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Spotlight

Holding on to the One Child Policy: China's Great Demographic Trade-Off

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Beijing's 2008 decision to maintain a somewhat liberalized version of its One-Child Policy surprised both Chinese and foreign demographers. Was the decision the product of a strategic calculation, or simply bureaucratic inertia? And was Beijing's decision a smart one?

Demographers in China and abroad were surprised when, after weeks of contentious inter-agency debate in March, 2008, China's State Birth Planning Committee recommended that the central government extend its population policy for yet another decade. The policy's current framework is set in China's 2001 Birth Planning Law, which demographers have labeled the "1.5 child policy"-a liberalized version of the *One Child Policy* (OCP), which was first formulated in 1979 and applied during the early 1980s. The law permits provincial-level governments and local authorities to grant exemptions from one-child restrictions (and penalties) to a range of categories of parents-to minorities, farmers, parents without siblings, and other, more specific circumstances.

Beijing's 2008 decision is a demographic trade-off. It favors smaller child cohorts and slower population growth, but accelerates *population aging* (growth of the proportion of seniors) and promotes a heavily male-skewed sex ratio at birth (the product of sex-selected abortions). The 2008 decision raises two questions. First, is its outcome the product of a strategic economic and security calculus, or does it simply reflect the survival instincts of a well-entrenched bureaucracy? And second, was Beijing's demographic trade-off a smart one?

To many China observers, the notion that conservative politics and bureaucratic inertia conspired to extend birth restrictions makes perfect sense. After all, it's not always easy, even in democratic societies, to dismantle a successful bureaucracy-and this one was uncommonly successful. The OCP met the Communist Party economic planners' most explicit goal: it held China's population under 1.3 billion through year 2000 and, many believe, helped launch the country on its steep path of economic growth. While OCP penalties and coerced sterilizations and abortions ignited protests during the 1980s and early 1990s, there have been fewer complaints under the 2001 Birth Planning Law, which outlawed forced procedures, allowed provincial rules exempting most rural Chinese, and led to local liberalization elsewhere (as in Shanghai, which has virtually abandoned enforcement). In a 2007 Pew-sponsored poll, 76 percent of the sample of Chinese citizens approved of the current policy. So why should its administrators-the Birth Planning Commission, provincial officials, or local birth-planning cadres who monitor and administer fines, relinquish their political positions and cede power to public health workers?

Could it be, however, that the direction of the 2008 decision reflected Beijing's ultimate vision of China as an intensely educated, more economically independent, and more respected great power? Slowed population growth, followed by a period of population decline, could-over the long term-reduce the country's exposure to, and impact on, international grain and petroleum markets that have become increasingly volatile. And a slowly growing (or declining), better-educated Chinese population could make it advantageous for Beijing to enter into a future carbon emissions trading regime.

It is not hard to imagine that Beijing would prefer to minimize tensions with weaker states, particularly regional neighbors, which it hopes someday to coax away from security relationships with the United States and its Western allies. However, the sheer size of China's population and its growing food and energy needs makes balancing its economic security against relations with smaller states extraordinarily difficult. For example, Beijing's efforts to dam the Mekong and to harness the river's power are already straining relations with governments further downstream, in Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. And the diplomatic pitfalls of China's overseas oil drilling and its African agricultural ventures have been nearly as difficult to manage.

Still, the numerous critics of the 2008 decision to maintain the current population policy contend that Beijing's calculations were off the mark-that China has the most to fear from the costs of supporting pensions and providing adequate health care to a rapidly rising number (and proportion) of retirees. In their recent book, Valerie Hudson and Adrienne denBoer assert that the eventual male to female imbalance among 20-to-29 year olds, which is scheduled to peak between 2025 and 2030 at just over 120 males for every 100 females, could have equally serious

social consequences. Are these valid critiques? They could be. But for now they're theoretical—beyond the realm of recent demographic experience and seemingly less disturbing to Beijing than the future costs of feeding, housing, educating and providing energy for additional millions.

The most interesting critique of the 2008 decision has been leveled by demographer Yong Cai and colleagues who argue that the OCP hardly matters at all. According to them, even if the policy were completely lifted tomorrow, China's current total fertility rate—which recent surveys indicate is between 1.5 and 1.6 children per woman—is unlikely to rise substantially. A recent survey among young couples in China finds that their ultimate childbearing goals average to about 1.6 children per family. Even in rural areas, where most couples can have at least two children without penalties, desired family size appears to be well below the 2.1 children per woman average needed for generational replacement.

The 2001 Birth Planning Law brought on substantial reforms. It omitted prior references to terminating unauthorized pregnancy and compulsory sterilization, and gave clients legal recourse to abuses, forcing provinces to adjust their practices. It forbids sex-selected abortion and encouraged a greater focus on women's health and informed choice of modern contraception, which the Health Ministry—and the UN Population Fund (UNFPA)—hoped would soon replace family-size restrictions as the guiding principle of China's population policy.

That major reform has yet to occur. Nonetheless, some demographers believe that provincial-level restrictions will be scaled back to a *de-facto* two-child policy in the next five years. More substantial population policy reforms could provide Beijing with a low-cost respite from the condemnation that it attracts as a consequence of its frequent human rights abuses.

Because a relatively large proportion of China's women are now in their peak reproductive years, and because those women's grandparents are living longer, births are projected to outpace deaths in the People's Republic for at least another 15 years, despite its population's subreplacement fertility. UN and US Census Bureau demographers project that China's population—now at about 1.33 billion and the world's largest—will grow and likely add another 70 million citizens (an increment larger than France's current population) before it crests and begins a slow decline sometime around 2025. Around then, India's still growing population will briskly pass it by—which appears to be just what China's current leadership prefers.

Photo Credit: One Child poster in China, April 2009 (by jimmiehomeschoolmom)

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