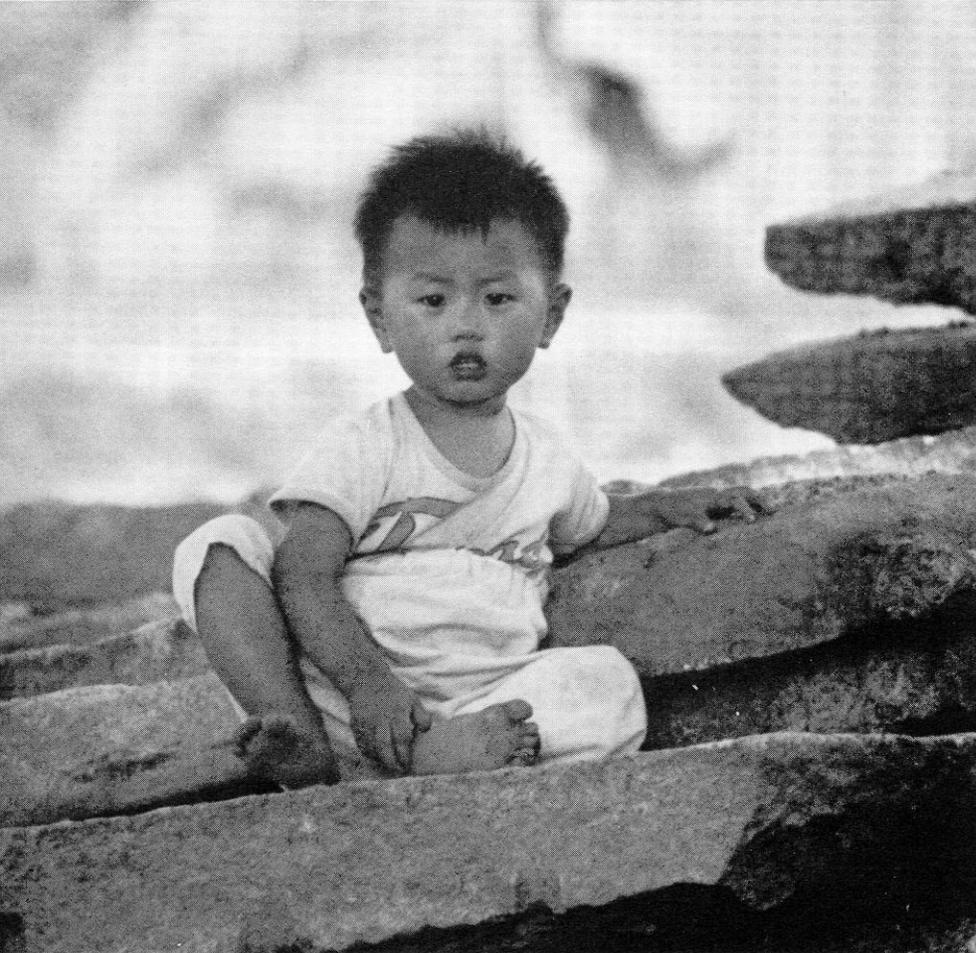


ONE CH

CHINA'S RURAL-URBAN



Photos: Dr Carol Vlassoff

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Is China, despite its policy of one child per family, experiencing a second "fertility peak"?

Recent news reports express official concern over an unexpected rise in the number of births in 1986 as compared with 1985. This increase was revealed by a population change survey conducted by China's State Statistical Bureau (SSB) at the end of 1986. The country's population experienced a net increase (births minus deaths) of 14.7 million people in 1986, in contrast to only 11.7 million in 1985. Since death rates remained low and constant (about 6.7 per thousand population), approximately 3 million more

people were added last year than previously anticipated.

The present fertility increase follows on the heels of international reports of a relaxing of China's birth control campaign. Central Document 7, issued in April 1984, while reiterating the critical need for family planning and a one-child policy for most couples, nevertheless allowed for second children under certain prescribed conditions. In Guandong and Guangxi, for example, families with one daughter and no sons were permitted to have a second child.

But the recent fertility rise may well lead to a reversal of such leniency. Commenting on this, Shen Yimin, Division Chief of SSB's

Department of Population, said, "We regard the increase in birthrates as very significant. It has aroused the attention of various ministries as well as delegates to the National People's Congress. If current fertility rates continue, we will exceed our target of 1.2 billion by the year 2000."

Natural and temporary phenomenon?

China's earlier "fertility peak" occurred in 1963 when the crude birthrate reached an estimated 49.8, which works out to about six children per family.

Although the 1986 rate of 20.8 represents a rise over the 1985 rate (17.8), it is still remarkably low in comparison with 1960 estimates. Moreover, as the large number of children born from 1963 to 1965 are now entering their peak child-bearing period, the current increase may be largely a reflection of the earlier rise and hence a natural and temporary phenomenon. In other words, 1986 couples may well be having the same number of children as 1985 cohorts; there are simply more of them to have children. While recognizing this possibility, Chinese experts continue to worry and to emphasize the need for close monitoring of population patterns.

High hopes are therefore pinned on the findings of China's in-depth fertility survey which was conducted by SSB prior to its population change survey. That information will help to explain present trends. (See *Reports*, July 1986.) Preliminary results from phase 1 of the IDRC-funded fertility study are soon to be published in Chinese, and in English shortly thereafter. However, the results of phase 2, which is currently under way, are awaited even more eagerly since they will provide greater insight into the recent fertility peak which succeeded phase 1 data collection.

Phase 2 covers six survey areas (five rural provinces and the municipality of Beijing), with a total sample of about 38 000 women.

Last April, during the interviewing period, representatives from IDRC and from the International Statistical Research Centre, which is providing technical assistance to the study, visited field sites in Beijing and Guandong. Observations from the interviews, as well as discussions with SSB project staff, indicate that the one-child policy is meeting considerable opposition, especially in rural areas.

Major factors in the policy's relatively low level of success in the countryside are the higher infant mortality rate there and the poorer quality of medical treatment. One woman interviewed in rural Guandong, wanting to assure the survival of at least one son, consented to sterilization only after her third delivery, which resulted in twins. Unfortunately, the twins died, after which it was discovered that her only son, the firstborn, was mentally handicapped. All of this, she reported, "left the family very sad and resentful of the

CHILD OR TWO?

PLIT



A Chinese survey indicates major opposition to the one-child policy, mainly in rural areas.

government". The experiences of such women will be written up as special case studies after the interviewing.

Insufficient incentives

Another reason for the apparent lack of success of the single-child policy in rural areas, explained the project staff, is the greater affluence of farmers compared with urban residents. One-child policy incentives are generally insufficient to persuade relatively prosperous rural families to forego the benefits of additional children.

Interestingly, incentives vary considerably from province to province, district to district, brigade to brigade, urban to rural areas, and even among urban centres.

In urban areas, one-child certificate holders enjoy certain common benefits. These include a family allowance of 5 Yuan (CA \$2.75) per month, priority for urban housing, free medical treatment for the child, assured entry into kindergarten (where scarce seats are highly valued), up to 12 months' paid maternity leave, and toys for the child distributed on a special day, each year.

In rural areas, on the other hand, incentives range from substantial to nonexistent. In the wealthier brigades, couples are paid 500 to 600 Yuan if they sign the certificate. Yet in others there are no such rewards. When asked about this discrepancy, the deputy director of the Guangdong Statistical Bureau explained that, because rural people tend to have more than one child, incentives are simply wasted. Many rural couples, he said, sign the certificate and accept payment, then proceed to have more children. He added that very few Chinese women, even among those who hold certificates, agree to be sterilized after only one child.

Legislation governing land distribution under what is known as the "responsibility system" tends to put an early brake on fertility, even for those couples failing to stop at only one child. For families with up to two children, land is allocated according to the number of family members. Those families with more than two children may not accrue additional land. Unoccupied land is held in reserve by the government for future generations and in-migrants from other parts of the country.

Some interviewees, particularly those in flourishing rural Guangdong, were remarkably undeterred by official directives. One proud young mother of one son determinedly planned to have another child, even though she had been visited by family planning workers armed with one-child propaganda. She also said that she and her husband, both factory-workers, had given up their land since they had no interest in farming.

'Vasectomies' didn't work

A further problem, reported by some rural couples who had signed the one-child certificate and appeared to have earnestly attempted to comply, was contraceptive failure. Survey personnel were surprised to find that in at least four cases where husbands of respondents had apparently been sterilized, pregnancies nevertheless resulted. These contraceptive failures were apparently due to a defective local variant of the vasectomy which has been discontinued. The existence of this indigenous technique was previously unknown to family planning officials, and its replacement by more reliable modern methods should contribute to greater acceptance of male sterilization.

Other survey respondents reported becoming pregnant while using an IUD but refused to

have an abortion. "It is not my fault that it didn't work," one woman explained, "so I am going to have this baby!"

In urban areas, by contrast, the one-child policy is having considerably more success. In Beijing especially, close adherence to the government's prescription was observed, though usually at the cost of great personal sacrifice to consenting couples. One 35-year-old woman, for instance, had been married only seven years, having deliberately postponed marriage in order to delay child-bearing. She had already had one son, after which she had used a variety of contraceptive methods including the IUD, condom, and rhythm (sometimes in combination). None had worked for her and she became pregnant twice. These pregnancies she dutifully aborted even though she confessed that she had really wanted two children.

Relaxing the policies?

Is there any way, then, of relaxing the rigid one-child policy to allow Chinese couples a little more freedom, while still preserving the goal of stabilizing the population at 1.2 billion by the year 2000?

In a recent article in *Population and Development Review*, John Bongaarts demonstrates that, if Chinese women were to postpone having their first child until age 27 and then wait four years to have a second child, China could keep the population from reaching 1.2 billion. One of the additional benefits of such a two-child rather than one-child policy, says Dr Bongaarts, would be the extra family support to parents in old age, reducing the need for high levels of government assistance. Female infanticide, which Chinese authorities claim is virtually nonexistent but which is still reported sporadically in the Western media, would also be curtailed.

Chinese policymakers, while impressed with such logic, are nonetheless skeptical. They worry that any relaxation of the one-child policy would result in a sudden rush of births among Chinese couples anxious to take advantage of the new freedom. "As soon as the policy opens up to permit two children," one researcher commented, "everyone will hurry to have another child. No one will be willing to wait four years in case the policy changes again!"

It therefore seems likely that the current policy will remain in effect for some time to come, but tempered by considerable tolerance for the daily problems and realities of Chinese families, as revealed by current research. ■

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