



Due to the 'one-child' policy, China's population growth rate is now about the same as the industrialized world's.

THE ONE-CHILD SOLUTION

DECLINING FERTILITY IN CHINA

By DR CAROL VLASSOFF

China is undergoing a demographic transition with a rapidity never before experienced in the history of mankind.

Crude birthrates plummeted from an estimated high of about 50 births per thousand population in 1963 to only 21 in 1983. Death rates also declined markedly. As a result, the population growth rate during the 1980-85 period — 1.17 percent per year — approximated that of the industrialized world.

These dramatic declines have been attributed largely to China's vigorous family planning program, the promotion of one-child families, and a system of related rewards and penalties. The goal is to halt population growth by the year 2000 at 1.2 billion, and gradually to reduce the population size in the years thereafter.

Chinese authorities have devoted considerable attention to research on population characteristics and trends in the past few years. This represents a major boost in the status of demography in the People's Republic.

Demographic statistics used to be based mostly on speculation and inferences from press reports, with occasional references to

a little known official population registration system. Since 1982, however, information has been collected and reported in a vigorous manner from a number of sources: registration figures for births, deaths, and year-end population totals from 1950 to 1982; the 1982 population census, which was conducted with meticulous care; a 10 percent sample survey of census questionnaires; and a one-per-thousand sample fertility survey, also conducted in 1982.

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The most current contributions to China's growing bank of demographic information are coming from an in-depth fertility survey conducted in April 1985 by the State Statistical Bureau (SSB).

Assistance was provided by IDRC and Norwegian and Danish donors. IDRC's role was to provide training for the Chinese

researchers in the survey design and methodology.

The results, once compiled and analyzed, will provide a wealth of information on fertility, contraception, abortion, infant mortality, family size preferences, and attitudes toward government policy — subjects never before investigated in detail in China.

The survey covered two provinces, Hebei and Shaanxi, and one municipality, Shanghai. These areas contain about 10 percent of China's total population. Hebei is typical of the coastal provinces of northern China; Shaanxi, of the inland regions; and Shanghai, of the large metropolitan centres.

In each area a random sample of 5000-7000 households was selected. From these, all women of child-bearing age who had ever been married were interviewed, amounting to more than 13 000 respondents.

The quality of the data was exceptional, as was the speed with which they were collected. The remarkably high response rate of more than 95 percent in each of the three areas reflects both the dedication of the survey team members and the enthusiastic cooperation of the respondents.

The interviewers, many of whom held other jobs as family planning workers, worked late into the night studying for examinations designed to assess their readiness to undertake the fieldwork. "Unless we obtained marks of over 90 percent," explained one interviewer, "we were not allowed to participate. We didn't do it for money, only as part of our regular jobs. It was a wonderful opportunity to learn how to conduct a scientific survey."

As for the high level of public participation, it can largely be explained by the pre-survey efforts of the research team. "The survey was advertised in advance in newspapers and billboards," said one of the survey supervisors, "and people were urged to cooperate. This meant that they were prepared for the survey and even felt honoured to be chosen. We also arranged interview times to suit the women so that the questionnaire was not viewed as an inconvenience but rather as a novel, and even special, event."

The preliminary tabulations now available contain a number of interesting insights. And the information appears to be remarkably consistent with the 1982 census results and other sources.

The success of China's family planning program is demonstrated by a dramatic fall in fertility. The total fertility rate (TFR) — roughly the number of children per completed family — declined from 5.4 in the 1940s to 2.6 in 1981 for the country as a whole.

The 1985 in-depth survey revealed further declines, at least for the three study areas, with TFRs of 2.4, 2.3, and 1.1 in Hebei, Shaanxi, and Shanghai, respectively. These large rural-urban differences between the provinces and Shanghai are attributed by Chinese researchers to the greater intensity of family planning programs in urban areas. They conclude that if China's population growth is to be halted at the 1.2 billion mark by the year 2000, family planning efforts will have to be concentrated in rural areas.

Another important factor contributing to lower fertility is the transition to later marrying ages of women over the past 30 years. The in-depth survey revealed that in Shanghai, for example, 42 percent of the oldest cohort of women (aged 45–49) were married during their teens, compared with only 3 percent of those aged 20–24. This increase in age at marriage is mainly the result of a national policy encouraging delayed marriage and of a weakening of the tradition of arranged marriages.

The use of birth control in China approximates that of the industrialized countries, with about 70 percent of married women of reproductive ages practicing contraception in 1982. In the three surveyed areas, 70–80 percent of the women interviewed had used at least one family planning method, and the large majority were practicing birth control at the time of the study: 83 percent in Shanghai, 76 percent in Hebei, and 69 percent in Shaanxi.

Chinese researchers were concerned that a small but significant proportion of women were not using birth control but already had one or two children. These were seen as the most important target for family planning information.

Since 1979, in keeping with the one-child-per-family policy, the Chinese government has been issuing single-child certificates to

couples with one baby who pledge to have no more. In 1982, the one-per-thousand survey revealed that 43 percent of single-offspring mothers had accepted the one-child certificate. Only 6 percent of certificate holders interviewed had failed to maintain their pledge, nearly all of them from rural areas.

Infant deaths among certificate-holding families were amazingly rare. Family planning officers attributed this to the fact that an only child is better cared for because by law he or she is entitled to superior medical services. Furthermore, an only child does not have to compete with siblings for parental care and attention.

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Following the traditional Chinese preference for male offspring, 60 percent of the certified children were boys, 40 percent girls. In effect, couples were more likely to agree not to have any more children if their first baby was a boy rather than a girl. The imbalance was, again, more pronounced in rural areas.

Data on one-child certificate holders from the in-depth survey have not yet been analyzed but preliminary results indicate an increasing acceptance of the one-child norm. In Shanghai, for instance, four-fifths of sampled women had borne only one child, compared with less than half the respondents in Shaanxi and Hebei. The researchers attribute these differences to variations in infant mortality rates among the three areas — from 19 deaths per 1000 births in Shanghai to 35 per 1000 in the other two provinces. (It is common for rural couples to have several children in the fear that one or more will die.)

Varying infant mortality reflects divergent social and health conditions: in Shanghai, for example, the large majority of deliveries take place in hospitals, whereas in the more isolated provinces most of the births occur at home. Thus, researchers note that if the one-child family policy is to succeed in rural areas, health conditions there must be substantially improved.

CONVINCING THE PEASANTS

In spite of its record to date, China's population policy still faces numerous challenges, including the need to improve family planning acceptance in rural areas. Many Chinese express doubt as to whether the policy's success in the countryside will ever match that of the metropolitan areas. The "responsibility system", which permits the sale of surplus produce on the open market, has already greatly enhanced the welfare of rural peasants, enabling some to provide for several children independently. They may well be willing, therefore, to forego some of the public benefits offered to one-child families.

Another challenge is the reversal of public prejudice in favour of sons so that couples will be content with only one child, whether male or female. This radical change in sex preference has already begun, and there is little concrete evidence of female infanticide or neglect.

One researcher noted that ancient proverbs in praise of girls are being revived. One, for example, compares boys to jack-ets, which are meant primarily for appearance and are easily removed. Girls, on the other hand, are like undershirts: their value is less obvious but they are worn close to the heart!

It will be fascinating to follow the future course of demographic trends in China, the world's most populous nation. Indeed, if current enthusiasm for fertility surveys continues, the resulting documentation will be rich and plentiful. □

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Photo: Carol Vlassoff