# The True History of China's Disastrous One-Child Policy

## Reform Is Too Little, Too Late

*Martin King Whyte*

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WILLIAM HONG / REUTERS

*A preschool student looks up as other children take an afternoon nap in a classroom of a school for children of migrant workers in Jiaxing, Zhejiang province, January 10, 2013.*

On October 29, 2015, the Chinese Communist Party announced that all couples will now be allowed to have two children, thus ending the 35-year enforcement of that nation's one-child policy. In response, some have suggested that although fertility in China is now so low that a one-child policy is no longer needed or desirable, it was perhaps justified when it was launched in 1980. At the time, so the argument goes, former Chairman Mao Zedong's long-term opposition to birth control had produced runaway population growth that threatened to impoverish

the nation and undermine party rule. And however coercive the one-child policy was, many believe that it succeeded in preventing roughly 400 million births, thus benefiting China and the entire world, as The Washington Post observed in its October 31 editorial praising the ending of the policy. The facts say otherwise.

It is true that Mao is on record claiming on multiple occasions that rapid population growth was not a problem for a socialist country such as China. However, as on so many other topics, Mao was anything but consistent on this issue. For example, in 1957, Mao stated that China needed to draw up national plans to regulate reproduction. He denounced the “anarchism” of uncontrolled births and advocated a national campaign to promote birth control. He pushed for the establishment of a governmental agency to regulate births, which was done in 1964, after China recovered from the disastrous Great Leap Forward famine. Then, in 1970, well before China implemented the one-child policy and while Mao was still very much in charge, China made its momentous shift from voluntary family planning to mandatory birth limits.

That policy was symbolized by the slogan “Later, longer, fewer,” meaning delaying marriage until one's mid-20s, spacing out births by at least four years, and having fewer children overall—only two for urban couples and three for rural families. Highly coercive enforcement also began during the 1970s; women who became pregnant “over quota” faced heavy pressure to submit to abortions and sometimes sterilization. Between 1971 and 1979, the total number of abortions performed in China increased from 3.91 million to 7.86 million and of sterilizations from 1.74 million to 5.29 million; intrauterine device (IUD) insertions, the preferred method of limiting births in rural areas, also roughly doubled. If prohibited pregnancies were carried to term, the resulting children would be denied schooling and welfare benefits. There are reports of these “black person, black household” children during this period, but it is impossible to estimate their numbers.

KIM KYUNG-HOON / REUTERS

*A child holds a Chinese national flag in front of a portrait of China's late Chairman Mao Zedong at Tiananmen Square in Beijing, June 4, 2013.*

Key to enforcing the system were grass-roots family-planning workers, who often functioned as “menstrual monitors,” keeping detailed records on the birth and contraceptive histories as well as the monthly cycles of all the women they supervised. That way, they could intervene at an early stage if a woman became pregnant without permission. The campaign drove China’s fertility rate down to much lower levels than one would expect in an agrarian society, from about six projected births per woman in her lifetime (the total fertility rate, or TFR) in 1970 to only 2.7 to 2.8 by the end of the decade. Indeed, about 70 percent of the decline of China’s fertility from 1970 to the present occurred during the 1970s, prior to the launching of the one-child policy. In fact, a study by Western demographers published soon after the one-child policy was launched demonstrated that if China had started with these already reduced fertility rates and opted instead to maintain a two-child limit in combination with a minimum marriage age of 25, China could have reached the then official population growth target (to remain under 1.2 billion in 2000) without the increased coercion and abuses required to enforce a one-child limit. In short, there was absolutely no compelling justification for China to shift to a one-child policy in 1980. Nevertheless, after Mao’s death in 1976, China’s impatient reformist leaders,

desperate to find ways to increase the economic growth rate per capita, began in 1978 to contemplate tightening the screws by shifting to a one-child policy. Chairman Deng Xiaoping and his colleagues recognized that China was falling ever further behind its dynamic neighbors in East Asia, and they also saw that by promoting economic growth and raising living standards, they could help repair the damage done to the party's authority and image by the Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution. They desperately wanted to avoid having future economic gains diverted to feeding more people instead of raising living standards.

The planned campaign quickly received supposedly scientific justification from demographic projections carried out by cyberneticist Song Jian and his colleagues, starting in 1979. Song, who had received a Ph.D. in engineering from Bauman Moscow State Technical University and would rise to become a member of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party and president of the Chinese Academy of Engineering, had traveled abroad earlier in the decade and had become aware of, and strongly influenced by, the alarmist claims documented in the Club of Rome's 1972 study The Limits to Growth. Based that study's Malthusian ideas, Song had become convinced that it was necessary for China to reduce its birthrate as quickly as possible. And so he made the bizarre claim that China's optimal population in the year 2080 would be under 700 million. His projections showed that in order to hit that mark, China would have to limit births to something close to one child per family. (The 1982 Chinese census counted the population as 1.008 billion.) In subsequent years, The Limits to Growth and other doomsday "population bomb" predictions (the title of a 1968 bestseller by Stanford University Professor Paul Ehrlich) were widely discredited in the West, but they remained the basis for official state policy in China for the next 35 years.

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*Young gymnasts practice pull-up on a bar at a gymnasium of a sports school in Jiaxing, Zhejiang province, April 11, 2015.*

The launch of the one-child policy in 1980 led to a further sharp ratcheting up of official coercion and abuse. In 1983, surgical birth control procedures performed (abortions, sterilizations, and IUD insertions) hit a high of 53 million—more than double the 1979 total—and many of them were anything but voluntary. Despite the massive increase in coercion, the one-child policy was not very effective in lowering fertility further, at least initially. The reasons are complex. In part, the campaign's overwhelming emphasis on controlling births led to a relative neglect of the other two goals of the predecessor campaign of the 1970s: late marriage and spacing between births. Paradoxically, 1980 was also the year that China issued a revised version of its 1950 Marriage Law of the People's Republic of China. The new rules on minimum marriage ages unintentionally provided legal justification for marriage in one's early 20s (20 for brides and 22 for grooms). As a result, the average age at first marriage fell by two years. Since birthrates are a product not only of how many babies couples have but of how many such couples there are, the sudden expansion of the pool of married couples led to an upward rebound in birthrates. The rate then fluctuated for most of the 1980s. In 1990, it was actually higher than in 1980, when the one-child policy was launched. China's fertility rates began to fall again at the very end of the 1980s and have

been below replacement levels since the early 1990s. The main reason for this change, though, is not the policy but China's rapid economic development. As the popular saying has it, "Economic development is the best contraceptive." Around the world, wherever economic development occurs, the trends of rising urbanization, incomes, and educational levels lead to declining fertility rates, as parents invest more resources in their own consumption and a smaller number of children. China's TFR today is estimated to be in the 1.4 to 1.6 range, which is pretty much what you would expect given its current level of development and is increasingly in line with those of its East Asian neighbors.

But of course China's neighbors reached their current low fertility levels through a combination of voluntary family-planning campaigns and economic growth, without the massive abuses and suffering produced by enforcement of the one-child policy. The claim that there are 400 million fewer Chinese today because of the one-child policy is also completely bogus, since most of the fertility decline occurred before that policy was launched (and the 1970s reduction would total far fewer than 400 million), and the further reductions since 1980 are primarily the result of China's economic boom.

Married Chinese couples will now be allowed to have two children if they want. But that doesn't mean they have been granted real power to decide their family's size. Under the new policy, if a couple has had two children and wants a third, the parents will once again face penalties for violating official birth limits, just as Chinese urbanites did during the 1970s. At the same time, China's extraordinarily rapid drop in fertility starting in 1970 has produced major crises—a rapidly aging population, distorted sex ratios, millions of unmarriageable males, and a growing labor shortage—from which China will suffer for decades to come. China's one-child policy may have ended, but not before inflicting lasting damage that the relaxation will do little to heal.

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MARTIN KING WHYTE is John Zwaanstra Professor of International Studies and Sociology, Emeritus at Harvard University. This essay is based on the evidence presented in Martin King Whyte, Wang Feng, and Yong Cai, "Challenging Myths about China's One-Child Policy," *The China Journal*, July 2015.
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