989 (per 1,000 population)

Year	Birth Rates			Population Growth Rates		
	Total	Urban	Rural	Total	Urban	Rural
1971	30.65	21.30	31.86	23.33	15.95	24.29
1972	29.77	19.30	31.19	22.16	14.01	23.26
1973	27.93	17.35	29.36	20.89	12.39	22.03
1974	24.82	14.50	26.23	17.48	9.26	18.60
1975	23.01	14.71	24.17	15.69	9.32	16.58
1976	19.91	13.12	20.85	12.66	6.52	13.50
1977	18.93	13.38	19.70	12.06	7.87	12.64
1978	18.25	13.56	18.91	12.00	8.44	12.49
1979	17.82	13.67	18.43	11.61	8.60	12.04
1980	18.21	14.17	18.82	11.87	8.69	12.35
1981	20.91	16.45	21.55	14.55	11.31	15.02
1982	21.09	18.24	21.97	14.49	12.96	14.97
1983	18.62	15.99	19.89	11.54	10.07	12.20
1984	17.50	15.00	17.90	10.81	9.14	11.17
1985	17.80	14.02	19.17	11.23	8.06	12.51
1986	20.77	17.39	21.94	14.08	11.64	15.20
1987	21.04	N.A.	N.A.	14.39	N.A.	N.A.
1988	20.78	N.A.	N.A.	14.20	N.A.	N.A.
1989	20.83	15.98	22.28	14.33	10.24	15.59

Source: 1990 *Zhongguo tongji nianjian* (Beijing: Guojia tongji chubanshe, 1991), p. 89.

part of responsible officials. The early effects of rural reforms on cadre enforcement have already been discussed; after 1985 new and more insidious implementation problems began to emerge, problems for which there were no easy solutions.

First was the problem of early marriage and childbirth. Prior to the reforms, couples who sought to marry were at the mercy of rural officials, who could grant or deny their request to register for marriage. After the reforms, however, couples who had not reached the legal marriage age staged traditional village weddings without official sanction, or simply began to cohabit. They did so with their parents' blessing and with little fear of retaliation from local officials. The failure of the state to recognize marriages meant little in the village, and with more early marriages came more "early births." By the late

1980s, family planning officials were reporting that 10 percent of all births each year were to women under the legal marriage age of 20.¹²

Second, the position of cadres within the village had been altered by political, as well as economic, reforms. A decision to promote younger and better-educated cadres led to a dramatic transformation of rural leadership between 1983 and 1990, with old cadres retiring and a new generation of cadres coming into power. In addition, reforms designed to promote autonomy and democracy at the village level led to a reform of the cadre system itself. Within the party, village branch secretaries were subject to biannual elections by local party members; similarly, new "villagers' committee" cadres were subject to direct peasant election and limited to three-year terms.

Of course, these reforms did not reverse entirely the balance of power between cadres and peasants. Cadres continued to wield substantial power over the peasantry, and local elections were often controlled from above, or by incumbent leaders. Nevertheless, by the end of the decade the net effect of these political and economic changes was to make cadres far more cautious when confronting villagers on volatile issues like family planning. Rather than press too hard on a recalcitrant couple to abort an "unplanned" pregnancy, more and more cadres were willing to settle for collecting a fine, which couples were often happy to pay if the child was a male.

To improve cadre compliance, the state attempted to link cadre salaries and evaluations to their performance in meeting local birth planning goals. Usually, this "responsibility system" was set up to reward or punish all cadres for failure to meet a wide variety of economic, political, or social goals; each individual target was weighted in an elaborate point system, with wages and bonuses tied to the number of points earned during a year. Where targets were met, salaries and bonuses would be paid in full; where targets were exceeded, cadres would forfeit a certain amount of their salary and receive no merit pay or citations. In some areas, this system served the intended purpose of increasing cadre incentives to implement the birth plan. In other areas, however, it merely encouraged the falsification of records by leaders at several levels, creating a statistical "leakage" in the late 1980s. Village leaders, for example, who represent the first leg in China's system of family planning statistical reporting, falsified local records in order to avoid fines from above or confrontations within the village. Township officials, unwilling or unable to discover any dis-

¹² Lin Shuangchuan, "How to View China's Population Situation," *Ban yue tan* (Biweekly Talks) 23 (December 10, 1990), pp. 12-13, in FBIS, *Daily Report, China*, January 10, 1991, pp. 30-31.

crepancies without the active assistance of village cadres, accepted the figures because it was in their interest to do so, securing their salaries and satisfying their superiors at the county level. In this way, counties and townships received recognition as advanced family planning units, and honest reporting that would endanger that designation was positively discouraged.¹³

Third, as the rural reform process decentralized economic decision making and encouraged rural industrialization and commercialization, township and village governments were able to accrue profits from their collectively run enterprises. Those profits quickly became the major source of local revenue, and as such, the major source of cadre power. The development and expansion of rural industry became the primary means by which local governments could expand local employment, improve the standard of living, invest in public works and town development, and get recognition from their superiors. Yet precisely because these locally generated profits were so essential to the health of the local community, the desire to maximize profits frequently translated into the neglect of long-term investments like education, health, and family planning work.

This tendency to neglect non-revenue-generating investment was reinforced by a sweeping reform of the fiscal management system, in which fiscal power was decentralized down to the rural township level. Through a series of fiscal, enterprise, taxation, and administrative reforms, local governments gained access to local taxes and extrabudgetary funds, namely to money—sometimes a great deal of money—controlled at the local level. At the same time, in order to reduce the burden of central subsidies, the state gave local governments greater responsibility for funding programs like education, health care, welfare, and family planning and pressured the bureaucracies in charge of these and other areas to become self-financing.

How has this restructuring of economic interests affected the birth planning program? The central state allocates money to the family planning bureaucracy to pay for basic operating costs, salaries, and the cost of medical procedures and contraceptives. Beyond that, all costs for family planning must be carried by local governments—for example, the salaries for local personnel, the costs of transporting women to the township or county hospital, and the cost of propaganda and educational activities. But local governments are under strong pressures to reinvest any revenues in profit-generating activi-

¹³ Yang Xudong, "Woguo nongcun jihua shengyu gongzuo zhong xuyao yanjiu jiejuede jige wenti" (Several issues in need of resolution in our country's rural birth planning work), *Renkou yanjiu* (Population Research) 6 (1989), pp. 62–64.

ties, not profit-draining activities like family planning. As a result, family planning work has become increasingly dependent on the collection of fines from people who have violated the policy. These funds are referred to as "excess-birth fees" (*chaosheng fei*). In some localities, as much as two-thirds of annual expenditures for family planning work come from these fines.

These excess-birth fees have become crucial to the maintenance of the family planning bureaucracy and the family planning program at the county level and below, so much so that family planning campaigns have become linked to the bureaucratic need to collect funds. In one province, for example, campaigns in the late 1980s were launched at times when peasants were expected to be holding the most cash—once near the end of the spring festival, again in June or July after the summer harvest, and again after the second harvest in November. According to a former participant in these campaigns, the township was assigned targets for total births and other family planning indicators, but the greatest pressure was to meet the target for collecting fines.¹⁴ Once collected, most or all of the money was split between the township and county family planning organs, where the funds were essential in order to pay the salaries and bonuses of the family planning cadres or those who do the legwork in the villages. But these locally employed workers have discovered that the better they do their job of preventing unplanned births, the less likely they are to be paid, since their salary comes from the fees paid by policy offenders. In short, as the family planning bureaucracy has been pressed under the reform process to become financially self-sufficient, county and township officials have come to rely on the extraction of fines from policy violators to cover ordinary operating costs. *To pursue its bureaucratic mission of preventing excess births, the bureaucracy has relied on the monies collected as a result of excess births.*

The Census of 1990

By 1990 the combined effect of these implementation problems was to increase anxiety over what the fourth national census, scheduled for July 1, 1990, would reveal about the state of China's population. It was hoped that the census would put to rest nagging doubts about reported figures for population growth over the previous five years and also provide an opportunity to redress problems in the statistical reporting system. Since many couples failed to register "illegal" births (often with the collusion of rural cadres), and their discovery would

¹⁴ Personal interview files, July 1990.

ordinarily mean the imposition of a hefty fine and other penalties, the problem was how to persuade policy violators to report faithfully their total household size.

In March 1990 a circular that spoke directly to this problem was issued by the Census Leading Group of the State Council, the State Family Planning Commission, and the Public Security Bureau. Revealing the extent of the concern over underreporting, the circular made three important points. First, it called on local cadres to reverse the policy of not allowing "illegal" children to register for residency, pointing out that registration was necessary for an accurate census count. Second, the circular acknowledged that some cadres had failed to report extraquota births in order to acquire political and material benefits or evade punishments, and promised that "in general" there would be "no further investigation" of cases in which cadres had doctored the statistics, as long as they gave an accurate count for the census. Finally, it called for "more ideological work" to persuade individuals who had violated the policy to come forward and make a truthful report.¹⁵

It is not clear how successful this appeal was in persuading local authorities to confess previous instances of fraud, but the state did more than merely issue an appeal. Public Security Bureau personnel conducted a thorough examination of household registration figures prior to the census, registering any "illegal" children who were discovered without imposing fines or other punishments (at least not at the time of registration). While this work was being accomplished, the state mobilized and trained hundreds of thousands of census workers from party and state organs, and on July 1 the final count began. Although it will be some time before all the census data are analyzed and a final verdict can be pronounced, the precensus efforts apparently paid off in the form of a reasonably accurate count, particularly given the size of the target population.¹⁶

The results of the census shed light on the question of underreporting over the last several years. The final count for July 1, 1990, was 1.13 billion, and the year-end estimate for 1990 was 1.143 billion. These figures translated into a reported population increase of 31 million over the 1989 year-end estimate of 1.112 billion; in contrast, re-

¹⁵ Beijing Domestic Service, March 21, 1990, in FBIS, *Daily Report, China*, April 17, 1990, pp. 24-25.

¹⁶ One need only think about the problem-plagued U.S. census of 1990, where the population to be counted was only one-fourth the size of the Chinese population, to appreciate what a monumental achievement this was. Nevertheless, I will leave it to demographic experts to give a final verdict on the overall reliability of the Chinese census.

ported increases for 1987, 1988, and 1989 were only half that number, hovering between 15 and 16 million. Clearly, the census figures revealed serious underreporting over the last several years, which led to some hasty recalculating at the State Statistics Bureau (SSB) and the State Family Planning Commission. In announcing the 1990 year-end figure of 1.143 billion, for example, the SSB stated that the total had increased 16.29 million over that for 1989. That would put the 1989 figure at approximately 1.127 billion, far higher than the total of 1.112 billion actually reported in early 1990. And at the State Family Planning Commission, previous estimates of annual population increases during the Eighth Five Year Plan period (1991–95) were revised upward from 16–17 million to 22–23 million.

Do these figures imply that China's "one-or-two-child" policy has been a failure? Not at all, but neither has it been a great success, if measured against the strict numerical goals of the 1980s. The goal of the Seventh Five Year Plan was to keep the average annual population-growth rate at around 12.5 per thousand; in fact, official figures averaged over 14 per thousand, and the actual figures may have been significantly higher. The total population goal of 1.12 billion by the end of 1990 was also exceeded by a substantial margin. The hope of reducing the total fertility rate to below 2.0 children per couple was not fulfilled either. Total fertility hovered around 2.3, and the total fertility rate for rural women remained high at 2.8. Put simply, that figure indicates that most rural women are having at least two children, and the proportion with a "forbidden" third child remains substantial.

On the other hand, the one-child policy has been an unequivocal success in urban areas, where fertility levels have declined to 1.3. And although first births have remained stable since 1982, hovering around 51–52 percent of all births annually, third or higher-order births have dropped from 23 percent of all births in 1982 to only 15 percent in 1990, a figure that would be much higher in the absence of China's strict policy.

Population Policy in the 1990s

What is the future of the one-child policy? In 1991 pressures escalated to reduce population growth to an average annual level of "under 12.5 per thousand," the formal goal of the Eighth Five Year Plan. The family planning propaganda apparatus was in full swing, central and provincial leaders were making strong statements about the necessity of clamping down on population growth, and the absence of a quick fix for a sluggish economy led some to refocus on the "denomi-

nator" (population growth) as an easy target. In addition, in rural provinces such as Hebei that had exceeded the boundaries of central policy by tolerating a two-child limit across the board, rural childbearing regulations have been tightened, fines on rural offenders have been raised sharply, and pressures to reduce birth limits for minority nationalities are rising.¹⁷

Despite all these rumblings, however, there is no reason to expect that China will do anything other than "stay the course" on population control during the 1990s—that is, continue to implement the urban one-child policy and the rural "one-son-or-two-child" policy. The renewed propaganda and campaignlike mobilization are predictable responses to the bad news of 1990. The census was a major embarrassment to some provincial officials, revealing a wide gap between their performance and the goals of the Seventh Five Year plan. With 1991 ushering in a new five-year plan, those same leaders' anxiety to show that they had taken steps to remedy the problem triggered a noisy mobilization whose actual effect is yet to be seen.

With CCP General Secretary Jiang Zemin and Prime Minister Li Peng delivering tough speeches at a national family planning meeting in April 1991, warning that the slightest relaxation in efforts would mean a population in excess of 1.3 billion by the turn of the century, all local party officials have been put on notice that their performance must improve during the 1991–95 period. Even with the renewed sense of urgency and the escalating rhetoric, however, the statements of central leaders reveal the tightrope that is being walked. On the one hand, the leadership believes that the existing policy should be enforced rigorously, even if it means canceling the universal two-child policy that peasants in some areas have enjoyed. On the other hand, repeated references to the need for slow, sustained education, for solutions to real peasant problems, and for adherence to the "mass line" (i.e., staying close to the peasants, responding to their problems, and helping them to accept policies deemed to be in their best interests) show that the leaders are equally aware of the dangers of pushing too far. Those dangers became all too apparent during the last big push for population control in 1983 and 1984, when cadres were far less vulnerable than they are today. In the post-Tiananmen era, in which concerns for overall regime stability remain paramount

¹⁷ Personal interview files, Hebei province, July 1991. On lowering population growth among minority nationalities, see Zhang Tianlu, "Slow Down Population Growth, Promote Nationality Prosperity," *People's Daily*, July 10, 1991, p. 3, in FBIS, *Daily Report, China*, July 16, 1991, pp. 36–37; see also, Gansu People's Radio Network, June 12, 1991, in FBIS, *Daily Report, China*, June 19, 1991, p. 31.

and local governments are more likely to weigh central pressures against local interests, local leaders will think twice before pressing too hard.

Moreover, even the best efforts of the family planning apparatus, which is composed of 180,000 full-time cadres at the county level and below and supplemented by 35 million activists organized in local family planning associations, will be inadequate for the task ahead in the 1990s.¹⁸ The numbers are staggering: during the 1991–95 period, the number of women of childbearing age (15–49) will average 322 million per year, and the number of women in their peak birth years (ages 20 to 29) will reach 122 million per year. Those figures represent increases of 8 percent and 16 percent, respectively, over the 1986–90 period. Similarly, it is estimated that births will total 23 million per year, stretching the resources of a bureaucracy that is already strapped financially.¹⁹

Indeed, finances are another reason for doubting that there will be any major improvement in implementation of the birth limits. Although the 1991 "Decision" on family planning called for a gradual increase in expenditure from the current one yuan per capita to two yuan by 1995, it will be up to local governments to find the money. While some have pledged to do so, the reality is that township and village governments with very limited resources must pay for much of the cost of local enforcement. With the size of their clientele continuing to expand during the early 1990s, it is hard to see how marginal increases in funding allocations will translate into improved performance.

A final reason for expecting China to "stay the course" on family planning is a subtle change in recent years in the assumptions that undergird China's birth planning program. In the early 1980s, all of the major documents, speeches, and editorials on family planning stressed that China could achieve its economic development goals *only* if it successfully contained population growth. In other words, population control was seen as the prerequisite for economic development, given China's distinctive population burden and demographic structure. In part, this logic flowed directly out of the "central plan-

¹⁸ Wang Shoudao, "Great Practice in Resolving China's Population Problem: Written to Commemorate 70th CPC Founding Anniversary," *Guangming ribao*, July 7, 1991, p. 2, in FBIS, *Daily Report, China*, July 24, 1991, p. 31.

¹⁹ Chinese sources also estimate an annual net growth of 17 million or more *per year*, "equal to the size of a medium-sized country." To put it another way, compare it with official statistics from the U.S. census of 1990, which showed a net population gain of 22 million in *ten* years! *Xinhua Domestic Service*, January 24, 1991, in FBIS, *Daily Report, China*, January 31, 1991, p. 26.

ning" approach to population control that had been institutionalized during the 1970s. Just as important, however, this logic was reinforced by the emphasis of the Deng regime on rapid modernization and the fear of the reformers that new economic policies would take some time to translate into tangible economic gains. Between 1978 and 1980, when Deng and his supporters were still waging political battles against "leftists" of various stripes, Deng and Chen Yun placed heavy emphasis on the continuing problem of rural poverty and hunger in order to garner support for a more pragmatic approach to rural policy. Not knowing how successful those reforms would eventually prove to be, however, they understandably feared that population growth would negate short-term gains and undercut the strength of their reformist position. If population growth were quickly contained, on the other hand, economic gains would occur more rapidly, and the payoff—in both economic and political terms—would be substantial.

Starting with this logic, birth planning was billed as the guarantor of economic development, the one factor on which the success or failure of China's development program ultimately depended. By 1984, however, a revisionist view began to emerge among family planning administrators and young demographers. This "new thinking" accepted the need for strict birth planning in China, but took a more traditional view on the relationship between fertility and development. Inverting the assumption that had dominated Chinese arguments in the 1970s and early 1980s, the revisionists argued that further declines in fertility would most likely *result from* the process of modernization, not facilitate it, since lower fertility levels were closely associated with higher income and educational levels. Proponents of this view did not go so far as to suggest that the birth planning program be repealed, but they did use it to garner support for a more realistic rural policy.

In 1991 the census results and the 1986–90 performance shortfalls have renewed the emphasis on population control as an "indispensable condition" for achieving economic goals during the 1990s. Nevertheless, with a decade of research and analysis to draw on, experts in China continue to stress that fertility is closely associated with levels of urbanization, economic development, and education. Working from that assumption, family planning officials have been successful in fending off their very vocal critics, who believe that the relaxation of rural birth limits was a policy disaster. And more important, they have been successful in persuading China's senior leaders that the problem with China's birth planning policy does not lie with the policy itself, but with the way in which it is being implemented.

None of this is to say that China has gone soft on family planning. On the contrary, it continues to implement the most intrusive and limiting family planning program in the world, and that program touches the lives of more than one-fifth of humanity. Some couples comply voluntarily, and some offenders (especially protected party officials) can get away with little punishment, or with steep fines that they are able or willing to pay. For the rest, however, it is a mandatory program. They may understand national appeals for reducing population growth, but they comply with local birth limits under administrative threat.

The compulsory character of China's family planning program has made it a sensitive issue in U.S.-China relations, but the choices appear less clear-cut in Beijing than they do in Washington, D.C. If the current birth limitation policy is continued successfully, it can be estimated conservatively that China will still add at least 160 million to its population base by the end of the decade (the equivalent of roughly two-thirds of the 1990 population of the United States), and the numbers will continue to climb until well into the 21st century. China already ranks as the world's largest grain producer, but even if it is successful in raising output from 400 to 500 million tons by the year 2000 (an unlikely achievement), per capita production will remain steady and surplus grain supplies will be limited. At present, each person in China is supported by 853 square meters of cultivated land, about one-ninth of the average land area for each American; by the end of the century, however, that figure will be closer to 700 square meters.²⁰ And while China's current working-age population numbers 727 million, that number will reach 858 million by the year 2000 and 977 million by 2020.²¹

The implications of these figures are staggering and raise fundamental questions about China's future. One of those questions is how the current or any successor regime will cope with a modernizing society of such vast proportions. A second, more troubling question is whether there is a population threshold beyond which no regime could effectively rule.

²⁰ Frederick W. Crook, "Primary Issues in China's Grain Economy in the 1990 Decade," in U.S. Congress, Joint Economic Committee, *China's Economic Dilemmas in the 1990s: The Problems of Reforms, Modernization, and Interdependence*, Vol. I (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1991), pp. 385-402.

²¹ The working age for men is defined as 16 to 59; the working age for women is defined as 16 to 54. Xinhua Domestic Service, June 19, 1991, in FBIS, *Daily Report, China*, June 24, 1991, pp. 39-41.