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# REPORTS

## THE FERTILITY REVOLUTION IN CHINA

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In the early 1970s, China had one of the highest population growth rates in the world. Its population, dangerously nearing the billion mark, made up one-fifth of the total world population. Concerned, the Chinese government set out to introduce a series of family planning policies.

What has happened since, as many demographers have observed, represents one of the most rapid "fertility transitions" in human history.

But the real social effects of this remarkable turnaround are only now beginning to emerge. The results of the second phase of the In-Depth Fertility Surveys were released in China earlier this year. The results of the first phase were made public in 1988.

China's State Statistical Bureau conducted the surveys with the help of the International Statistical Institute in the Hague and the governments of Norway, Finland, and Denmark.

The study involved interviews with married women aged 15-49 in various parts of China. It documented some dramatic changes.

At the time the Chinese government announced its first family planning program, women in China had an average of nearly six children. The "later, longer, fewer" campaign of 1972, which emphasized later ages for marriage and childbearing, longer intervals between births, and smaller families, showed positive signs of

getting the birth control message across. By the time the one-child-per-family policy was announced in 1979, fertility had fallen to 2.7 children per woman.

The one-child policy has led to even further reductions. Urban areas such as Beijing and Shanghai have essentially conformed to the policy, while rural areas have reached an average of about two children per family.

The fertility-reduction program has been successful. Indeed, it may have gone farther than some wanted.

### Not All Positive

Because China has now attained fertility levels impressively lower than most other developing countries, researchers are beginning to look at how Chinese society has adapted to the family planning programs. Not all of the developments have been positive.

Dr Zeng Yi, Deputy Director of the Institute of Population Research at the Beijing University, says the discrepancy in statistics between rural and urban settings could be a major problem.

He predicts that, in the future, only 8% of rural women will comply with the one-child policy, with the average settling at 2.5 children per woman. But 61% of urban women will have only one child.

This, in the long run, could mean a shortage of young people in cities to care for their elderly parents. "Serious labour shortages and a significant health care burden imposed by aging urban populations will plague Chinese cities in the next century unless policies are introduced to mediate these effects," Zeng Yi says.

These proper policies, he says, should include the encouragement of rural youths to migrate to towns and cities and greater consistency in family planning in rural and urban areas. Stricter enforcement of birth control, for instance, may be needed in the countryside, whereas some relaxation of the one-child policy could be considered in urban areas.

The birth control programs have also been unable to change the ingrained preference for a son among married couples. Despite government efforts, increased education, and modernization, more than 50% of respondents in the fertility surveys wanted a son as their first child, compared to only 5% who wanted a daughter. The others did not express a preference.

Often, those couples whose first child was a male signed the one-child certificate, whereas those whose first offspring was female went on to have other children in the hope of having a boy.

### Blend of Old and New

Despite the potential problems of urban underpopulation and the inherent favouritism of son preference, the Chinese have managed to fuse successfully the modern notion of family planning with tradition. The results of the In-depth Fertility Surveys showed this fusion of attitudes and behaviour relating to fertility and family planning.

One of the main topics the study concentrated on was the age of Chinese couples at marriage and co-residence. An important component of China's birth control program has been the encouragement of late marriage and the postponement of childbearing. The legal age of marriage was raised from 18 to 20 in 1980 but the officially recommended age has been higher — 23 for rural women and 25 for urban women.

Since 1982, marriage age has averaged well over 20-years-old in all of China's provinces. Indeed, average marriage ages have been similar to those of developed countries for nearly two decades.

Many traditional marriage customs, however, remain largely intact. The tendency, for instance, to have both an official state marriage and a traditional family ceremony still exists.

Co-residence with parents after marriage is also still common in China; between 70 and 85% of all couples identified in the surveys lived with their parents for some time after marriage. Despite the later ages of marriage, there has actually been a slight increase in the custom of co-residence with parents.

Marriage partners and freedom of choice were also investigated by the fertility surveys.

Traditionally, the selection of appropriate marital partners was the domain of Chinese parents through arranged marriages. The Marriage Laws, introduced in 1950 and revised in 1980, outlawed many ancient practices, including early marriage, arranged marriage, dowry, and brideprice.

Although some of these traditions still persist, the laws have provided support to those who want more control over marriage decisions.

The surveys indicate that parental involvement in marriage has slowly diminished, with half of the women in Beijing stating their parents were not involved. But parents are not completely out of the picture.

"What appears to be happening in marriage decisions in China is that, although parents today do not have absolute control over their children's marriages like in earlier generations, young people are not necessarily shutting their parents out of the process either," says Nancy Riley and Zhen Jian, two researchers involved in the fertility survey.

At a time when the independence of children and young adults has increased, there has ironically been a stressed interdependence among family members.

This development in China is divergent from classical theories of modernization that hold that, as societies modernize, parents and children become increasingly detached from one another. Somehow, China has managed to balance increasing child independence with an emphasis on joint decision-making in the family.

Another area of the study focused on breastfeeding. In many parts of the world, declining fertility rates and the emancipation of women from traditional household roles have eroded customary practices of prolonged breastfeeding. In these countries mothers have abandoned breastfeeding completely or weaned newborns quicker because of the availability of breast milk substitutes and work opportunities outside the home.

Chinese mothers have not apparently adopted this practice. Instead, they still breast-feed for periods lasting more than 2 years, especially in rural areas. Paradoxically, the fertility decline has in fact produced a recent increase in feeding durations. Chinese women tend to breast-feed the last child longer than the earlier offspring.

The one-child policy has had the unexpected effect of actually extending the traditional periods of feeding.

IDRC participated in the fertility surveys through the training of Chinese researchers. Members of IDRC taught specific skills for each stage of the project — sampling, survey practice, data processing, data analysis, and report writing. This training reduced Chinese dependence on foreign expertise.

The In-Depth Fertility Surveys concerned a subject of the highest national importance in China. Previous population information came mainly from the 1982 census and two sample surveys that provided only limited information.

The in-depth surveys were unique in gathering a wealth of data on the human factors behind demographic trends and public policies.

They revealed the attitudes of the people toward the one-child policy, family planning behaviour, and fertility preferences. As such, these tools of information can be considered by policymakers to devise strategies appropriate for sustainable development in China.

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