

WORLD

WHY CHINA NEEDS MORE CHILDREN

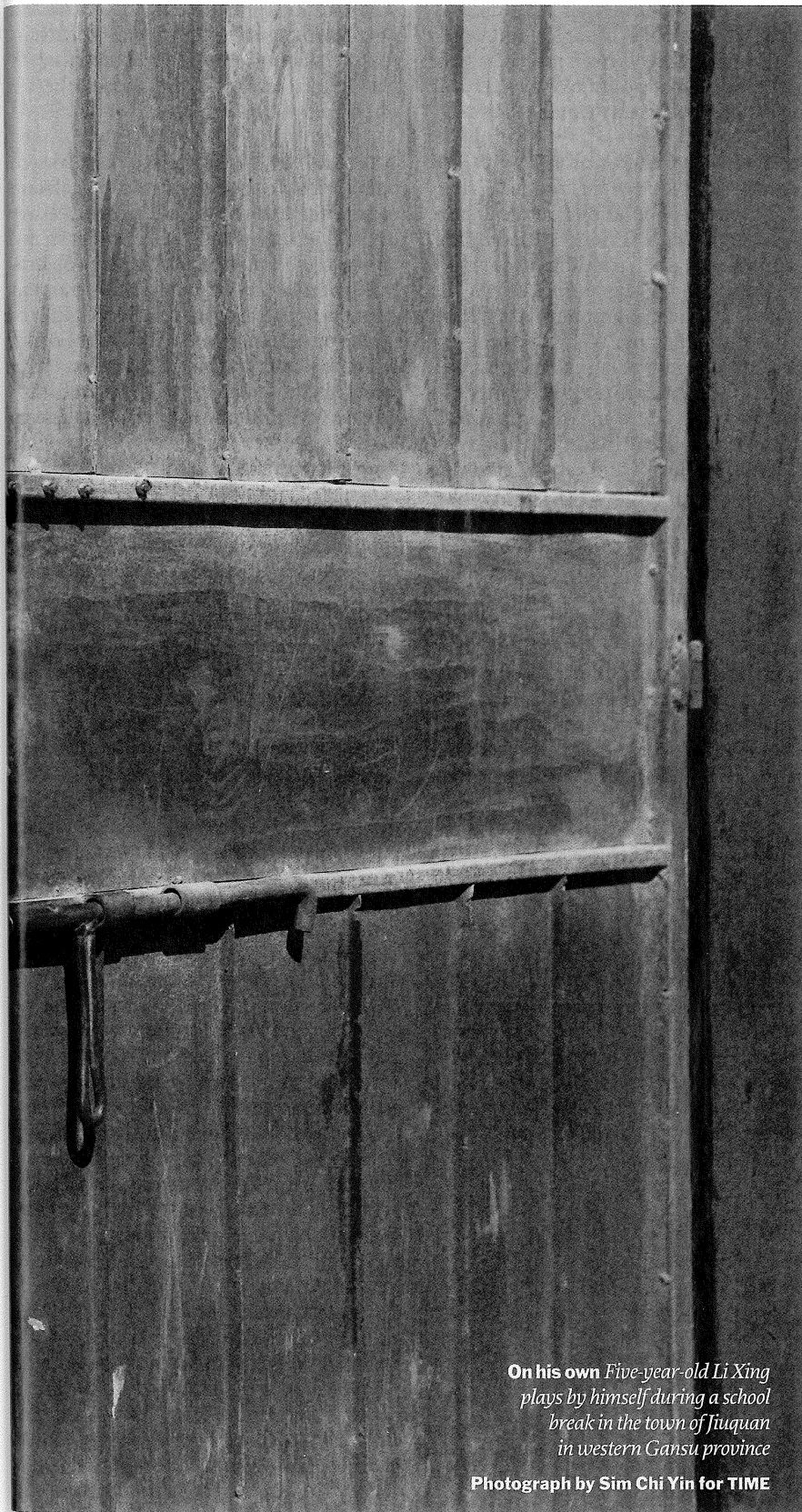
AFTER DECADES OF THE ONE-CHILD POLICY,

BEIJING WANTS ITS PEOPLE TO HAVE MORE

KIDS. IT MAY BE TOO LATE FOR THAT

BY HANNAH BEECH/JIUQUAN





On his own Five-year-old Li Xing plays by himself during a school break in the town of Jiuquan in western Gansu province

Photograph by Sim Chi Yin for TIME

IT HAS BEEN A LONG TIME SINCE LIU Jinghu and his wife enjoyed a weekend to themselves. Saturdays and Sundays in smoggy Beijing are dedicated to their only child, 2-year-old son Xiaojing: there are early-childhood exercise classes, singing sessions with other families and Lego-building sprees in a living room scattered with toys. Looming in their minds is the specter of expensive tutoring to get their toddler into a good school and, further into the future, the pressure to buy their son an apartment so he can persuade a woman to marry him. That property burden could cost Liu, a software-development manager, and his wife, a human-resources specialist, two decades' worth of salary. Such are the costs of raising a kid today in middle-class China.

Liu and his wife were themselves only children in a nation teeming with singletons because of China's one-child policy, which was unveiled in 1979 as a quick fix for a poor, populous society. The couple's lack of siblings means they are legally allowed to have two children. But Liu says he doesn't have the time, money or mental strength for another kid. "We don't want to spend our lives working just [for our child]," he says. "We want more from life than that."

The world's most populous nation, 1.35 billion strong, will soon have too few people—or, rather, too few of the right kind of people. That's because more than three decades of government-mandated family planning, often called the one-child policy, have succeeded beyond the architects' grandest dreams. Add to that the natural inclination of richer, more educated people like Liu and his wife to limit their family size, and China's population growth is projected to taper off in 15 years.

That would leave the People's Republic with a distorted population: too few youths, too few women and too many elderly. Writing in the *Population and Development Review*, a peer-reviewed journal published by the Population Council in New York City, three top Chinese demographers predict that "the one-child policy will be added to the other deadly errors in recent Chinese history," alongside the turbulent 1966–76 Cultural Revolution and a devastating man-made famine in 1959–61. "While those grave mistakes both cost tens of millions of lives, the harms done were relatively short-lived and were corrected

quickly afterward. The one-child policy, in contrast, will surpass them in impact.”

Ironically, the one-child policy now threatens to undermine the very economic success it helped spawn. The family-planning program, coupled with market reforms launched around the same time, is credited with catalyzing China's modern transformation. With fewer bellies to feed, the government turned a hand-to-mouth society into the world's second largest economy. Although many families, especially those in the countryside, are exempted from the one-child maximum, Chinese women bear, on average, about 1.5 children, compared with about 6 in the late 1960s. (For a nation to maintain its population, it needs a total fertility rate of at least 2.1 babies per woman.) By 2030, China's population is expected to peak at just short of 1.4 billion and then begin a long decline.

In implementing the largest social-engineering experiment in human history, the People's Republic has merely traded one population time bomb for another. China now faces a multitude of social woes usually seen in more-developed economies better equipped to handle these challenges. It is growing old before it grows rich—bringing about an explosion of elderly Chinese even as the government has presided over a fraying of the nation's socialist safety net.

Last year the working-age population shrank for the first time, a huge concern for a leadership that depends on plentiful labor to deliver economic growth—which is in turn needed to quell social instability. By limiting urban families to one child while allowing some rural ones to bear two, China has skewed its population against the type of citizen it needs in order to climb into the ranks of developed countries. Then there are the some 25 million extra males, a result of tradition-bound parents ensuring that their offspring quota is filled by a son. “I don't think the one-child policy was worth it,” says Mu Guangzong, a population expert at Peking University. “The people who made the policy never imagined all the problems we're facing right now. Their knowledge of demography was shallow. Now society has to pay heavily for their ignorance.”

After years of dawdling, China's leaders are trying to forestall the looming crisis. On Nov. 15 state media announced that President Xi Jinping had signed off on what days earlier was characterized as a “fine-tuning”

of the family-planning policy: couples in which one partner is a single child would be allowed to have two offspring. By some estimates, the policy shift could add 1 million babies to maternity wards each year.

The Problems of Paucity

BUT IT MAY BE TOO LITTLE, TOO LATE FOR A nation whose population problems have already spawned serious social dilemmas. “We don't need adjustments to the family-planning policy,” says Gu Baochang, a demographer at People's University in Beijing. “What we need is a phaseout of the whole system.” But will that really happen? Just a day after the one-child-policy reform was announced, Wang Pei'an, Vice Minister of the powerful National Health and Family Planning Commission, ruled out further changes, although another official sounded less pessimistic days later. Clearly, debate continues on when the deeply unpopular policy might be abolished.

But keeping the one-child policy going, even with some of its rules relaxed, could have a huge, harmful impact on the economy. According to economists at Citigroup, the following consequences of China's social engineering could shave 3.25 percentage points off the nation's yearly growth rate through 2030.

TOO FEW WORKERS During its decades of double-digit growth, China's competitive advantage came from its huge workforce. Today the country's labor pool is shrinking, and wages are soaring. For years, Wang Jinshi could depend on a constant supply of rural Chinese to make shoes at his factory in southern Foshan city. No more. Worse, the future supply of factory workers is imperiled. Last year, 13,600 Chinese elementary schools closed for lack of students. “The economic cycle is broken,” says Wang,

BECAUSE OF THE
ONE-CHILD POLICY,
CHINA'S POPULATION
HAS TOO FEW YOUTHS
AND WOMEN AND TOO
MANY ELDERLY

who constantly hustles to find workers. He now pays wages that are 35% higher than five years ago—and still his workers often leave after a few months because of better offers from other employers.

TOO FEW YOUTHS By 2050, 1 in 3 Chinese will be older than 60—a 430 million-strong cohort bigger than the entire population of the U.S. In developed nations like Japan, the elderly explosion is a huge problem. But Japan is far richer than China, and its elderly can expect subsidized, high-quality medical services and caregiving. China, by contrast, has shattered its “iron rice bowl,” the socialist term for cradle-to-grave government support. That leaves each single child potentially responsible for six old people—one set of parents and two sets of grandparents—a trend in China that is called “4-2-1.” Providing for the elderly is even harder now that hundreds of millions of Chinese are mobile, leaving the farms where the elderly live to work in cities where the jobs are.

TOO FEW WOMEN At the middle school in Fancheng, a quiet community in central China's Henan province, teacher Yin Le's seventh-grade class has 27 boys and 13 girls. As in other parts of rural China, residents are allowed to have a second child after a few years' wait, if the first baby is female or handicapped. Chinese tradition values boys over girls because sons carry on the family line. Through illegal yet common ultrasounds and sex-selective abortions—plus the occasional case of female infanticide and abandonment—parents have skewed the gender ratio so heavily that in some rural areas, 135 boys are born for every 100 girls. “What shall these boys do in the future?” says Yin. “How can they find a wife if there are not enough girls?”

Chinese men who find no mate to extend their family trees are called bare branches. Their mounting frustration terrifies the Communist Party; young, unattached men are the perfect protest demographic. And they have much more to protest than the scarcity of single women. For instance, they wonder why they graduate from college in record numbers yet cannot find decent white collar jobs because China's economy is still addicted to a labor-intensive model. They worry, too, about real estate. One of the reasons property markets in big cities are so inflated is that young men think that buying a home is the best

way to lure a potential wife. Starter apartments in Beijing now go for some 30 times a young worker's average annual income.

The Policy Worked—Too Well

THE SOCIAL ENGINEERS WHO DESIGNED the one-child policy never intended for it to hold for more than a generation. Even they referred to their experiment as temporary and laced the system with loopholes. In the cities, which even three decades ago seemed unmanageably bloated, many families were generally limited to a single child. But the rules were looser for farming communities: the countryside had more space, and agriculture needed more hands. As in the case of Liu and his wife, couples in which both parents were only children could have two kids. And ethnic minorities were allowed multiple children.

Still, local officials, whose promotions depended on keeping population figures low, enforced the rules with chilling zeal, resorting to compulsory sterilizations and abortions—even on women just days from delivery. Women in many rural areas are still required to undergo gynecological checkups four times a year to ensure they are not pregnant. Local governments have also milked the system by collecting “social-support fees,” as payments for illegal extra births are known. The fines are set locally and are often calculated at several times a person's annual income. Demographer He Yafu estimates conservatively that \$330 billion in such fees have been levied since the one-child policy began.

Government statisticians claim that 400 million fewer Chinese were born because of the policy. Most demographers say other factors contributed to the slowing population growth: as people become wealthier and more educated, they tend to have fewer kids. But there's no doubt that Beijing's family-planning bureaucracy has been brutally effective. Since the policy was instituted, there have been at least 335 million government-approved abortions, 200 million sterilizations and an unknowable number of medical checkups to prevent pregnancies among women who had already filled their quotas.

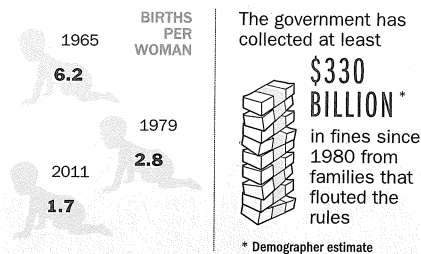
Chinese conventional wisdom is that the results justified the draconian measures: policing the nation's wombs helped China dramatically raise living standards. Per capita GDP is now \$6,000, compared with less than \$200 in 1980. China has pulled hundreds of millions of people out



PRICE OF SUCCESS

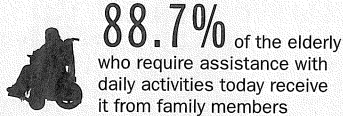
To combat poverty and overpopulation, China unveiled a one-child policy for many citizens in 1979. But the program has spawned social problems

BABY BUST



AGE SHIFT

In 2025, China will have more adults over 64 than children under 15

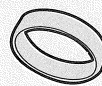


GENDER DISPARITY

CHINESE TRADITION VALUES BOYS OVER GIRLS, WHICH HAS SKEWED THE GENDER RATIO



There are 18 million more boys than girls under age 15 in China



By 2020,
30 MILLION

men of marriageable age may be unable to find a spouse

OTHER CONSEQUENCES

Crime rates, bride trafficking and sexual violence are rising



The gender imbalance may fuel social unrest. In 2010, China was rocked by 180,000 protests, riots and other mass incidents—roughly double the tally from five years earlier

Sources: China Health and Retirement Longitudinal Study; Chinese Academy of Social Sciences; Congressional-Executive Commission on China; Institute for the Study of Labour; United Nations; World Bank; World Factbook; Sun Liping, Tsinghua University

of poverty since the one-child policy began. “The consensus for a long time in China has been that fewer people is good because that puts less pressure on the economy and environment,” says Lu Jiehua, a social demographer at Peking University. “It's hard for leaders to go against decades of wisdom.”

But it's one thing to force people to have fewer children and quite another to make them have more. Relaxing the rules likely won't fix all the population imbalances. The precise group that China's leaders want to see increase its family size—the urban, educated middle class—hasn't shown much interest in doing so. “Because my wife and I grew up as only children, we don't see the need for big families,” says Liu, the software manager. “I guess we've gotten used to a society of only children.”

Inconvenient Truths

YET CHINA CONTINUES TO PROMOTE THE one-child policy as something other developing countries should emulate. Beijing acts as the wise older brother, dispensing advice to Asians, Africans and Latin Americans who wish to help their homelands replicate China's economic trajectory. Visiting delegations of social scientists rarely hear of the policy's more problematic consequences. Says demographer Gu: “I try to tell the foreigners I meet, ‘No, don't do what we did.’”

If all these delegations really wanted to learn from China, they'd do well to consult the statistics from the windswept region of Jiuquan, near the westernmost reaches of the Great Wall. Residents there have long been able to freely have two kids. Yet even without forced abortions and the mortifying tracking of women's menstrual cycles by government workers, Jiuquan's fertility rate is lower than the national average. You Shengguo, a 42-year-old villager, explains why he had no wish to expand his family beyond his only daughter. “It's better to raise one child well than have lots of whom you can't care for properly,” he says.

Equally significant, the gender disparity that plagues other parts of China doesn't exist in Jiuquan. At the Dingjiaba primary school, for instance, there are more girls than boys. Nature, it turns out, is better at regulating human demography than any Communist Party apparatus. After more than three decades of misguided family planning, that should be China's lesson to the world. —WITH REPORTING BY GU YONGQIANG/BEIJING AND CHENGCHENG JIANG/JIUQUAN ■