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China's Population Policy in Historical Context

TYRENE WHITE

For nearly forty years, China's birth limitation program has been the definitive example of state intrusion into the realm of reproduction. Although the notorious one-child policy did not begin officially until 1979, the state's claims to a legitimate role in the regulation of childbearing originated in the 1950s and the enforcement of birth limits in the early 1970s. What was new about the one-child policy was not the state's claim of authority over the realm of human reproduction; that claim had been staked long before. What was new was the one-child-per-family birth limit, and the strengthened commitment of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leaders to enforce this limit.

The formal retirement of the one-child birth limit in 2014—the result of a long-debated decision to allow all childbearing-age couples to have a second child if either the mother or father were only children, will no doubt invite many retrospective assessments of its impact on China's development process, on women and families, and on Chinese society. Some will emphasize the hubris of the Chinese government, its audacity in supposing it had the right to impose strict birth limits and make all adults ask and receive official state permission to conceive and give birth. Others will look at it from an entirely different perspective, one that emphasizes the contribution of China to what they perceive as the problem of global overpopulation. Still others will use economic analysis to determine how much of China's post-1979 economic growth can be attributed to the reduced rates of population growth and fertility that resulted from the policy. A fourth category might emphasize the gendered dynamics of the Chinese program.¹

Each of these perspectives has its virtues, but one limitation will be the tendency to see the one-child policy as a starting point—as the beginning of China's great social experiment of the late twentieth century, rather than the culmination of a political and policy process that had been unfolding in China since 1949, and a global process of social change as the ideas and instruments of population control evolved and spread during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. To understand the meaning and significance of the one-child policy, however, it must be examined against the backdrop of these global and domestic forces. Domestically, Marxist theory and Soviet practice combined with China's post-1949 revolutionary politics and Maoist doctrine to produce a unique language for population policy and carve out a set of institutions and practices that laid the foundation for strict state regulation of childbirth. Globally, the debate over the relationship between population and development, which could be traced to its Malthusian origins, had been mixed with the ideas of social Darwinism and the institutions of colonial rule to produce growing anxiety over the rapid growth of the nonwhite population and the potential threat it posed to the established hierarchy of power relations and to the quality of the human species.²

These dynamics provided the social and political matrix within which China's population policy evolved, and at the broadest level, explain how China came to embrace the one-child policy. In similar fashion, it was the evolution of these same domestic and global forces that led to its decline and retirement.

Before turning to a brief history of the evolution of China's population policy, a note about the meaning of the so-called one-child policy. It is important to keep in mind that "one-child policy" is a useful and descriptive label for the birth limitation program that China adopted in 1979, but it does not capture the complexity or variability of the policy as implemented over time and space and ethnic group. Although all of China's childbearing-age population was urged to have only one child, China's minority groups (approximately 10 percent of the population) were never required to limit births to one child, nor were many farm households who inhabited relatively poor and sparsely populated regions of the country. Parents of children born with serious physical or mental limitations were also permitted to have another child. And beginning in 1984, five years after the policy's inception, rural resistance and widespread reports of female infanticide, combined with central-level conflict over the direction of reform, led the regime to relax the policy for rural residents whose first child was a girl. Under this revised

policy, labeled a “one-son or two-child policy,” rural couples whose first child was female were given official permission to have a second child after a waiting period of three to five years. There were also periods when Beijing ceded to local authorities more room to adapt policy to local conditions, as long as they did not exceed their birth and population growth targets for the year. At other times, however, they exercised more centralized control. In addition, regulations permitted couples comprised of two only children to have a second child. As large numbers of the one-child generation entered their marriage and childbearing-age years after 2000, therefore, the numbers eligible to have a second child grew rapidly. In short, the “one-child policy” is a label that accurately describes the policy goal, and generally describes the policy in effect for most urban households through 2013, but it obscures the reality of a much more complex pattern of regulation and enforcement that varied over time and space.

Additionally, undue focus on the one-child policy years obscures the significance of what came before 1979. Yet without the steps taken during this earlier period, state capacity to limit couples to one child would have been lacking. With that in mind, I will look closely at developments prior to 1979 that help illuminate the connections between China and the wider world.

Chinese Politics and Population Policy: An Overview

The history of China's population policy between 1949 and 1979 echoes the overall history of the People's Republic over that same period. After the defeat of Japan in 1945, the CCP fought a civil war against the US-backed Nationalist Party. After the Communist victory in 1949, the CCP took several years to consolidate its authority and begin the transition to socialist government (1949–52). This was followed by the First Five-Year Plan period from 1953 to 1957, which saw the collectivization of agriculture and the socialist transformation of the industrial economy. Divisions within the leadership over such issues as the pace of collectivization, the role of material incentives, and the virtues of mass mobilization over bureaucratic governance were temporarily but forcefully reined in by Mao Zedong, who launched the Great Leap Forward in 1958. This frenzied campaign was grounded in the Maoist belief in *voluntarism*, or the capacity of human action, if properly led

and motivated, to override the limits of the material conditions through massive and sustained human effort.³ In the case of the Great Leap Forward, the goal was to overtake the Soviet Union in level of development through one great burst of mobilization. Rather than achieve that goal, by 1961 the campaign had resulted in around fifty million excess deaths due to starvation and related factors, the near-collapse of collective agriculture, and overall economic stagnation.⁴ While other political leaders (including Deng Xiaoping) worked to restore order and revive the economy from 1962 to 1965, Mao retreated to focus his attention on the international socialist movement. What he saw happening in the USSR discouraged him, and led him to believe that it was possible for the revolution to be undermined by “revisionists” who courted the capitalist West and preferred negotiation to revolutionary warfare. Concluding that the Bolshevik Party in Moscow had been corrupted in this way, he began to build momentum for a great purge of the CCP. Rather than follow the standard practice of rectifying the party through an internal process controlled by the party this purge was to be conducted by the masses, who were encouraged to root out capitalist-roaders within the party and purge society of all aspects of traditional or bourgeois culture. As Red Guards began to follow Mao’s call in 1966, the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution began, and government, police, and security operations came to a halt. Red Guards meted out harsh justice to anyone believed to have deviated from the Maoist path, and not content with those battles, they began to fight among themselves over who should be considered the true followers of Chairman Mao. When the political devastation and social disruption grew too severe, Mao chose to rein in the Red Guards, but the political and policy changes that began during this period (1966–69) continued through 1976.⁵

Despite the continuation of radical Maoist policies, Premier Zhou Enlai led a revival of the normal operations of state governance, and the first order of business was to draft a Fourth Five-Year Plan (1971–75). In 1975, this was followed by a call for “modernization by the year 2000,” an ambitious goal that was intended to prevent China from falling farther behind its rapidly developing neighbors. Before any significant momentum could be built toward that goal, however, both Mao and Zhou died in 1976. The leadership struggle that followed was not resolved until 1978, when Deng Xiaoping and his allies relaunched the campaign for “modernization by the year 2000” and took the first steps toward reform. This new path of reform allowed China to meet and exceed the development goals it had set for the year 2000.⁶

It was against this backdrop of political volatility that China's approach to population policy evolved, and like many other policies, it became a pawn in leadership struggles and was subject to changing political winds. During the first two decades of the Maoist era, however, the proper approach to demographic issues was hotly debated and contested. Initially, the CCP and its leader, Mao Zedong, resisted any suggestion that a large population constituted a problem. They rejected the claim that China was overpopulated, arguing instead that the appearance of overpopulation was actually the result of the exploitative system of capitalism, and would disappear as capitalism was replaced by socialism.

It did not take long, however, for top officials in the CCP to begin to worry quietly about the pressures created by a large and rapidly growing population. When the results of China's first national census were tallied in 1954, the leadership began to understand the dimensions of the problems China faced, and some began to worry that the CCP could never meet its promises to the peasantry to end the hunger and want that had characterized their lives before the revolution. Some began to speak in more practical ways about the burden of population growth, and to recommend that China amend its population policy to provide more support for family-planning education and allow the import of condoms and other contraceptive supplies.⁷

Before these first steps could yield any meaningful results, however, the radicalization of domestic politics interrupted the effort, and advocates of family planning were branded as "rightists," or enemies of the revolution. At the same time, however, the middle and late 1950s was a period of intensified state planning. All institutions and bureaucracies were mobilized to put into place annual five-year performance plans that would help China achieve its goal of becoming an advanced socialist economy and society. In this context, it was Mao who suggested in 1957 that China should attempt to plan reproduction in the same way it aspired to plan material production. The focus on planning made it more difficult for critics to undermine birth control efforts, since it was the logic of socialist planning, and not Malthusian pessimism, that prompted it. Planning could be associated with either pronatalism or antinatalism.

At the time, birth planning (*jihua shengyu*), that is, the attempt to regulate population growth so as to keep it in balance with levels of economic production and growth, was only a goal to be reached at some more advanced stage of socialist development. As China's population continued to grow rapidly in the 1960s, however, key leaders such as Premier Zhou Enlai came to

believe that birth planning could no longer be postponed. In 1965, Zhou proposed the first national population control target—reducing the annual rate of population growth to 1 percent by the end of the century, and by 1972 he had authorized the creation of an extensive family-planning bureaucracy to oversee implementation of population policy, provide free access to contraceptives, abortions, and sterilizations, and monitor the enforcement of local birth targets. Socialist planning thus came to embrace human reproduction in much the same way that it embraced agricultural and industrial production. Local officials who were responsible for meeting grain and steel production quotas now began to receive quotas for babies.⁸

In the early and mid-1970s, the policy focus was “later, longer, fewer,” that is, promoting later marriage, longer spacing between births (three to five years), and fewer births (a two-child ideal and a three-child limit). By mid-decade, the childbearing norm began to tighten; the new slogan was “One is not too few, two is enough, three is too many.” In the cities, young couples began to feel pressure to have only one child. In the countryside, they were urged to have no more than two. In 1979, a group of China’s top scientists announced that if China was to achieve its economic goals by the year 2000—a goal that the new Deng regime had expressed as achieving a per capita gross national product of \$1,000 by the year 2000 (subsequently reduced to \$800 per capita), population had to be contained within 1.2 billion. In turn, this meant that the official birth limit had to be lowered to one child per couple (with some exceptions for special circumstances). The scientists, whose computer models and calculations were based on faulty and inadequate data, succeeded in persuading Deng Xiaoping of the absolute necessity of the one-child policy, and it soon became official policy.⁹

In an extraordinary “Open Letter” to CCP members that was published in all newspapers in September 1980, China’s leaders defended the new policy and made it clear to the CCP membership the high level of priority they attached to it. They argued that the two-decade delay after 1949 was a fateful mistake. By the time the state began to encourage fertility control, a huge new generation of young people had already been born who were approaching their childbearing years. As a result, even with declining fertility levels (i.e., the average number of children born to a woman during her reproductive years), demographic momentum meant continued growth of total population size. That growth threatened to reach 1.5 billion by century’s end if no action was taken, the letter

argued, a number that would doom China to poverty and backwardness through another generation if urgent action was not taken by this generation.¹⁰

Implementing the One-Child Policy

The one-child policy was inaugurated just as the Deng regime was about to embark on a far-reaching reform program that gradually transformed China's economy, polity, and society. The collective economy was gradually decollectivized and marketized; politics was deradicalized and political institutions revived; society was granted relief from the all-intrusive party-state that had permeated every aspect of public and private life. Change came in fits and stops, with periods of dramatic change often followed by a partial retreat to safer political ground. This pattern gave Chinese politics a cyclic or wave pattern, not unlike the high tides and low tides of the mass campaigns of the Mao era. Through all of these changes and fluctuations in political atmosphere, the insistence on strict birth control never faltered. It was a constant in an otherwise volatile situation.

In the early years of the program (1979–83), as the Deng regime fought against the lingering influences of the Cultural Revolution, it was possible to use the tools and institutions of the Maoist era to press for strict enforcement of birth quotas that were handed down to each city, county, neighborhood, and village. Thirty years of Maoism had taught Chinese citizens to be wary of voicing opposition to the latest campaign, taught officials that they could intimidate and coerce anyone who dared to defy them, and taught party leaders at all levels that the failure to meet campaign quotas was one of the seven deadly sins of Chinese politics. A poor campaign performance could spell the end of a promising career.

The tasks local officials faced were formidable. All childbearing-age couples, urban and rural, had to receive official birth permits from the state in order to give birth legally. In addition, provinces and local governments drafted regulations offering economic incentives to encourage policy compliance and imposing stiff sanctions on policy violators. All childbearing-age women were required to undergo periodic gynecological exams to ensure they were not carrying an "unplanned" pregnancy, and if they were, they were pressed to undergo an abortion immediately. The new regulations often came with a three-month window before enforcement began; women who

were already pregnant, but did not have an official birth permit, were thus duly warned, and faced the difficult choice between abortion or family ruin.¹¹

In China's cities and towns, the total fertility rate had declined from 3.3 in 1970 to about 1.5 by 1978, a remarkably low level for a developing country. Determined to push it even lower, however, state monitoring intensified in workplaces and neighborhoods. Monthly or quarterly gynecological examinations for childbearing-age women, plus a system of marriage and birth permits provided by the collective work unit or the neighborhood committee, made it hard for anyone to escape the tight surveillance net. Those who did faced severe penalties if caught, including fines and loss of employment, perhaps even one's coveted urban household registration.¹²

Rural China posed a far greater challenge. Agricultural work requires household labor, and even very young children can be put to work in service of the family income. Moreover, children were the only guarantee of old-age support, and the most destitute villagers were inevitably those who were alone and childless. Only a son could assure a couple that they would be spared such a fate. Daughters usually married out of the village, and upon marriage a daughter's first obligation transferred to her husband's family. In addition to these practical considerations, the traditional emphasis on bearing sons to carry on the ancestral line remained deeply entrenched in the countryside. As a result, although rural fertility levels were cut in half between 1971 and 1979 (declining from approximately 6.0 to 3.0), much of rural China remained hostile to a two- or one-child limit, including the village officials who would have to enforce the policy. When the rural reforms implemented after 1978 began to relax the state's administrative grip on the peasantry just as the one-child policy was launched, therefore, it set the stage for an intense struggle over the control of childbearing.¹³

The struggle took a variety of forms. In some villages, women who refused to abort an unplanned birth were subjected to endless meetings where they were berated, intimidated, and threatened into cooperation. In others, medical teams and party cadres swooped in unexpectedly, in an effort to catch women who were eluding them. At worst, women were forced onto trucks and taken directly to the township headquarters, where medical personnel would perform abortions and sterilizations and insert intrauterine devices. The use of some form of birth control after the first or second child became mandatory, and in the countryside the preferred method was the IUD, since it was always in place and not easily removed. The insertion of an IUD immediately after childbirth became standard practice.

Villagers resisted in a variety of ways, including leaving the village until the campaign was over and the baby was born, using bribery to get a birth permit, attacking or killing family-planning officials, resorting to female infanticide, or, more common after the mid-1980s, sex-selective abortion. Absent the one-child policy, it was common in the countryside to consider the birth of a daughter a "small happiness" and a son a "big happiness." When this pattern of son preference was reinforced by a one-child birth limit, some were driven to use any means possible to guarantee they would have a son.¹⁴

Rather than retreat in the face of resistance, the state intensified its efforts. In late 1982, a massive sterilization campaign was launched, with the goal of eliminating all third and higher births. The result of this massive campaign was a fourfold increase in the number of tubal ligations performed in 1983, as compared with the previous years, and large increases across every category of birth control procedures. So severe were the local pressures to meet sterilization targets that many women who had long since completed their intended childbearing, and had been effectively utilizing some form of birth control, were forced to undergo sterilization.¹⁵

As the campaign began to play itself out and elite politics took a more "liberal" turn, implementation moved into a second phase (1984-89). A decision was made to modify the one-child policy to allow for more exceptions. Fearful of a breakdown of authority in the countryside and widespread anger over the one-child limit and the often brutal tactics used to enforce it, leaders in Beijing decided to simply concede the need for a son in the countryside. Henceforth, the rural policy became a one-son or two-child policy.¹⁶ Village couples whose first child was a daughter would be allowed to have a second child, allowed to try again for a son. This concession was made in the hopes of pacifying restless villagers, improving enforcement, and reducing the upsurge in female infanticide and female infant abandonment, but over a period of several years, the net effect of this and other rural reforms was to encourage local governments to unduly relax their enforcement efforts. Village officials who themselves were subject to the birth control policies often colluded with their neighbors to avoid enforcement efforts undertaken by outside teams. As the agricultural reforms destroyed the instruments of control and power that officials had enjoyed in the past, they found it difficult to enforce birth limits, and found it easier to report false numbers than fight with neighbors and kin.¹⁷

The net effect of this policy "slippage" was to weaken central control over the levers of enforcement, and provide support for experts and birth-planning

officials who argued that the policy should be more flexible across different regions of China, allowing those in the most impoverished areas with difficult, hilly terrain to have two children, allowing those in average circumstances to have one son or two children, and limiting those in more prosperous areas to only one child. They believed that the same results could be achieved, with less effort and more willing compliance, than if the policy did not respond to the nuances of family need and economic circumstance.

This more differentiated policy was put into place in the latter half of the 1980s, only to be upset by the events of May–June 1989, which ended in a military crackdown on Tiananmen protesters and their supporters in Beijing and around the country. The martial atmosphere that returned to Chinese politics for the next two to three years made it possible to once again tighten local enforcement, ushering in a third phase of policy enforcement (1989–95). As in 1982–83, fears about a poor performance justified the revival of campaign methods. Cadres who had been warned off those methods in the mid-1980s were now instructed to use “crack troops” and “shock attacks” to break through resistance and meet the new goals of the 1991–95 plan period. They were also chastised over the failure to meet the goals of the five-year plan ending in 1990. China’s population control targets for that year had been exceeded by a very substantial margin, giving fuel to those who believed that it was acceptable to use coercion in service of the higher goal of achieving the per capita economic goals that had been set for the year 2000. It was also justified by the preliminary results of the 1990 census, which indicated that China’s population had grown more quickly than planned or expected.¹⁸

These numbers prompted the conservative leadership to tighten enforcement, returning to a strict formula that limited all urban couples to only one child, and all rural couples to one son or two children. Exceptions were granted only to some of China’s smaller minority nationalities, and to parents whose first child was mentally or physically handicapped to such a degree that they were unable to function as a healthy, working adult. Local officials were put on notice that they were liable for strict enforcement, and that failure to achieve their performance targets for birth planning would result in economic penalties, administrative sanctions, and even demotions. They were to assume that meeting population targets was just as important to their future career success as meeting key economic goals.¹⁹

This success came at a price, however. Evidence of intimidation and coercion was widespread, particularly in areas that had done poorly prior to 1990. Rural cadres who sided with their fellow villagers did what was necessary

to give the appearance of compliance, but also behaved as they had in the past when the work was hard and the campaign targets too ambitious—by lying, exaggerating, or finding other ways to manipulate the system. Because of these practices and others, many Chinese demographers expressed great skepticism when survey data suggested in 1995 that China's fertility level had dropped to 1.4.²⁰

The reversion to a more radical political atmosphere began to fade after several years, ushering in yet another phase of policy evolution and implementation (1995–2013). Responding to the new challenges, the post-Tiananmen politics of conservatism gave way to a new wave of reform and opening that rapidly transformed the political, economic, and social landscape.

It was in this context that many of China's population specialists began again to challenge the wisdom of the administrative and punitive approach to population control that had been relied on since the 1970s. Leading figures in China's new generation of highly trained demographers and sociologists criticized the assumption that "fewer births is everything," arguing that it led to "short-sighted actions (such as surprise raids on big-bellied women)." Frankly acknowledging that China's fertility decline had been induced through the widespread use of coercion, the authors insisted on the need for a broader and more complex view of population dynamics and a population policy better suited to an overall strategy of "sustainable development." Writing that "the curtain is gradually closing on the era of monolithic population control," the authors went on to discuss the disturbing consequences of that approach (including sex ratio imbalances and a rapidly aging population) and the necessity of shifting to a developmental approach that emphasized improvements and investments in the quality of the population.²¹ In short, they argued that development was the best route to fertility decline, rejecting in the process the sort of "population determinism" (fewer births is everything) that was so deeply embedded in China's population control strategy.

Domestically, the problem of rural unrest and instability was again preoccupying the leadership, and buttressed the position of advocates of reform. One of the major complaints of villagers was the use of coercive birth control tactics to collect taxes and fees owed to the local government. Not only did new documents on rural taxation explicitly forbid the use of those measures, a family-planning document issued in 1995 codified them as seven types of prohibited behaviors: (1) illegally detaining, beating, or humiliating an offender or a relative; (2) destroying property, crops, or houses; (3) raising mortgages without legal authorization; (4) imposing "unreasonable"

fining or confiscating goods; (5) implicating relatives or neighbors of offenders, or retaliating against those who report cadre misbehavior; (6) prohibiting childbirths permitted by the local plan in order to fulfill population targets; (7) organizing pregnancy checkups for unmarried women.²² This itemization of unacceptable behaviors underscored the extent to which the increasingly professional family-planning bureaucracy sought to distance itself from the coercive methods of enforcement that had remained prevalent in the countryside.

Meanwhile, changes in the international discourse on population and development also encouraged advocates of policy reform. When China began to implement its one-child policy in 1979, the discourse on population issues was still dominated by a "population control" paradigm that saw population growth as an impediment to national advancement and a threat to global survival. By the mid-1990s, another school of thought had emerged and displaced the old paradigm. This alternative approach focused on women's reproductive health and rights, and emphasized the organic relationship between the elevation of the status of women (especially through increased education and employment outside the home), the elimination of poverty, and declining fertility levels.²³

Convinced that change was already overdue, many demographers and family-planning officials embraced this new discourse, and called for the reform of China's policy. Change came slowly, however, despite the unsavory consequences of the policy, including a distorted sex ratio and a rapidly aging population. After some internal debate, the Chinese government officially reavowed its one-child policy in 2000 and in 2001 passed a long-debated Population and Family Planning Law that upheld the existing policy and gave compliance the force of law.²⁴ Although the law included provisions that called for an "informed choice of safe, effective, and appropriate contraceptive methods," and one prohibiting officials from infringing on "personal rights, property rights, or other legitimate rights and interests," it reaffirmed China's basic approach to population control. Subsequently, however, as the one-child generation matured and married in growing numbers, the state reiterated the right of two single children to have a second child if desired.

Despite the political reluctance to abandon the one-child policy, policy developments in other areas began to shift the focus away from raw population numbers. The decade was dominated by growing concerns over the lack of a social insurance system and retirement support for an aging society,

rapidly rising healthcare costs associated with both aging and environmental degradation, and sustainability and climate change. Taken together, these issues formed a development trifecta that revealed the need for a more flexible and supple population policy. As a result, pressures for reform grew. By 2012, those pressures led to the publication of a pro-reform report by the China Development Research Foundation, a top-tier think tank that is supported by, and advises, the State Council on policy issues.²⁵ The report, which urged that the one-child policy be phased out by 2015, paved the way for decisions announced subsequently during the Eighteenth Party Congress and National People's Congress in 2013.

China's Population Control Program in Global Perspective

In 1989, when the Deng regime crushed the prodemocracy movement, China still inhabited a world defined by the contours of the Cold War. By 1992, that world had disappeared, and the CCP now faced the problem of how to survive in a post-Leninist, postsocialist world. The answer, in part, was to lift the conservative strictures that had been imposed after June 4, 1989, and return to the path of economic reform. As was the case in 1979, however, strictures on childbearing remained firmly in place. Justifications of the one-child policy in 1980 were based on the argument that socialist modernization could not be achieved without it, and the CCP was obliged to take all steps necessary to achieve that goal. By 1995, with the end of the Cold War and collapse of the Soviet Union, the language of socialism was more muted. Modernization was everything, and even as China's economy steamed toward levels of economic development that had only been dreamed of in 1979, the leadership refused to revisit the one-child policy in any serious way. Annual reports and speeches attributed China's great economic success to correct economic policies and directives. Population control, which in 1980 was argued to be the crucial factor on which all development goals rested, was given little credit by the late 1990s. And yet the "numbers are everything" approach, long abandoned in other parts of the economy, remained the rigid foundation on which China's population policy was premised.

China's move in 1979 to limit childbearing-age couples to only one child was a unique and unprecedented state intervention into the realm of reproduction, a confirmation, if you will, of Michel Foucault's vision of

all-encompassing state hegemony.²⁶ Taking that step took audacity, authority, institutional capacity, and a degree of leadership commitment that is rare in any regime. If there were distinctive qualities of the Chinese context that made the conception and enforcement of a one-child policy possible, however, there were also other ways in which Chinese experience ran parallel to that of many other developing world countries, especially in Asia. For all of its unique elements, the Chinese case was also part of a broader global history and was significantly influenced by it.

Turning first to the distinctive aspects of the Chinese experience, China succeeded in intensifying its population control policy and reducing the birth limit to one child by relying on a number of unique ideas and institutions, and by wedding population control to the regime's highest priority of all—rapid modernization. The idea of *jihua shengyu* or “birth planning,” a concept central to the Chinese program, allowed advocates of birth control to elide the internal struggle between leftist and rightist forces, a development that helped to insulate the government's increasingly bold antinatalist stance from the radical politics and policies of the Cultural Revolution decade (1966–76). This development was crucial, allowing advocates of birth control and regulated childbirth to block charges from the left of neo-Malthusianism, and charges from cultural conservatives within the party who objected to the expansion of family-planning education and access on moral grounds. In the early attempts to advocate family planning, supporters had used the liberal language of the West, translating “family planning” literally as *jiating jihua*, population control as *renkou jiezhi*, and birth control as *shengyu jiezhi*. The shift to *jihua shengyu*, or *birth planning*, was purposeful, placing the entire project within the politically unassailable context of socialist economic planning. From the time of the second birth control campaign in the mid-1960s, therefore, birth planning defined China's policy, and *jiating shengyu* (family planning) was used only to distinguish China's approach from the liberal, bourgeois model of the West.

In addition to this unique language, China benefited from unique institutions. The CCP was the key institution, since it penetrated all levels and all organizations of Chinese society. Its pervasive presence in every town and village, and the regime's insistence after the revolution that there be no independent sources of influence or authority, meant that leaders in Beijing had a reliable instrument of enforcement. Whatever the limitations and weaknesses in Beijing's ability to compel a disciplined response from party officials down the line—and there were many—those limitations paled in comparison

with the challenges faced by other developing world regimes. Although the reform era made it increasingly difficult to maintain that discipline, Beijing adapted as necessary. In the early 1990s, for example, lax enforcement of birth limits led Beijing to introduce the "one-ballot veto system" for assessing the work of local officials. This system was intended to make birth control targets as important as economic targets by making their achievement critical to annual assessments of cadre performance. Under this system, fulfilling or even exceeding all economic targets was insufficient to gain a positive assessment and receive bonuses and other perks. Cadres also had to meet their birth control goals. If not, this one failure would taint their evaluation, and perhaps their career.²⁷

A second unique institution that Beijing could draw on was the mobilization campaign, which embodied a Maoist approach to policy implementation. Mass mobilization campaigns were an endemic part of the political and policy process in China, and were used extensively to galvanize the party to swift action, mobilize the masses to participate in the campaign, and push toward the fulfillment of the campaign's goals. During the Maoist era, these campaigns followed a predictable pattern. First came the call to mobilize, then came the campaign to carry out the program, which led to frenzied efforts on the part of local authorities that often provoked a backlash and resistance from the targets of the campaign. This reaction to the overreach by local enforcers led to a moderation of the program, which sometimes was followed by a second hard push for enforcement. Party officials at all levels were highly motivated to meet the targets or goals they had been assigned, since failure to do so could result in a major career setback or, even worse, a political attack on officials' revolutionary commitment.²⁸

Frequent repetitions of this pattern during the Maoist era had the effect of turning it into China's primary institution for policy implementation, and it was this instrument that the new Deng regime turned to when it launched the one-child policy. And here we stumble upon a great historical irony. At the very moment when the Deng regime was setting out to undo much of the Maoist legacy, liberate Chinese politics and society from the disruptive consequences of repeated political campaigns, and routinize Chinese governance, the new leaders put their full weight behind a massive campaign to implement the one-child policy and turned a blind eye to the waves of coercion that swept through many parts of China over the next few years as local officials were pressed to meet exacting and difficult population targets.

Although the one-child policy and campaign was launched in 1979, it was the "Open Letter" to all CCP members, published in the flagship newspaper on September 20, 1980, that stands as the most potent marker of the campaign, and once again sets China apart. Not only did China's leaders expect party members to carry out the campaign, they expected them to abide by it. Younger party members were called on to take the lead in signing a certificate pledging to have only one child, and undergoing sterilization after the birth of their first child. Older party members in positions of leadership were urged to support their childbearing-age children in taking the one-child pledge. By making this call public, party leaders brought pressure to bear on reluctant local-level officials who shared the view of their neighbors that one child was not enough, and that failing to produce a son to carry on the ancestral line would bring a worse fate than defying the one-child limit. Ultimately, many did defy that limit by using influence, bribes, or falsely acquired medical certificates to get around it. Comparatively speaking, however, what is remarkable is the extent to which the CCP organization was able to discipline its members at all levels. The unprecedented "Open Letter" was a clear signal to all local officials that the one-child policy was a top priority of the Politburo, and had to be treated as such.

Another set of institutions assured a high level of compliance among the urban population. In the early years of reform, China's system of collectivized work units remained in place, allowing for close supervision of childbearing-age couples. While compliance with the one-child limit brought tangible benefits such as free healthcare and priority status for school admissions, failure to comply could mean being fired, denied housing, and denied access to the many other collective benefits that came with being part of a work unit. Rather than risk these consequences, most acquiesced in the program, which for childbearing-age women meant subjection to gynecological exams monthly or quarterly to be sure they had not become pregnant without the necessary state-issued birth permit. This step was only one of many ways in which women's bodies became the site for policy implementation. The massive 1983-84 sterilization campaign, for example, forced many compliant women to abandon the birth control method they had been using reliably and undergo sterilization instead. They were pressured to do so by local officials who had to meet their quotas and targets for sterilization procedures within a certain period of time, and could not do so without sterilizing women who were no risk to the birth limits.²⁹

Rural institutions were disrupted by the new reforms more quickly than urban ones, placing rural officials in a more precarious position in attempting to carry out birth control work. With their monopoly of economic power beginning to dissolve and with their own desire to have more than one child, rural officials were often caught in a difficult position that only a campaign launched from higher levels could alleviate. As a result, poorly performing counties or districts were often called upon to launch a localized campaign, assisted by medical personnel drafted from county hospitals to speed the rate at which birth control procedures—abortions, IUD insertions, sterilizations, and vasectomies—could be carried out. Large numbers of personnel would descend on a particular locality with the goal of ending all “unplanned” pregnancies (that is, pregnancies that were not authorized by the requisite state-issued birth permit) and sterilizing those who had already violated the one-child birth limit. If resistance was encountered, as it often was, officials used whatever means necessary to coerce compliance. Popular methods included destroying new homes or other personal property of farmers, holding one or more of the offender's parents or grandparents in custody until they relented, or subjecting the pregnant women to isolation and harangue until they gave in. All of these methods were officially outlawed in the mid-1990s, but they were used extensively before that time and continued to be used more sporadically over the next twenty years. The campaigns became routinized to coincide with Spring Festival (Chinese New Year), when families gathered, marriages occurred, and spouses living in different places were reunited, or the summer harvest (August or September), when farmers got a respite from their ongoing labor.³⁰

It is important to note that the effectiveness of the campaign approach was progressively eroded by the success of China's economic reforms, which brought economic development, social change, and a shift to more routine forms of bureaucratic governance. These changes led to increased reliance on legal and administrative measures and a decline in tolerance for the more blunt and coercive tactics associated with campaign-style enforcement. This shift did not prevent, however, the episodic recurrence of campaigns in scattered localities by local officials determined to make quick progress on lowering fertility levels. Those enforcement practices, in turn, fomented the popular anger that became more pronounced over time.

If the institutions and practices described above were distinctive to China, in other respects the Chinese program, its motives, and its evolution were the product of the same global forces that influenced demographic policies

elsewhere. Whether responding to, or reacting against, international influences, China's policy has been shaped far more by external sources than is generally acknowledged.

The influence of international forces on the evolution of China's population policy can be seen in several ways. First is the influence of the early twentieth-century Euro-American movements supporting birth control and eugenics. While the Chinese revolution unfolded in the early and mid-twentieth century, anxieties among Western elites about the growth and quality of global population— anxieties fueled by Malthusian and social Darwinian ideas—helped to galvanize the international family-planning movement and shape their views of China. Margaret Sanger, who sat at the intersection of the family-planning and eugenics movements, traveled to China, Japan, and Korea in 1922 to lecture on the subjects and received an enthusiastic reception from local supporters, who began to organize a local birth control league.³¹ Many Chinese feminists and supporters of the New Culture Movement supported her call for birth control, and female physicians began to open clinics devoted to the needs of women and children, including birth control education and services. Due to the political turbulence of the 1920s and 1930s, however, these developments were limited in their scope and impact, and nationalist elites proffered a range of views.³²

The Chinese Communist Party, by contrast, took a more unified view of the matter, dismissing limited measures such as access to birth control as bourgeois and calling for socialist revolution to truly liberate Chinese women. Their official party policy in the 1930s and 1940s was pronatalist; high birth rates among the peasantry were seen as the only means to compensate for losses due to war, disease, and high infant mortality. At the same time, the demand for access to birth control by urban women joining the revolution led to an official policy advocating delaying marriage until the end of the war with Japan. For married couples, birth control was sanctioned as a means to delay childbirth.³³

This policy did not go unchallenged, however. Opponents writing in the newspaper *Liberation Daily* (*Jiefang ribao*) argued that birth control surgery was dangerous and bad for women's health. Others opposed birth control on moral grounds, arguing that giving birth was a natural human phenomenon that should not be artificially regulated.³⁴ In the face of this opposition, restrictions were placed on access to abortion and sterilization, but birth control after marriage was officially sanctioned.

At liberation, this birth control policy remained in force, despite the adoption of a pronatalist line. With the party leadership absorbed with more pressing issues, decision-making on birth control devolved to the newly created Ministry of Public Health. Dominated by Western-trained medical professionals who were inclined by tradition and training to be conservative on the issue of contraception, the ministry drew up regulations that imposed severe restrictions on access to contraception, abortion, and sterilization. In April 1950, regulations were issued governing access to abortion by female cadres in party, government, and military posts in the Beijing District. The regulations were designed to severely limit access, and those who met the strict conditions were required to obtain a series of written approvals before the procedure could take place.³⁵ By May 1952, national regulations had been drafted; they were approved at the end of the year and disseminated on a trial basis.³⁶ The regulations outlawed sterilization or abortion except in cases of severe illness or threat to the woman. In addition, no woman was eligible for sterilization unless she was thirty-five years old, had six or more children, and had one child aged ten or above.³⁷ Reinforcing this strict line, the Ministry of Health also moved to limit access to contraceptives. In January 1953, only days after the regulations were approved, the ministry notified customs officials that they should stop the import of contraceptives.³⁸ This ban, combined with the restrictive policy that discouraged the production of contraceptives domestically, meant that even the rudimentary and unreliable contraceptive supplies available at that time would continue to be extremely scarce. Supporters of family planning thus faced formidable opposition, and that argument unfolded in the mid-1950s in the form of the rise and quick fall of China's first family-planning campaign. Access to contraceptives and education on family planning, then, were no less contested in revolutionary China than they were in the West, and despite the socialist doctrine that framed the debate, the issues were precisely the same.

A second external influence on the CCP's early position on population and family planning was the emerging Cold War. In 1949, the US government, seeking to explain the defeat of its allies, the Nationalists, despite massive aid and military support, prepared an extensive official history of US policy in China, explaining why it had ultimately withdrawn support from the Nationalists, why the CCP was winning, but also why the Communist regime was bound to fail. The analysis argued that the CCP would not be able to meet its obligation to feed its population because of the unchecked

population growth. In other words, it argued that the Malthusian dilemma would defeat them.³⁹ Mao Zedong's response was to condemn this "pessimistic view" emanating from the capitalist West as reactionary, Malthusian, and "utterly groundless," and to insist instead that China's large population was a great asset.⁴⁰ This rejection of what he saw as Malthusian logic was justified by Marxist ideology, which saw "overpopulation" as a byproduct of capitalism that would be eliminated by the revolution. It was also consistent with the party's pre-1949 pronatalist policy, as well as the Soviet Union's pronatalist policy after World War II. Nevertheless, this exchange of verbal hostilities elevated an ongoing and complex internal process of sorting out party policy on population issues to the status of international insult, creating even greater resistance within the CCP to family planning.

A third external factor that influenced China was the successful implementation of family-planning and birth control programs in its neighboring countries. In the 1950s and 1960s, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan all developed birth control programs, and in the case of Japan, it was also very apparent by the mid-1960s that the Japanese economy was recovering rapidly from its destruction in World War II. Chinese premier Zhou Enlai was especially taken with these developments, particularly given the toll of the Great Leap Forward on China's economy. Between 1963 and 1966, Zhou spoke frequently and forcefully on the issue of birth control, arguing that it was a "shortcoming" (*duanchu*) of the socialist system that it did not have a "population plan." Zhou explained this by noting that neither Marx nor Lenin had confronted the problem; their writings therefore offered no guidance or solutions. Foreshadowing later developments, he also remarked: "In my opinion, after having two children, it is best to undergo sterilization."⁴¹

In July 1963, in a speech to high school graduates, Zhou defended the birth control policy against charges that it was Malthusian. Noting that Malthus relied on war and pestilence to solve the population problem, Zhou said:

We can't rely on war to solve the population problem, and we can't rely on pestilence, and we certainly can't rely on overseas developments. . . . [Instead] we must study advanced experience.⁴²

He went on to use the example of Japan as a country whose achievements in reducing birth rates deserved China's attention. He advocated sending experts to Japan to study their methods, or inviting Japanese experts to China. Zhou apparently was struck by the fact that Japan's population growth rate had dropped to about 10 per 1,000 by the mid-1960s, so much

so that in the fall of 1965 he urged in several speeches that China strive to achieve the same low growth rate by the end of the century.⁴³ His repeated references to the Japanese example are remarkable given the recent history of Japan's invasion and occupation of China between 1937 and 1945, and it is indicative of the urgency Zhou felt about China's rapid population growth. Unfortunately, the radical politics of the Cultural Revolution prevented any further action, but as soon as the most radical phase was over, Zhou began to restore normal government work, develop a new five-year plan, and press for a bigger investment in birth control.

Yet a fourth influence on China was the evolving global discourse on population control. Whereas an international conference held in 1964 was dominated by those who voiced unbridled enthusiasm for population control, the 1974 UN conference on population and development, held in Budapest, was divided between a pro-population control coalition of mostly developed world states, and delegations from the global South who took a neo-Marxist view that saw population and poverty as a by-product of long-standing exploitation by the capitalist North. To redress this inequity, they called for debt forgiveness and economic restructuring to bring about a redistribution of wealth.⁴⁴ China, which had long positioned itself in foreign affairs as an advocate of nonaligned Third World regimes, publicly supported this view, while continuing to push aggressively at home to lower fertility rates.⁴⁵

When the reform era began a few years later and China's commitment to population control became more transparent, the UN Fund for Population Activities, along with many NGOs, academic centers, and scholars, provided enthusiastic support to Chinese authorities who were anxious to improve their facilities and expertise on demographic issues. They helped train a new cohort of Chinese demographers and offered technical assistance as China prepared to carry out a population census in 1982. Since that time, China has participated in a vast number of international meetings and conferences, collaborated with UN organizations and NGOs on research and applied projects, and become an important source of expertise to countries who wish to draw on China's impressive demographic resources and experience.

The profoundly important role of international actors and ideas on China's program is best illustrated by two examples. The first is the role of Song Jian, a prominent scientist, in leading China toward a one-child policy. Attending his first international conference in Sweden in 1978, Song became interested in the scientific modeling techniques that had been used to develop the Club of Rome report called *The Limits to Growth* in 1972, and *Mankind at the*

Turning Point in 1974.⁴⁶ Though his expertise was in cybernetics, and though the techniques and the predictions they produced had been widely criticized and dismissed in the West, he returned to China and used similar modeling techniques to convince Deng Xiaoping that China's only hope for modernization was with a one-child birth limit.⁴⁷

The second example comes in the 1990s, when internal criticism of China's one-child policy and its consequences began spilling out into academic journals and professional conferences. This criticism was provoked in part by the new campaign that had gotten underway in the early 1990s to crack down on violators of the birth limit, giving rise to a new round of coercion in many areas of the countryside. It was also provoked by the now very wide divide that existed between the highly professionalized scholars and bureaucrats who advised and manned the top ranks of the family-planning bureaucracy, and the old guard political leadership that resisted all calls for policy reform. In this context, two high-profile international conferences gave support and momentum to the reformers.

The first was the 1994 UN Conference on Population and Development that was held in Cairo, and the second was the UN Conference on Women that was held in Beijing in 1995. For many feminists, the Cairo conference was the culmination of a decade or more of work to shift the discourse on population and development from one focused on reducing population numbers to one focused on reproductive rights and women's status. Despite continued differences among representatives over language pertaining to abortion, in particular, the conference report embraced the new language and emphasized the organic relationship between the elevation of the status of women (especially through increased education and employment outside the home), the elimination of poverty, and declining fertility levels.⁴⁸

The substance of the conference was reported in some detail in the Chinese media and in population journals, and shortly thereafter, the influence of the new international language on Chinese policy became clear. In China's "Outline Plan for Family Planning Work in 1995–2000," for example, stress was placed on the impact of the socialist market economy on population control, and on the necessity of linking population control to economic development. In addition, the plan placed special emphasis on the role of education, and urged aggressive efforts to increase women's educational level in order to promote lower fertility. This emphasis dovetailed with the Millennium Development Goals adopted by most UN member states in 2000, specifying a set of goals to be reached by 2015. China took an active role in

supporting this agenda, which included a focus on women's empowerment and education, along with gender equality.⁴⁹

A second UN conference, the UN's Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995, strongly reinforced the Cairo message, provoking a new wave of feminist thinking and action, and further encouraging SFPC officials to consider a more client-centered approach that gave greater consideration to women's needs and their reproductive health. This conference was also important in stimulating the growth of nongovernmental organizations in China, with greater focus on issues related to women and gender, and it encouraged established organizations like the Women's Federation to become stronger advocates for women.⁵⁰

Still another way in which global forces influenced the evolution of China's population policy was the revolution in telecommunications that made it increasingly difficult to deflect and bury reports that contradicted claims that birth limits were enforced by routine administrative means, and not through the use of coercion. During the 1980s and 1990s, Chinese citizens with complaints against local officials often turned to domestic or foreign journalists when their complaints fell on deaf government ears. By the later 1990s, however, the arrival of social media platforms, along with a more prosperous and tech-savvy population that had easy access to them, made containment impossible. In 2012, for example, the family of a woman who was forced to abort her seven-month old fetus used social media to publicize her story. Supported by gruesome photographs of the aborted fetus, the story drew enormous attention and public outcry, revealing through posted comments the depth and breadth of the hatred of the one-child policy and the hostility toward those who enforce it.⁵¹ Repeated episodes of this sort were an embarrassment to a regime moving to the forefront of global affairs, and the public hostility they revealed tapped into anxieties about regime stability. Taking incremental steps toward retiring the policy was a way to deal with those concerns and dampen popular resentment.⁵²

Ultimately, of course, the decision to retire the one-child policy was an economic and social one. With a rapidly aging population, the policy no longer paid the substantial economic dividends that it had in previous decades. On the contrary, it was setting China up for economic difficulties in the future. Socially, the pressure to abandon the policy was rising, especially as those born under the one-child policy were now eligible to have two children if both parents were only children. Skewed sex ratios, recognized as one of the worst social consequences of the one-child limit,

remained a major problem, one that would constrain marriage options of millions of young men for decades to come. Just as important, corruption and wealth had allowed many to buy their way to a second, or even third child, by simply paying the required fines. In a social climate where there was great resentment of official corruption and economic inequality, retaining a policy that was being enforced so unevenly was an increasingly dangerous proposition.

Consequences and Legacy of China's One-Child Policy

The one-child policy was adopted just as the reform era began in 1979. This poses two problems for assessing its impact. First, the consequences of the one-child program are deeply intertwined with the consequences and results of economic and political reform, so much so that it can be difficult to distinguish the effects of birth planning from other effects of reform. And where those effects are clearly entangled, it is even harder to weigh the relative influence of one versus the other. Second, looking at the consequences of the one-child policy from today's vantage point, it is easy to forget that the consequences have been unfolding and evolving since 1979. They are not static or categorical. This fluidity means that there can be no definitive assessment that takes into account the unfolding story of the policy and China's socio-economic transformation.

Despite these two important caveats, it is still clear that the implementation of China's one-child policy has had an enormous impact on Chinese society, though not always the impact that has been claimed by the state. On the one hand, there can be no doubt that the size and composition of China's population at the beginning of the reform era—young, educated, and underemployed—aided in China's rapid economic development, or that maintaining lower levels of fertility freed up more resources than would otherwise have been available to invest in human capital. Eager to justify two decades of state control, however, at the end of the century Chinese authorities declared that China's population policy had prevented four hundred million births since 1970. At the time, this assertion went unchallenged in public forums, with the result that it became a widely known figure and was republished as fact in many media reports. In fact, the calculations that led to this estimate were as faulty as the ones that led to the adoption of the one-child limit,

exaggerating greatly the impact of the one-child policy and China's overall birth-planning program.⁵³

That this number was designed to aid state propaganda efforts is made clear by the choice of 1970 as the starting point for measurement. In 1970, China's fertility level remained high. The years 1970–79 did see a gradual increase in pressures to have fewer children, but the most important developments of those years were the depoliticization of arguments for population control, the creation of a family-planning system to provide education and support for family planning, and most important, the provision of free contraceptives to encourage and hasten adoption of some form of birth control. These efforts had a profound effect on China's urban and rural fertility levels, all before the one-child policy got underway. This suggests that while state action was crucial in hastening fertility decline, these policy developments coincided with increased demand for access to contraceptives and increased desire of childbearing-age couples to manage their childbearing and limit their number of children. As theorists of fertility decline have noted, a population must be "ready, willing, and able" to limit childbearing before sustained fertility decline can begin. China provided the tools that enabled young men and women to act on their fertility preferences, encouraged them with propaganda and education, and created political and economic incentives to comply.

Choosing the 1970 fertility level as the starting point for calculating the impact of China's population policy, therefore, obscured the impact of the one-child policy while allowing the state to offer further justification for it. It ignored the widespread patterns in fertility decline seen elsewhere in the world, particularly the impact of development on childbearing preferences in the absence of heavy-handed state intervention. Nor did the calculation offer any way to compare the impact on population size of the one-child policy, as opposed to a universal two-child policy that focused on the spacing of children, or an approach premised entirely on guaranteed and substantial rewards for compliance, or even one that maintained the *de facto* late-marriage policy that had been in place during the Cultural Revolution.⁵⁴

If it is difficult to calculate the number of births that were prevented exclusively by the one-child policy, it is easy to observe other effects of the policy. First, it meant that an entire generation of childbearing-age couples was subjected to state control over the number of children they were permitted to have, and *when* they were permitted to have them. It is important to separate these two impacts to understand their full implications. The one-child birth

limit meant that childbearing-age couples were not permitted to have more than one child (or two for couples who met specific conditions), and women were subjected to constant monitoring by the state and its local agents to ensure that couples who were compliant at the age of twenty remained compliant at the age of thirty. Less well understood, however, is that in the early years of the campaign, many women who became pregnant with their *first* child, but without official permission, were required to have an abortion. And in more recent years, as the numbers permitted to have a second child grew, failure to comply with regulations requiring couples to wait three or four years to have a second child could also result in pressure to abort.

Women were also the subjects on which most medical procedures were carried out. Their bodies bore the physical weight of enforcement, and the state used the birth of a first child or the abortion of a subsequent pregnancy as an opportunity to insert an IUD or carry out a tubal ligation. This was particularly true in the countryside, where resistance to the one-child limit was widespread and campaign-style roundups of pregnant women were frequent events. Despite recognition in the 1980s that vasectomy was a cheaper and safer medical alternative to tubal ligation, only a very small proportion of men underwent the procedure, and no major educational campaigns were carried out to encourage male sterilization. When asked about this issue in the early 1990s, both male and female officials in the countryside felt that attempts to increase the rate of male sterilization were futile. They claimed that women preferred to take the risk of undergoing sterilization, fearing that male sterilization would reduce permanently the strength and virility of their husbands. When asked why those attitudes could not be changed with the same investment of state resources that had been devoted to implementing the one-child policy, it was clear they had never considered that possibility.⁵⁵

While men were exhorted to support the one-child policy, the female reproductive system, one of the few areas that had not been completely subsumed by the radical politics of the Mao era, was explicitly redefined as a public domain. In addition to the policies and regulations passed at each level of government that brought reproduction under state authority, an even more visible symbol of state intrusion was the widespread practice in rural China of publicly documenting the menstrual cycle and birth control method of each childbearing-age woman in the village. Public exposure contributed to other pressures to conform and underscored the power of local authorities to engineer family size, composition, and change.

In addition to its direct impact on reproductive age women, the one-child policy influenced the Chinese family and society in a variety of ways. The most direct impact on Chinese society was to create a two-track society and a two-track generation: children who were born in urban areas were overwhelmingly likely to be single children (singletons), and children who had one or more siblings were most likely rural-born. By 2010, about 63 percent of all Chinese families had a single child, but in cities the percentage was much higher. Children were reared, then, in an atmosphere where they were uniformly surrounded by other singletons, a revolutionary change from the recent past, and one that raised deep concerns in China about the temperament, values, and psychological well-being of this generation. Development and commercialization meant that these singletons experienced a degree of wealth and disposable income that was inconceivable to their parents and grandparents when they were young. Indulged by grandparents and parents, they became important consumers in the new economy, altering the balance of power within the family.⁵⁶

With no competition from other siblings, singletons were the sole beneficiary of their parents' resources and attention. This contributed to parents' ability to invest in their child's education and devote themselves to their socioeconomic advancement, an important dividend of the one-child policy.⁵⁷ It also increased pressure on the child to succeed in school, career, and marriage, sometimes to the detriment of their psychological health. Meanwhile, the decline and collapse of the aversion to divorce that had been characteristic of the Maoist era, combined with a simplified process for legal divorce, meant that growing numbers of singletons were the children of divorce, living with a single parent or with a parent and stepparent.⁵⁸ These changes, of course, are consistent with social changes that have occurred in other developing societies, and are not the direct byproduct of the one-child policy. The role of the one-child policy was to remove the cushion from these events sometimes provided by siblings, who can support one another as they move through wrenching family changes.

Another important consequence of the one-child policy was to create a family structure composed of an inverted triangle: four grandparents, two parents, and one child (the so-called 4-2-1 phenomenon). Given the traditional Chinese emphasis on care for the elderly, the weight of obligation to be carried by singletons was a source of concern, both on the micro and macro levels. At each level, the issue was the same. In micro form, the question was how a singleton could pay for the care and well-being of seven

family members, or two married singletons care for fifteen people, including their single child. In macro form, the question translated into the problem every society faces with population ageing: how can the working adults in a society care for very large numbers of elderly and youth, and simultaneously maintain the levels of economic productivity necessary to sustain economic growth?

As China moved through an exceptionally rapid fertility decline in the last decades of the twentieth century, it did so having already achieved an increase in life span and a decline in mortality that was exceptional in the developing world. As a result, its younger generation is smaller than the one that came before it, and its older generation will have an average life span consistent with that of advanced industrialized countries. This dependency ratio (most commonly defined as the total number of elderly and youth as a percentage of the number of working-age adults) has worsened in many countries in the industrialized world that have very low fertility (e.g., Italy and Japan). China is unique, however, in the degree to which the dependency factor has grown prior to reaching income levels equivalent to those of advanced industrialized countries. In 2012, China experienced its first ever natural absolute decrease in its labor force, with 3.45 million fewer workers than the previous year and a projected decline of about 29 million by the end of the decade. Put more starkly, in 2009 there were thirteen working-age adults for each elderly person; by 2050, there will be only two. Persons aged sixty or older comprised 8.8 percent of China's population in 1990, reached 10 percent by the end of the century, and was at 13.7 percent in 2013. Though this figure did not yet place China among those countries with the highest percentages of elderly population, the raw numbers show the scope of what China faces. By the year 2013, the elderly population numbered approximately 185 million, on its way up to an estimated 284 million by 2025, and 440 million by 2050.³⁹ This trend will place tremendous pressure on the working adult population, as their labor will be expected to generate much of the national wealth needed to care for their elders and their children.

Another way in which the one-child policy has impacted society is through its contribution to migration and to the creation of a class of children collectively known as *heiren*, that is, "black" or illegal persons. This term, which emerged in the 1980s, is used to describe individuals born without state permission, and who therefore do not officially exist. As children, *heiren* are denied access to any services or benefits that come from being registered officially as part of a household or locale, including access to healthcare

and schooling. Faced with pressures to abort or pay exorbitant fines for “unplanned” or illegal births, some parents choose to run, becoming part of the enormous migrant population that has spread over China during the reform era. This buys them time to give birth to the child, but it does not solve the problem of registration. Recent efforts to reform the household registration (*hukou*) system, and to permit migrants to register for school in the location where the family lives, may slowly improve the situation, but in the short run, those unable to pay the fines for giving birth outside the plan will continue to be caught in bureaucratic limbo.⁶⁰

One of the most disturbing effects of the one-child policy is its contribution to a marked sex ratio imbalance in those born after 1979. Over time and across many different human populations, sex ratios at birth—that is, the number of males born during a given time period compared to the number of females—hover around 105 boys for every 100 girls. On occasion, for a limited period of time, this ratio may vary naturally, with a few more or a few less boys for each 100 girls. Data from China's 2000 census, however, revealed that the sex ratio at birth was approximately 119 boys for every 100 girls, and the 2010 census gave similar results. If that were not serious enough, the national figures mask much more severe distortions, with some provinces and regions recording sex ratios of 125 or more males for each 100 females.⁶¹

From the beginning of the one-child policy, there was concern that the traditional preference for sons that was deeply embedded in Chinese culture might result in an imbalanced sex ratio at birth. In the September 1980 “Open Letter” on the one-child policy, for example, several of the most common objections to the policy were aired, including fears that it would lead to female infanticide and abandonment and, consequently, to an imbalance in the sex ratio. These fears were initially discounted, but they proved to be warranted. In the early 1980s senior officials became alarmed about the many reports of female infanticide and female abandonment on the part of couples desperate to have a son. The infanticide reports produced a firestorm of controversy at home and abroad, leading the regime to respond in two contradictory ways. First, it denied that there was a widespread problem; census and survey data were used to show that China's sex ratio at birth was well within what was considered to be the normal range and in keeping with China's own population history. Though conceding that incidents of infanticide and abandonment did occur, it was insisted that such cases were rare, and that they occurred only in the most backward regions of the countryside, where the “feudal mentality” remained

entrenched. The solution proposed was an education campaign to uproot such backward ideas, but education alone was of little use, given the social and economic realities that privileged male offspring.

By 1984, as reports of female infanticide multiplied and the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) began to insist that the problem be faced and addressed, the state changed tack. Rather than address the underlying causes of gender bias, however, it made concessions to rural sensibilities and adjusted the one-child policy to allow single-daughter households to try again—for a son. In the countryside, the state conceded, women were considered socially inferior and worth less economically. Sonless couples were disadvantaged economically and socially, the potential prey of stronger families and kin groups. Single-daughter households should therefore be given special consideration, just as minority groups and the parents of invalids were given special consideration. Although the intent of the 1984 policy change was to legitimize what was already happening in the countryside, it had the effect of reinforcing existing prejudices against females. A woman with a single daughter and no sons might be applauded by local officials, but in the real world of the village she was likely subject to a lifetime of pity, social ridicule, and blame, much of it heaped upon her by other rural women who had themselves endured such pressures.

Faced with intense demands from the state, on the one hand, and their peers and elders, on the other, some took the desperate course of female infanticide to preserve the chance to have a son. As the 1980s progressed, however, two alternative strategies emerged. The first was infant abandonment, which increased substantially in the late 1980s and 1990s in response to a tightening of the birth control policies. Although some infants were placed with relatives or rural families without children, in keeping with long-standing custom in China during times of political upheaval and economic crisis, many were left to be discovered by strangers who turned them over to public security officials. From there, they were sent to local orphanages, where new procedures were slowly developed to create avenues for adoption. Fearful that domestic adoption by young couples would undermine the one-child policy, however, the adoption law passed in 1991 only allowed couples over the age of thirty-five and childless to adopt a child. This restriction, in turn, led to an upturn in international adoption, as couples and singles from the prosperous regions of North America, Europe, and Asia arranged for adoptions.⁶²

The second strategy for guaranteeing a son was the use of ultrasound technology and sex-selective abortion. By the early 1990s, most state-run

hospitals and clinics had acquired ultrasound equipment capable of fetal sex determination. And as private clinics proliferated in the 1990s, they too were equipped with ultrasound technology, providing easy access for a fee. Despite repeated condemnations of sex-selective abortion and attempts to outlaw the use of ultrasound technology for fetal sex identification, easy access to the technology, combined with the lure of lucrative bribes and consultation fees, made ultrasound use very popular. Contrary to official statements blaming rural backwardness for the problem, it quickly became clear that the sex ratio distortions were widespread. In 1981, the Chinese sex ratio at birth, 108.5 males for every 100 females, had already been slightly in excess of the norm. Over the next twenty years, the sex ratio in favor of males at birth rose dramatically, to approximately 111 in 1985, 116 in 1992, and 119 by 2000. A decade later, the 2010 census showed sex ratios at birth were still hovering around 119 males per 100 females.⁶³

In the early 1990s, Chinese experts attributed most of the skew in the sex ratio to underreporting of female births, particularly illegal births, implying that the actual sex ratio at birth remained within, or close to, acceptable norms. Provoked by Amartya Sen's provocative 1990 essay on the "100 million women" missing in India and China, however, scholarly research and writing on the issue increased dramatically, as did research on the situation in China.⁶⁴ By the late 1990s, candid assessments by Chinese scholars concluded that sex-selective abortion was widespread and was the main cause of the distorted sex ratio. Moreover, accumulating data indicated that the phenomenon was not just a rural problem, nor was it concentrated in the least-educated segment of the population. Instead, the combined effect of the one-child birth limit, traditional son preference, and easy access to a technology that allowed couples to make sure they had a son was to tempt people from a wide variety of socioeconomic backgrounds to choose sons over daughters. Just as the state had justified its attempts to engineer national population growth, couples justified the use of sex-selective abortion to engineer the sex of their only child.

The resulting skew in the sex ratio has raised alarms over the "army of bachelors," or as they are referred to in Chinese, "bare branches" (*guang gun-er*), who are now, or will be in the future, unable to find wives as adults. Although this problem has already begun to appear among those born after 1980, it will get much worse before it gets better. Census data for 2000 revealed about 8.5 million missing girls, but by 2010 the number had risen to more than 20 million.⁶⁵ In 2012, there were an estimated 18 million more

boys than girls under the age of 15, and by 2020, estimates suggest there may be anywhere from 30 to 40 million males in marriage-age cohorts who will be unable to find wives. Even if the sex ratio imbalance returns to balance by 2020, that number will grow, and the impact of these deficits will be felt late into the twenty-first century.⁶⁶

This deficit of females has already begun to have an impact on marriage markets in China. Rural men of marriage age compete for a limited number of wives from the local area, and as the number of “leftover” men continues to grow, the higher the costs of marriage become. Men whose families are unable to raise enough money are unable to marry, and frequently resort to marriage brokers to help them find brides from other provinces.⁶⁷ Despite these and other efforts, however, the number of unmarried men in their late twenties is rising rapidly. While the shortage of women has allowed some brides to marry into a higher economic or social status, others have become more vulnerable to human trafficking, or to abuse in their new homes, where they are far removed from their family support system. Conversely, disadvantaged men are vulnerable to being cheated by marriage brokers, or by the bride and her family. There have been many reports of brides disappearing days after their marriage, once the bride’s family had received the compensation they had demanded for their daughter.⁶⁸

Conclusion

In his astute essay on the collapse of the Soviet regimes in eastern Europe in 1989, Daniel Chirot pointed to the great irony of attempting to build the socialism of the future on forms of industrial organization that were rapidly growing obsolete. Massive concentrations of industrial plants and workers was a late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century approach that helped Russia overcome its slow start on the road to industrialization, but it was an inadequate response to the mid-twentieth-century conditions that increasingly privileged innovation, speed, adaptability, and global reach. Post-World War II socialist economies, therefore, were built on structures that were rapidly becoming an anachronism.⁶⁹

The same irony pervades the history of China’s population policy, especially the one-child policy. By the time China embraced the one-child policy, nearly everything that inspired it was on the cusp of becoming obsolete. The intellectual hubris of the population control movement that peaked between

the mid-1960s and 1980 would shortly thereafter begin to flounder under the combined challenges of the Green Revolution, revisionist demographic theories that challenged the orthodox view that population growth impeded development, and feminist and conservative challenges. Indeed, in retrospect one might argue that the 1984 UN conference on population held in Mexico City marked the beginning of the end for orthodox demographic theories that assumed population control was essential for successful economic development. At that conference, the Reagan administration sent a conservative delegation to challenge family planning on revisionist and moral grounds, while developing countries like Mexico, who were still deeply suspicious of neo-Malthusian arguments in 1974, embraced the orthodox view on the necessity of population control, and NGOs representing feminist views embraced a reproductive rights approach that would win the day in Cairo a decade later.⁷⁰

In the midst of this ferment, China moved to embrace precisely the “numbers is everything” approach that was the core belief of the population controllers, wrapping it in a language of socialist modernization that was uniquely Chinese. Once in place, and with the full weight of the new reform leaders behind it, the legitimacy of the project and the validity of the method were difficult to challenge. The party had declared that the achievement of “modernization by the year 2000” depended on the successful implementation of the one-child birth limit. Even when it became clear that China would exceed all expectations for economic growth by the year 2000, even when it became clear that the social consequences of the policy were severe, even when “population control” had become a discredited approach to demographic challenges, the policy remained in place. It recedes now as an anachronism, but its social and political consequences will be felt for decades to come.

Beyond the consequences discussed above, there is the rage left behind in many Chinese over the state's unwillingness to adopt a two-child policy many years earlier, and its reliance on an enforcement system that privileges the rich, allowing them to effectively purchase a second child by paying a large “social compensation fee,” while avoiding the pressure, harassment, or outright coercion experienced by ordinary Chinese whose pregnancy is deemed illegal. As Chinese writer Ma Jian noted in a 2013 op-ed in the *New York Times*, however, venting popular anger against wealthy and famous individuals like film director Zhang Yimou (accused of fathering seven children with four different women) “plays into the party's hands” by deflecting

public outrage away from “the government’s barbaric policy.”⁷¹ However one judges the one-child policy—as an economic and social necessity, a barbaric violation of human rights and dignity, or a dual-edged sword—it is important to keep in mind that although the one-child birth limit will disappear, the state has not conceded its authority to plan China’s population growth. The birth limit is changing, but the logic that led to a one-child policy remains in place. Changing demographics, rising popular protest, and global influences have certainly moderated China’s approach to implementation of birth limits, as well as the language used to describe the program, but the Chinese approach to population policy remains grounded in the principle of state sovereignty over reproduction. This enduring claim, and its policy consequences, will continue to set the Chinese case apart for many years to come.

Notes

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 6. MacFarquhar, *The Politics of China*, chap. 4.
 7. On the first family-planning campaign, see H. Yuan Tian, *China's Population Struggle: Demographic Decisions of the People's Republic of China, 1949–1969* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1973); Leo A. Orleans, *Every Fifth Child: The Population of China* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1972); Pi-Chau Chen, *Population and Health Policy in the People's Republic of China* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1976).
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 12. On the range of penalties outlined in regulations, see White, *China's Longest Campaign*, chaps. 3–4.

13. On the struggle to implement the one-child policy in the countryside and rural resistance, see White, *China's Longest Campaign*, chaps. 5–6; also by White, "Domination, Resistance, and Accommodation in China's One-Child Campaign," in *Chinese Society: Change, Conflict, and Resistance*, ed. Elizabeth Perry and Mark Selden, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2010), 171–96; Jeffrey Wasserstrom, "Resistance to the One-Child Family," *Modern China* 10 (July 1984): 345–74; Susan Greenhalgh, "Controlling Births and Bodies in Village China," *American Ethnologist* 21, no. 1 (1994): 3–30.
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18. On the failure to meet population targets for 1990 and preparations for the census, see White, *China's Longest Campaign*, chap. 8, "Campaign Revivalism and Its Limits."
19. For one example of how the "one-ballot veto" system worked, see Document #7, issued by the Hubei provincial government in 1994, entitled, "Guanyu shixing jihua shengyu 'yipiao fougue quan' de guiding" (Decision on implementing the 'one-ballot veto system' for birth planning) in Hubei sheng jihua shenghy weiyuanhui, *Jihua shengyu zhengce fagui ziliao xuanpian, 1983–1997* (Compilation of laws and regulations pertaining to birth-planning policy, 1983–1997) (Wuhan, 1997), 596–97.
20. On skepticism over the reported low fertility levels by the mid-1990s, see Chinese demographer Zeng Yi's influential article, "Wo guo 1991–92 nian shengyu lu shifou dada diyu daiti shuiping?" (Has our country's 1991–92 fertility rate dropped far below replacement level?), in *Renkou yanjiu* (Population research) 19, no. 3 (1995): 7–14.
21. Gu Baochang and Mu Guangzong, "A New Understanding of China's Population Problem," *Renkou yanjiu* 5 (1994): 2–10.
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27. See note 19.
28. The classic work on the mass campaign in China is Gordon Bennett, *Yundong: Mass Campaigns in Chinese Communist Leadership*, China Research Monograph, No. 12 (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 1976). See also Perry, "Moving the Masses"; Vogel, *Canton under Communism*; White, *China's Longest Campaign*; and Sebastian Heilmann and Elizabeth Perry, *Mao's Invisible Hand: The Political Foundations of Adaptive Governance in China* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011).
29. White, *China's Longest Campaign*, chap. 6.
30. White, *China's Longest Campaign*, chaps. 6 and 7.
31. Sanger discussed her experience in China, as well as Japan, in a speech delivered at Carnegie Hall on October 31, 1922, titled "Birth Control in China and Japan." The text can be found online at <http://www.nyu.edu/projects/sanger/webedition/app/documents/show.php?sangerDoc=101865.xml> (accessed July 8, 2014). These and other documents have been made available online as part of the Margaret Sanger Papers Project of the History Department of New York University. The project's online site can be found at <http://www.nyu.edu/projects/sanger/>.
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33. Shi, *Zhongguo jihua shengyu huodong shi*, 52–53. See also Liu Shaoqi, "Tichang jieyu" (Promote Birth Control), in *Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan renkou yanjiu zhongxin* (Population Research Center of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences), *Zhongguo renkou nianjian, 1985* (Population Yearbook of

- China, 1985) (Beijing: Chinese Academy of Social Sciences Publishing House, 1985), 4-5.
34. Shi, *Zhongguo jihua shengyu huodong shi*, 50-51.
 35. First, the woman's husband had to authorize the abortion in writing. Second, the head of the department or organ where the woman worked had to authorize the procedure. And third, the attending physician had to approve the decision. Failure to obtain all the necessary approvals would result in administrative punishment. Shi, *Zhongguo jihua shengyu huodong shi*, 111.
 36. The regulations were entitled "Provisional Method for Limiting Birth Control Surgery and Abortion" (Xianzhi jieyu ji rengong liuchan zanxing banfa). Shi, *Zhongguo jihua shengyu huodong shi*, 113.
 37. Deng Lichun and Ma Hong, eds., *Dangdai zhongguode weisheng shiye, xia* (Health Work in Contemporary China, vol. 2) (Beijing: Chinese Academy of Social Sciences Publishing House, 1986), 231.
 38. Shi, *Zhongguo jihua shengyu huodong shi*, 115.
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 41. Mao, "Bankruptcy," 145-46.
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 45. Finkle and Crane, "The Politics of Bucharest."
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