# China’s Demographic Crisis: Declining Population and Aging Society

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## Introduction

China is undergoing an unprecedented demographic shift: after decades of rapid growth, its population has begun to shrink and age. In 2022, China’s population declined for the first time since the great famine of 1961, heralding the end of its long era of expansion[[1]](https://www.reuters.com/world/china/chinas-population-drops-2nd-year-raises-long-term-growth-concerns-2024-01-17/#:~:text=That%20was%20well%20above%20the,of%20the%20Mao%20Zedong%20era). This trend accelerated in 2023 when the population fell by **2.08 million people (a 0.15% drop)** to a total of 1.409 billion[[2]](https://www.reuters.com/world/china/chinas-population-drops-2nd-year-raises-long-term-growth-concerns-2024-01-17/#:~:text=effects%20on%20the%20economy%27s%20growth,potential). The birth rate has plunged to record lows while deaths have risen, resulting in natural decrease. Only about **9.02 million births** occurred in 2023 versus **11.1 million deaths**, driving the population decline[[3]](https://www.reuters.com/world/china/chinas-population-drops-2nd-year-raises-long-term-growth-concerns-2024-01-17/#:~:text=contained%20until%20authorities%20abruptly%20lifted,curbs%20in%20December%202022). China’s birth rate hit a historic nadir of **6.39 births per 1,000 people** in 2023, and the death rate climbed to its highest level since 1974[[4]](https://www.reuters.com/world/china/chinas-population-drops-2nd-year-raises-long-term-growth-concerns-2024-01-17/#:~:text=%2A%20China%27s%20population%20drops%200.15,to%2011.1%20mln). The country’s once-youthful age structure is rapidly greying: over **21% of Chinese citizens are now aged 60 or above**[[5]](https://www.reuters.com/world/china/chinas-population-drops-2nd-year-raises-long-term-growth-concerns-2024-01-17/#:~:text=China%27s%20population%20aged%2060%20and,04%20million%20in%202022). This demographic turn has profound implications for China’s economy and society, as a shrinking workforce must support a growing elderly population. In this report, we examine the scale and causes of China’s demographic crisis, its economic and social impacts, and the measures being taken to address the challenges of a declining, aging population.

*Figure: China’s annual population change from 1960 to 2023. After peaking in the 2010s, China’s population growth slowed to zero and turned negative. The country saw its first population decline in six decades in 2022, followed by an even larger drop in 2023*[*[1]*](https://www.reuters.com/world/china/chinas-population-drops-2nd-year-raises-long-term-growth-concerns-2024-01-17/#:~:text=That%20was%20well%20above%20the,of%20the%20Mao%20Zedong%20era)[*[2]*](https://www.reuters.com/world/china/chinas-population-drops-2nd-year-raises-long-term-growth-concerns-2024-01-17/#:~:text=effects%20on%20the%20economy%27s%20growth,potential)*. These back-to-back declines mark a historic pivot point in China’s demographic trajectory.*

## Scale and Recent Trends of Population Decline

China’s population decline, while small in percentage terms so far, signals the start of a long-term downward trend. The **2022** census data recorded a net drop of about **850,000 people**, the first population shrinkage since 1961[[1]](https://www.reuters.com/world/china/chinas-population-drops-2nd-year-raises-long-term-growth-concerns-2024-01-17/#:~:text=That%20was%20well%20above%20the,of%20the%20Mao%20Zedong%20era). In **2023** the decline widened to **2.08 million people**, leaving China with 1.409 billion residents[[2]](https://www.reuters.com/world/china/chinas-population-drops-2nd-year-raises-long-term-growth-concerns-2024-01-17/#:~:text=effects%20on%20the%20economy%27s%20growth,potential). Though the decline rate (0.15% annually) seems modest, it is occurring earlier and faster than previously anticipated. United Nations projections now forecast that China’s population will **shrink by 109 million people by 2050** – more than triple the decline predicted just a few years ago[[6]](https://www.reuters.com/world/china/chinas-population-drops-2nd-year-raises-long-term-growth-concerns-2024-01-17/#:~:text=Long,their%20previous%20forecast%20in%202019). If current trends persist, China’s population will continue contracting through the end of the 21st century, potentially falling below 800 million by 2100 under some scenarios[[7]](https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/12/05/key-facts-about-chinas-declining-population/#:~:text=The%20UN%20forecasts%20that%20China%E2%80%99s,48%20in%202100)[[8]](https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/12/05/key-facts-about-chinas-declining-population/#:~:text=China%E2%80%99s%202022%20total%20fertility%20rate,three%20children%20beginning%20in%202021). Notably, **India surpassed China as the world’s most populous nation in 2023**[[9]](https://www.reuters.com/world/china/chinas-population-drops-2nd-year-raises-long-term-growth-concerns-2024-01-17/#:~:text=India%20surpassed%20China%20as%20the,rise%20between%20Beijing%20and%20Washington), underscoring the swiftness of China’s demographic turnaround.

Several indicators illustrate the severity of China’s demographic slowdown. The **crude birth rate** has collapsed to record lows. In 2023 it was around **6.4 births per 1,000 people**, down from an already low 6.8 in 2022[[4]](https://www.reuters.com/world/china/chinas-population-drops-2nd-year-raises-long-term-growth-concerns-2024-01-17/#:~:text=%2A%20China%27s%20population%20drops%200.15,to%2011.1%20mln). By contrast, the crude death rate has risen to **7.9 per 1,000** – the highest in decades[[10]](https://www.reuters.com/world/china/chinas-population-drops-2nd-year-raises-long-term-growth-concerns-2024-01-17/#:~:text=China%27s%202023%20rate%20of%207,37%20deaths%20in%202022). This means deaths now outnumber births each year, causing natural population decrease. Total annual births have plummeted to single-digit millions (9.0 million in 2023) while annual deaths have exceeded 11 million[[3]](https://www.reuters.com/world/china/chinas-population-drops-2nd-year-raises-long-term-growth-concerns-2024-01-17/#:~:text=contained%20until%20authorities%20abruptly%20lifted,curbs%20in%20December%202022). For context, China was recording over 17 million births per year in the early 1990s; today’s birth figures are roughly half that level. The **total fertility rate (TFR)** – the number of children a woman is expected to bear – is estimated around **1.1–1.2**, far below the replacement level of 2.1 needed to sustain the population[[8]](https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/12/05/key-facts-about-chinas-declining-population/#:~:text=China%E2%80%99s%202022%20total%20fertility%20rate,three%20children%20beginning%20in%202021). This places China among the lowest-fertility countries in the world. Such persistently low birth rates, if not reversed, guarantee a continued decline in population in the coming decades.

*Figure: China’s birth rate (green line) versus death rate (purple line) from 1950 to 2023. The birth rate has fallen steeply over the past few decades, reaching a record low in 2023, while the death rate has gradually risen. In recent years the two lines have intersected – deaths now exceed births – resulting in natural population decline*[*[3]*](https://www.reuters.com/world/china/chinas-population-drops-2nd-year-raises-long-term-growth-concerns-2024-01-17/#:~:text=contained%20until%20authorities%20abruptly%20lifted,curbs%20in%20December%202022)[*[10]*](https://www.reuters.com/world/china/chinas-population-drops-2nd-year-raises-long-term-growth-concerns-2024-01-17/#:~:text=China%27s%202023%20rate%20of%207,37%20deaths%20in%202022)*. Historical events like the 1960s famine and the one-child policy (implemented in 1980) left visible impacts on these trends.*

Equally alarming is the **rapid aging** of China’s populace. Improvements in longevity coupled with the long-term drop in birth rates mean that seniors form an ever-larger share of the population. By 2023, China had **297 million people aged 60 or above**, accounting for **21.1%** of the population[[5]](https://www.reuters.com/world/china/chinas-population-drops-2nd-year-raises-long-term-growth-concerns-2024-01-17/#:~:text=China%27s%20population%20aged%2060%20and,04%20million%20in%202022). This elderly cohort grew by nearly 17 million in just one year (up from 280 million in 2022)[[5]](https://www.reuters.com/world/china/chinas-population-drops-2nd-year-raises-long-term-growth-concerns-2024-01-17/#:~:text=China%27s%20population%20aged%2060%20and,04%20million%20in%202022). China’s median age has risen above 38 years, and the workforce is already shrinking in absolute terms. The **working-age population (15-59)** fell to about 858 million in 2024, representing 60.9% of the populace, down from 70% a decade ago[[11]](https://www.china-briefing.com/news/chinas-demographic-shift-how-population-decline-will-impact-doing-business-in-the-country/#:~:text=a%20rapidly%20aging%20population,total%20of%20858%20million%20people). Conversely, the dependency ratio – the number of dependents (young and old) per working adult – is climbing as the balance tilts toward more retirees. By **2035**, the retirement-age population (60+) is projected to exceed **400 million**, meaning nearly one in three Chinese will be senior citizens[[12]](https://www.reuters.com/world/china/chinas-population-drops-2nd-year-raises-long-term-growth-concerns-2024-01-17/#:~:text=The%20country%27s%20retirement,about%20280%20million%20people%20currently). To put that in perspective, China will have more elderly people in 2035 than the entire population of the United States[[12]](https://www.reuters.com/world/china/chinas-population-drops-2nd-year-raises-long-term-growth-concerns-2024-01-17/#:~:text=The%20country%27s%20retirement,about%20280%20million%20people%20currently). This greying wave raises concerns about pension sustainability: researchers at the Chinese Academy of Sciences warn that the **national pension fund could be depleted by 2035** if current trends continue[[12]](https://www.reuters.com/world/china/chinas-population-drops-2nd-year-raises-long-term-growth-concerns-2024-01-17/#:~:text=The%20country%27s%20retirement,about%20280%20million%20people%20currently). Clearly, the demographic writing is on the wall – China faces a future of fewer births, more deaths, and a rapidly aging citizenry, posing enormous challenges to its economic vitality and social support systems.

## Underlying Causes of Low Birth Rates and Aging

China’s demographic challenges have been driven by a confluence of long-term policy decisions, social changes, and economic factors that have drastically reduced fertility rates. A primary cause is the legacy of the **One-Child Policy**, which was enforced from 1980 until 2015. For over three decades, most Chinese families were restricted to having only a single child. While this policy successfully curbed population growth, it also meant significantly fewer youngsters were born, creating a smaller base of future parents[[13]](https://www.reuters.com/world/china/chinas-population-drops-2nd-year-raises-long-term-growth-concerns-2024-01-17/#:~:text=Births%20in%20the%20country%20have,having%20children%20is%20more%20expensive). Even after the one-child mandate was relaxed (to two children in 2016 and three children in 2021), China’s birth rate continued to decline[[8]](https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/12/05/key-facts-about-chinas-declining-population/#:~:text=China%E2%80%99s%202022%20total%20fertility%20rate,three%20children%20beginning%20in%202021). The decades of strict population control left an irreversible imprint: today there are fewer women of childbearing age, and many families have gotten used to the idea of having only one child[[14]](https://www.china-briefing.com/news/chinas-demographic-shift-how-population-decline-will-impact-doing-business-in-the-country/#:~:text=One%20of%20the%20key%20drivers,fertility%20rate%20may%20accelerate%20further). Furthermore, the one-child era contributed to a **skewed sex ratio** (due to a cultural preference for sons), resulting in millions more men than women – another demographic distortion that can depress birth rates in the long run[[15]](https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/12/05/key-facts-about-chinas-declining-population/#:~:text=China%20is%20among%20the%20countries,to%20a%202020%20UN%20report).

Beyond policy, **socioeconomic development and urbanization** have fundamentally altered reproductive behavior in China. As the country rapidly industrialized and urbanized in the 1980s–2000s, large numbers of young people moved from rural areas to cities[[13]](https://www.reuters.com/world/china/chinas-population-drops-2nd-year-raises-long-term-growth-concerns-2024-01-17/#:~:text=Births%20in%20the%20country%20have,having%20children%20is%20more%20expensive). Urban living is associated with higher costs of raising children, less living space, and lifestyle changes that tend to favor smaller families. Like other East Asian economies (e.g. Japan and South Korea), China experienced a steep fertility decline as incomes rose and society modernized[[13]](https://www.reuters.com/world/china/chinas-population-drops-2nd-year-raises-long-term-growth-concerns-2024-01-17/#:~:text=Births%20in%20the%20country%20have,having%20children%20is%20more%20expensive). By the time the one-child rule ended, many underlying drivers of low fertility were already in place[[16]](https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/12/05/key-facts-about-chinas-declining-population/#:~:text=Notably%2C%20fertility%20rates%20in%20China,continued%20to%20fall%20in%20China). **Economic pressures** are one major deterrent to having children. The costs of housing, education, healthcare, and childcare in China’s cities have become prohibitive for many young couples. In fact, a Beijing-based research institute found that **China is now among the most expensive places in the world to raise a child**, and financial burden is a leading reason why couples hesitate to have more (or any) children[[17]](https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/12/05/key-facts-about-chinas-declining-population/#:~:text=The%20YuWa%20Population%20Research%20Institute%2C,have%20more%20children%20these%20days). With intense competition for good schools and jobs, parents often feel obliged to invest heavily in each child (the so-called “**little emperor**” phenomenon), which further raises the perceived cost of parenting.

Changing **cultural attitudes and lifestyles** also play a role. Younger generations in China are increasingly prioritizing education, careers, and personal fulfillment, and they tend to marry and start families later than previous generations. The average age of first marriage and first childbirth has climbed substantially (the mean childbearing age is now ~29, up from 26 in 2000)[[18]](https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/12/05/key-facts-about-chinas-declining-population/#:~:text=In%20addition%20to%20having%20fewer,which%20China%20is%20part%20of). Many women, in particular, are delaying or forgoing motherhood amidst greater career opportunities and rising aspirations. However, women also face workplace discrimination and insufficient support, which can make balancing a career and family difficult[[19]](https://www.reuters.com/world/china/chinas-population-drops-2nd-year-raises-long-term-growth-concerns-2024-01-17/#:~:text=High%20childcare%20and%20education%20costs,women%20from%20pausing%20their%20careers). Employers may be reluctant to hire or promote women who might take maternity leave, and traditional gender norms still expect women to be primary caregivers. This double burden discourages some women from having children at all. Moreover, a *“996”* work culture (long hours) in many industries leaves young professionals with little time or energy to raise a family.

Several acute recent developments have further dampened fertility intentions. The **economic uncertainties** of the past few years – including a sharp if temporary spike in youth unemployment, wage stagnation for many workers, and a persistent housing market downturn – have made young Chinese even more cautious about having children[[20][21]](https://www.reuters.com/world/china/chinas-population-drops-2nd-year-raises-long-term-growth-concerns-2024-01-17/#:~:text=Further%20denting%20appetite%20for%20baby,household%20wealth%20is%20stored%2C%20intensified). For example, in 2023 China’s urban youth unemployment hit record highs, and a crisis in the property sector (where most household wealth is tied up) eroded many families’ financial security[[20]](https://www.reuters.com/world/china/chinas-population-drops-2nd-year-raises-long-term-growth-concerns-2024-01-17/#:~:text=Further%20denting%20appetite%20for%20baby,household%20wealth%20is%20stored%2C%20intensified). Such conditions dent the “appetite for baby-making,” as couples worry about affordability and future prospects[[22]](https://www.reuters.com/world/china/chinas-population-drops-2nd-year-raises-long-term-growth-concerns-2024-01-17/#:~:text=,Michigan%20demographer%20Zhou%20Yun%20said)[[20]](https://www.reuters.com/world/china/chinas-population-drops-2nd-year-raises-long-term-growth-concerns-2024-01-17/#:~:text=Further%20denting%20appetite%20for%20baby,household%20wealth%20is%20stored%2C%20intensified). The COVID-19 pandemic and stringent lockdowns also played a role, with some families postponing childbearing due to health and economic worries[[23]](https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/12/05/key-facts-about-chinas-declining-population/#:~:text=The%20mean%20age%20of%20first,contributing%20factor%20to%20delayed%20motherhood).

Crucially, once a country’s fertility rate falls to such low levels, it is exceedingly difficult to raise it again. Other societies like Japan and South Korea have struggled for decades to coax birth rates back up from around 1.0–1.5, with limited success. China appears to be in a similar trap. As one demographer noted, **“fertility decline is often very difficult to reverse”** after it reaches the low levels seen in China[[24]](https://www.reuters.com/world/china/chinas-population-drops-2nd-year-raises-long-term-growth-concerns-2024-01-17/#:~:text=,Michigan%20demographer%20Zhou%20Yun%20said). The government can encourage people to have more children, but entrenched economic and social factors are not easily overcome by policy alone. Indeed, despite China ending the one-child policy and officially urging families to have two or three children, **birth rates have continued to fall** (aside from a brief uptick in 2016)[[16]](https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/12/05/key-facts-about-chinas-declining-population/#:~:text=Notably%2C%20fertility%20rates%20in%20China,continued%20to%20fall%20in%20China). In short, China’s low fertility is a product of both its past – the legacy of population control – and its present – the modern realities of urban life, gender roles, and financial pressure. These forces combined have produced a perfect storm for population decline. Meanwhile, the population is aging inexorably because life expectancy has risen (to about 78 years) and the large generations born in the mid-20th century are now entering old age[[25]](https://www.china-briefing.com/news/chinas-demographic-shift-how-population-decline-will-impact-doing-business-in-the-country/#:~:text=The%20other%20side%20of%20China%E2%80%99s,projected%20to%20double%20by%202050). With few young people to offset longer-lived elders, the age imbalance grows every year.

## Socioeconomic Impacts of an Aging, Shrinking Population

The demographic shifts in China are not just statistics – they carry far-reaching consequences for the nation’s economic growth, workforce, and social welfare systems. A key concern is the erosion of China’s **“demographic dividend”**, the advantageous situation in past decades when a huge working-age population with relatively few dependents fueled economic expansion. That era is ending. The labor force is now peaking in size and will begin shrinking rapidly hereafter. As a direct consequence of a declining population, China faces the **loss of human capital and potential labor shortages** in the future. The working-age cohort (roughly ages 16–59) has already started to contract, dropping by a few million each year. Fewer entrants to the labor market could constrain industries that rely on ample cheap manpower – a factor that once underpinned China’s manufacturing dominance. In the long run, a smaller workforce may mean lower aggregate productivity and economic output, unless productivity per worker rises enough to compensate.

Slower **economic growth** is a likely outcome of these demographic pressures. China’s explosive GDP growth in the late 20th century was partly enabled by a young, growing population. Now, with the population aging and set to shrink, many analysts foresee a drag on growth potential[[26]](https://www.reuters.com/world/china/chinas-population-drops-2nd-year-raises-long-term-growth-concerns-2024-01-17/#:~:text=The%20fresh%20data%20adds%20to,more%20strain%20on%20%20106). The domestic consumer base will also age and eventually contract, which could dampen consumption and investment. The Chinese economy is already showing signs of stagnation in some sectors, and demographics will add further headwinds. As Reuters reported, the new population data “adds to concerns that the world’s No. 2 economy’s growth prospects are diminishing” due to fewer workers and consumers[[26]](https://www.reuters.com/world/china/chinas-population-drops-2nd-year-raises-long-term-growth-concerns-2024-01-17/#:~:text=The%20fresh%20data%20adds%20to,more%20strain%20on%20%20106). Some global manufacturers are reconsidering long-term supply chain investments in China, and neighboring countries with younger populations (like India or Vietnam) might become more attractive for labor-intensive operations[[9]](https://www.reuters.com/world/china/chinas-population-drops-2nd-year-raises-long-term-growth-concerns-2024-01-17/#:~:text=India%20surpassed%20China%20as%20the,rise%20between%20Beijing%20and%20Washington). In essence, China’s demographic decline could chip away at its economic dynamism and reduce its weight in the global economy over time.

Perhaps the most immediate strain will be on **social security and healthcare systems**. China’s population aging is outpacing the development of its pension and eldercare infrastructure. The government and employers have been providing basic pensions to retirees, but these pay-as-you-go systems are facing sustainability issues as the retiree pool swells relative to the workforce. Local governments, which fund many social services, are already **indebted** and will struggle with rising costs for elderly care and pensions[[26]](https://www.reuters.com/world/china/chinas-population-drops-2nd-year-raises-long-term-growth-concerns-2024-01-17/#:~:text=The%20fresh%20data%20adds%20to,more%20strain%20on%20%20106). The Chinese Academy of Sciences projects that the main state pension fund could run dry by 2035 under current conditions[[12]](https://www.reuters.com/world/china/chinas-population-drops-2nd-year-raises-long-term-growth-concerns-2024-01-17/#:~:text=The%20country%27s%20retirement,about%20280%20million%20people%20currently). Millions of older Chinese, especially in rural areas, still rely on family support and meager pensions. For example, a farmer interviewed in Gansu province will receive only 160 yuan (about $22) per month in pension after age 60 – clearly insufficient for living expenses[[27]](https://www.reuters.com/world/china/chinas-population-drops-2nd-year-raises-long-term-growth-concerns-2024-01-17/#:~:text=Zhu%20Guoping%2C%20a%2057,his%20family%20with%20meagre%20savings). Such cases illustrate the looming *pension adequacy* challenge. Healthcare is another pressure point: demand for medical services and long-term care will rise sharply as the elderly population with chronic conditions grows. China will need many more geriatric specialists, caregivers, and facilities like nursing homes to care for tens of millions of additional seniors.

The changing family structure is having **social impacts** as well. Traditional Chinese society relied on the Confucian norm of children supporting their aging parents (the concept of *filial piety*). However, with the one-child policy generation now adulthood, many couples (themselves often only children) find themselves responsible for **four elderly parents** plus their own child – the so-called “4-2-1” family structure. This creates a heavy caregiving and financial burden on the middle generation[[28]](https://www.china-briefing.com/news/chinas-demographic-shift-how-population-decline-will-impact-doing-business-in-the-country/#:~:text=The%20rising%20share%20of%20elderly,key%20caregivers%20for%20their%20grandchildren)[[29]](https://www.china-briefing.com/news/chinas-demographic-shift-how-population-decline-will-impact-doing-business-in-the-country/#:~:text=social%20fabric,key%20caregivers%20for%20their%20grandchildren). Many families will simply not have the resources (or number of children) to personally care for all their elders. As a result, China is seeing **greater need for institutional eldercare** services. Retirement homes, assisted living facilities, and community care centers are expanding, especially in cities, but supply still falls short of the exploding demand[[30]](https://www.china-briefing.com/news/chinas-demographic-shift-how-population-decline-will-impact-doing-business-in-the-country/#:~:text=All%20of%20this%20means%20that,meet%20the%20rapidly%20growing%20demand)[[31]](https://www.china-briefing.com/news/chinas-demographic-shift-how-population-decline-will-impact-doing-business-in-the-country/#:~:text=To%20support%20eldercare%2C%20China%20has,the%20provision%20of%20financial%20support). In rural areas, the out-migration of youth means some elderly are left without nearby family at all. The social fabric is being tested as the norm of family caregiving is strained; the government may increasingly have to step in to provide safety nets for isolated seniors.

An aging society could also **impact innovation and entrepreneurship**, as populations with higher median ages tend to be less risk-taking and more conservative economically (though this effect is hard to quantify). Additionally, there may be geopolitical implications: a smaller, older population could affect China’s future military recruitment and spending priorities, and some analysts worry that demographic decline might occur before China becomes fully prosperous (“growing old before getting rich”). On the positive side, the emergence of a large elderly population does open new markets – the so-called “silver economy” of services and products catering to seniors. Industries like healthcare, pharmaceuticals, senior housing, and robotics for eldercare are poised to grow. Moreover, a tighter labor pool can incentivize **automation and productivity upgrades** in companies, potentially accelerating China’s shift up the value chain. Indeed, the Chinese government views the demographic challenge as an impetus to transition from labor-intensive growth to a more innovation-driven model[[32]](https://www.china-briefing.com/news/chinas-demographic-shift-how-population-decline-will-impact-doing-business-in-the-country/#:~:text=As%20China%20faces%20a%20shrinking,edge%20technologies)[[33]](https://www.china-briefing.com/news/chinas-demographic-shift-how-population-decline-will-impact-doing-business-in-the-country/#:~:text=Automation%20is%20emerging%20as%20a,cost%20countries). Overall, however, the near-term impacts of China’s demographic shifts skew negative: fewer working hands, more dependent elders, and mounting fiscal stresses on pensions, healthcare, and local governments[[26]](https://www.reuters.com/world/china/chinas-population-drops-2nd-year-raises-long-term-growth-concerns-2024-01-17/#:~:text=The%20fresh%20data%20adds%20to,more%20strain%20on%20%20106). It represents a significant socio-economic adjustment that China must manage in the coming decades.

## Policy Responses and Mitigation Efforts

Chinese authorities are acutely aware of the demographic crisis and have launched a multi-pronged strategy to address declining births and population aging. A first set of measures focuses on **boosting the birth rate** and removing barriers to family expansion. The government has completely dismantled its former restrictive birth policies: it ended the One-Child Policy in 2015, allowed two children per family, and by **2021 introduced a Three-Child Policy**, legally permitting (and even encouraging) couples to have up to three children[[34]](https://www.china-briefing.com/news/chinas-demographic-shift-how-population-decline-will-impact-doing-business-in-the-country/#:~:text=Three). Alongside these policy shifts, officials have rolled out a range of incentives to encourage childbearing. **Financial incentives** include tax deductions for families with children and direct subsidies in some cities. For example, the city of *Shenzhen* now offers parents a one-time bonus plus annual stipends for each child: a couple having three children could receive a total of **19,000 RMB** (about $2,600) in subsidies over the years until the children turn three[[35]](https://www.china-briefing.com/news/chinas-demographic-shift-how-population-decline-will-impact-doing-business-in-the-country/#:~:text=servic%20es%20and%20education%2C%20and,the%20introduction%20of%20childcare%20leave). Many local governments have extended **maternity and paternity leave** allowances to give parents more time with newborns[[36]](https://www.reuters.com/world/china/chinas-population-drops-2nd-year-raises-long-term-growth-concerns-2024-01-17/#:~:text=Local%20governments%20have%20announced%20various,maternity%20leave%20and%20housing%20subsidies). Others provide discounts or priority in housing and access to public daycare and kindergartens. The central government has also called on employers and society to be more family-friendly – for instance, by enforcing women’s rights in the workplace and discouraging excessive overtime so people have work-life balance conducive to raising children.

These pronatalist efforts, however, face an uphill battle. Even officials acknowledge that **money and perks alone may not spur a baby boom** given the deeper economic and cultural factors at play. As one Chinese father stated, “People will not have a child because of these incentives… they are auxiliary, not the root cause” of low fertility[[37]](https://www.reuters.com/world/china/chinas-population-drops-2nd-year-raises-long-term-growth-concerns-2024-01-17/#:~:text=Beijing%20resident%20Wang%20Weidong%2C%2036%2C,to%20have%20a%20second%20child). Moreover, many local incentive programs have struggled with implementation. Some cash-strapped municipal governments announced generous birth subsidies or housing perks, only to quietly scale them back due to **insufficient funding and lack of administrative capacity**[[36]](https://www.reuters.com/world/china/chinas-population-drops-2nd-year-raises-long-term-growth-concerns-2024-01-17/#:~:text=Local%20governments%20have%20announced%20various,maternity%20leave%20and%20housing%20subsidies). A policy institute in Beijing has called for a unified, nationwide family support scheme to replace the patchwork of uneven local measures[[36]](https://www.reuters.com/world/china/chinas-population-drops-2nd-year-raises-long-term-growth-concerns-2024-01-17/#:~:text=Local%20governments%20have%20announced%20various,maternity%20leave%20and%20housing%20subsidies). In addition to economic incentives, the government is also trying to **promote a cultural shift** in favor of marriage and childbearing. Top leaders, including President Xi Jinping, have spoken about the need to cultivate a “new culture” of family life and have extolled traditional family values[[38]](https://www.reuters.com/world/china/chinas-population-drops-2nd-year-raises-long-term-growth-concerns-2024-01-17/#:~:text=Gender%20discrimination%20and%20traditional%20expectations,exacerbate%20the%20issue%2C%20demographers%20say). Propaganda efforts encourage young people to marry and start families for the good of the nation. It remains to be seen if such messaging can meaningfully change personal decisions, but it underscores how seriously Beijing views the demographic issue – now framed as critical to national security and development.

Another pillar of China’s response is adapting to and mitigating the impacts of an **aging population**. Since it is impossible to fully reverse population aging in the short term, the government is pursuing policies to better support the elderly and leverage the “silver economy.” One major reform is a planned **gradual increase in the retirement age**. China has long had a low official retirement age (60 for men, 55 or 50 for women depending on occupation), which is increasingly out of step with longer life expectancy. In 2023, authorities announced a phased plan to raise the retirement ages over the coming years[[39]](https://www.china-briefing.com/news/chinas-demographic-shift-how-population-decline-will-impact-doing-business-in-the-country/#:~:text=What%20is%20the%20government%20doing,to%20tackle%20China%E2%80%99s%20population%20decline). Starting in **2025**, the retirement age for men will begin rising from 60 towards 63 by about 2038, and for women from 55 (for white-collar) or 50 (for blue-collar) towards 58–55 on similar timetables[[40]](https://www.china-briefing.com/news/chinas-demographic-shift-how-population-decline-will-impact-doing-business-in-the-country/#:~:text=To%20address%20the%20impending%20problems,collar%20jobs)[[41]](https://www.china-briefing.com/news/chinas-demographic-shift-how-population-decline-will-impact-doing-business-in-the-country/#:~:text=statutory%20retirement%20age%20,collar%20jobs). This incremental approach – adding a few months to the retirement age each year – aims to prolong working careers, increase the labor pool of older workers, and relieve some pension burden by shortening the time people draw benefits[[42]](https://www.china-briefing.com/news/chinas-demographic-shift-how-population-decline-will-impact-doing-business-in-the-country/#:~:text=Raising%20the%20retirement%20age). While raising retirement ages can be unpopular, it is seen as unavoidable given that today’s 60-year-olds are generally healthy and can still contribute economically. By keeping people economically active longer, China hopes to mitigate workforce decline and tap the expertise of experienced workers.

The government is also expanding the **pension and insurance systems** to cope with an aging society. In 2022, China launched its first **private pension scheme** to supplement the state pension[[43]](https://www.china-briefing.com/news/chinas-demographic-shift-how-population-decline-will-impact-doing-business-in-the-country/#:~:text=Private%20pension%20schemes). This voluntary program encourages individuals to open tax-advantaged retirement accounts and invest in pension products, with a contribution cap of RMB 12,000 per year that can be deducted from taxable income[[44]](https://www.china-briefing.com/news/chinas-demographic-shift-how-population-decline-will-impact-doing-business-in-the-country/#:~:text=In%202022%2C%20China%20launched%20its,reducing%20taxes%20on%20pension%20benefits). By late 2024, the private pension scheme was **expanded nationwide**, allowing all eligible workers to participate and broadening the range of investment options (including government bonds and mutual funds)[[45]](https://www.china-briefing.com/news/chinas-demographic-shift-how-population-decline-will-impact-doing-business-in-the-country/#:~:text=benefits). The goal is to develop a robust “third pillar” of retirement funding (after the basic public pension and employer pensions) that will alleviate pressure on government finances and provide seniors with additional income security[[46]](https://www.china-briefing.com/news/chinas-demographic-shift-how-population-decline-will-impact-doing-business-in-the-country/#:~:text=China%20is%20positioning%20the%20private,based%20support%20networks%20weaken). In tandem, China is encouraging the growth of **private health insurance** and long-term care insurance markets to help families prepare for eldercare costs.

Strengthening the **eldercare service sector** is another priority. Recognizing that families alone cannot handle the care needs of hundreds of millions of elderly, the government is investing in community centers, nursing homes, and day-care facilities for seniors. Policies have been introduced to lower costs for eldercare providers – for instance, the National Development and Reform Commission in 2022 issued measures granting tax breaks, utility subsidies, and low-interest loans to companies and NGOs that operate eldercare or childcare services[[31]](https://www.china-briefing.com/news/chinas-demographic-shift-how-population-decline-will-impact-doing-business-in-the-country/#:~:text=To%20support%20eldercare%2C%20China%20has,the%20provision%20of%20financial%20support)[[47]](https://www.china-briefing.com/news/chinas-demographic-shift-how-population-decline-will-impact-doing-business-in-the-country/#:~:text=cities%2C%20as%20well%20as%20policies,the%20provision%20of%20financial%20support). Some cities have even started offering **“eldercare leave”** – extra paid holidays for employees to take care of their aging parents[[48]](https://www.china-briefing.com/news/chinas-demographic-shift-how-population-decline-will-impact-doing-business-in-the-country/#:~:text=To%20support%20eldercare%2C%20China%20has,taxes%20and%20fees%2C%20and%20the). In early 2024, the State Council (China’s cabinet) released a comprehensive plan titled *“Opinions on Developing a Silver Economy to Improve the Well-being of the Elderly,”* which lays out a 26-point agenda to enhance support for the aging population[[49]](https://www.china-briefing.com/news/chinas-demographic-shift-how-population-decline-will-impact-doing-business-in-the-country/#:~:text=In%20early%202024%2C%20the%20General,accessible%2C%20and%20inclusive%20service%20systems). This includes improving access to healthcare, promoting age-friendly communities, and expanding educational and recreational programs for seniors[[49]](https://www.china-briefing.com/news/chinas-demographic-shift-how-population-decline-will-impact-doing-business-in-the-country/#:~:text=In%20early%202024%2C%20the%20General,accessible%2C%20and%20inclusive%20service%20systems). The government also sees business opportunities in products and technologies for the elderly – encouraging companies to innovate in fields like assistive devices, smart health monitoring, and senior-friendly home design[[32]](https://www.china-briefing.com/news/chinas-demographic-shift-how-population-decline-will-impact-doing-business-in-the-country/#:~:text=As%20China%20faces%20a%20shrinking,edge%20technologies)[[50]](https://www.china-briefing.com/news/chinas-demographic-shift-how-population-decline-will-impact-doing-business-in-the-country/#:~:text=Notably%2C%20sectors%20like%20humanoid%20robotics,the%20face%20of%20demographic%20decline).

To counteract the shrinking labor force, China is aggressively pursuing **automation and productivity improvements**. It has been investing heavily in industrial robots, artificial intelligence (AI), and other advanced technologies to increase output with fewer workers[[33]](https://www.china-briefing.com/news/chinas-demographic-shift-how-population-decline-will-impact-doing-business-in-the-country/#:~:text=Automation%20is%20emerging%20as%20a,cost%20countries). This drive aligns with China’s long-term economic strategy to upgrade its manufacturing sector and reduce reliance on labor-intensive industries. The government’s **“New Quality Productive Forces”** initiative, for example, promotes automation and AI in factories as a response to both rising wages and fewer young workers entering the workforce[[51]](https://www.china-briefing.com/news/chinas-demographic-shift-how-population-decline-will-impact-doing-business-in-the-country/#:~:text=At%20the%20heart%20of%20this,term%20planning). In the realm of eldercare, technology like **humanoid robots and AI-driven healthcare** solutions are being explored to help care for seniors more efficiently[[50]](https://www.china-briefing.com/news/chinas-demographic-shift-how-population-decline-will-impact-doing-business-in-the-country/#:~:text=Notably%2C%20sectors%20like%20humanoid%20robotics,the%20face%20of%20demographic%20decline). By boosting automation, China aims to maintain economic growth and competitiveness even as its demographic advantages wane. Additionally, there is a push for **upskilling and education** to ensure the smaller number of young people are more highly trained and productive. Expanding higher education and vocational training programs is intended to create a more skilled workforce that can do more with less manpower[[39]](https://www.china-briefing.com/news/chinas-demographic-shift-how-population-decline-will-impact-doing-business-in-the-country/#:~:text=What%20is%20the%20government%20doing,to%20tackle%20China%E2%80%99s%20population%20decline)[[32]](https://www.china-briefing.com/news/chinas-demographic-shift-how-population-decline-will-impact-doing-business-in-the-country/#:~:text=As%20China%20faces%20a%20shrinking,edge%20technologies).

It is important to note that many of these policy responses are still in their early stages, and their effectiveness will only become clear over time. The Chinese government has shown flexibility and determination in confronting the demographic crisis – a stark contrast to the rigid one-child regime of the past. Yet, despite an ambitious array of pronatalist and aging-related policies, results have been limited so far. Birth rates have not yet shown any sustained rebound, and young Chinese remain hesitant to have larger families despite the incentives. Likewise, raising retirement ages and expanding pensions are gradual fixes that will take years to yield benefits. Nonetheless, China is **taking a holistic approach** to the problem: *“actively seeking to slow or reverse population decline, while also adapting to an aging society through pension reform, eldercare development, and automation”*[[39]](https://www.china-briefing.com/news/chinas-demographic-shift-how-population-decline-will-impact-doing-business-in-the-country/#:~:text=What%20is%20the%20government%20doing,to%20tackle%20China%E2%80%99s%20population%20decline). This dual strategy – encouraging more babies *and* preparing for more seniors – encapsulates the difficult balancing act the country faces.

## Conclusion and Future Outlook

China’s population decline and rapid aging represent one of the most significant demographic upheavals in modern history. The nation is moving from a period of abundant young labor and booming population growth into an era of workforce contraction and greying citizenry. The causes – from the one-child policy’s aftereffects to modern economic realities – are deeply entrenched, which means quick reversals are unlikely. Most experts agree that **China’s population will continue to shrink for decades** to come, potentially reducing the population by hundreds of millions by the end of the century[[7]](https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/12/05/key-facts-about-chinas-declining-population/#:~:text=The%20UN%20forecasts%20that%20China%E2%80%99s,48%20in%202100). The social and economic ramifications will be profound: China will have to support a large elderly cohort with a relatively smaller pool of workers, challenging its pension systems, healthcare capacity, and familial support structures. The Chinese economy, too, may have to adjust to a new normal of slower growth and labor scarcity, investing in innovation and productivity to offset the demographic drag[[26]](https://www.reuters.com/world/china/chinas-population-drops-2nd-year-raises-long-term-growth-concerns-2024-01-17/#:~:text=The%20fresh%20data%20adds%20to,more%20strain%20on%20%20106).

The government’s multifaceted response shows it is treating the issue with utmost seriousness. However, **there is no easy solution to a demographic downturn**. Other countries’ experiences suggest that policies like baby bonuses or extended parental leave can at best stabilize fertility rates, not restore them to high levels, especially when public expectations and lifestyles have changed. China’s recent initiatives – easing birth limits, offering incentives, raising retirement age, and so on – will take time to influence behavior, and some may not fully achieve their desired effects. As demographers have noted, fundamental factors such as high living costs, career pressures, and shifting values will continue to weigh down the birth rate despite government efforts[[19]](https://www.reuters.com/world/china/chinas-population-drops-2nd-year-raises-long-term-growth-concerns-2024-01-17/#:~:text=High%20childcare%20and%20education%20costs,women%20from%20pausing%20their%20careers)[[17]](https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/12/05/key-facts-about-chinas-declining-population/#:~:text=The%20YuWa%20Population%20Research%20Institute%2C,have%20more%20children%20these%20days). In the coming years, we may see modest upticks or slowdowns in the rate of population decline if policies gain traction, but a return to the high fertility of the past is unlikely. The most optimistic scenario foresees China’s fertility inching upward to perhaps 1.5 children per woman by mid-century – still well below replacement, but mitigating the pace of decline[[7]](https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/12/05/key-facts-about-chinas-declining-population/#:~:text=The%20UN%20forecasts%20that%20China%E2%80%99s,48%20in%202100)[[8]](https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/12/05/key-facts-about-chinas-declining-population/#:~:text=China%E2%80%99s%202022%20total%20fertility%20rate,three%20children%20beginning%20in%202021).

Meanwhile, China will need to **embrace the reality of an aging society**. This includes bolstering social safety nets for the elderly, expanding healthcare services, and fostering industries around senior care and robotics to manage the burden. The concept of “active aging” – keeping seniors healthy, engaged, and productive for longer – will become increasingly important. Community programs and policies that integrate older people into volunteer work or part-time employment could help alleviate isolation and reduce the economic dependency ratio. At the same time, younger generations will have to adjust expectations around family size and eldercare responsibilities in light of the new demographic structure.

Internationally, China’s demographic shift could alter its position in the world. A shrinking population may ease some environmental and resource pressures domestically, but it could also mean a smaller domestic market and reduced global economic clout relative to faster-growing countries. Strategically, if economic growth moderates due to demographics, China’s capacity to project power might be somewhat constrained in the long run. However, these effects will play out over decades; in the short term, China remains a populous giant with significant momentum.

In conclusion, China’s demographic crossroads is a double-edged sword: it poses immense challenges, yet it also compels the nation to innovate and reform. The Chinese government is **experimenting with solutions** – from cash incentives for babies to robots for eldercare – in an attempt to secure the country’s future in the face of demographic headwinds. The ultimate outcomes are uncertain. As one analysis noted, *no country has yet managed to reverse sustained low fertility, and China’s pronatalist policies have yet to show results*[[52]](https://www.china-briefing.com/news/chinas-demographic-shift-how-population-decline-will-impact-doing-business-in-the-country/#:~:text=and%20an%20additional%20RMB%203%2C000,until%20the%20child%20turns%20three). What is clear is that China’s era of easy demographic growth is over, and a new chapter of population management has begun. How China navigates this transition will not only shape its own socio-economic destiny, but also yield lessons for other nations confronting similar demographic challenges in the 21st century.

**Sources:** China National Bureau of Statistics; Reuters[[53]](https://www.reuters.com/world/china/chinas-population-drops-2nd-year-raises-long-term-growth-concerns-2024-01-17/#:~:text=,Michigan%20demographer%20Zhou%20Yun%20said)[[26]](https://www.reuters.com/world/china/chinas-population-drops-2nd-year-raises-long-term-growth-concerns-2024-01-17/#:~:text=The%20fresh%20data%20adds%20to,more%20strain%20on%20%20106)[[12]](https://www.reuters.com/world/china/chinas-population-drops-2nd-year-raises-long-term-growth-concerns-2024-01-17/#:~:text=The%20country%27s%20retirement,about%20280%20million%20people%20currently); China Briefing[[39]](https://www.china-briefing.com/news/chinas-demographic-shift-how-population-decline-will-impact-doing-business-in-the-country/#:~:text=What%20is%20the%20government%20doing,to%20tackle%20China%E2%80%99s%20population%20decline)[[31]](https://www.china-briefing.com/news/chinas-demographic-shift-how-population-decline-will-impact-doing-business-in-the-country/#:~:text=To%20support%20eldercare%2C%20China%20has,the%20provision%20of%20financial%20support)[[54]](https://www.china-briefing.com/news/chinas-demographic-shift-how-population-decline-will-impact-doing-business-in-the-country/#:~:text=Image); Pew Research[[8]](https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/12/05/key-facts-about-chinas-declining-population/#:~:text=China%E2%80%99s%202022%20total%20fertility%20rate,three%20children%20beginning%20in%202021)[[17]](https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/12/05/key-facts-about-chinas-declining-population/#:~:text=The%20YuWa%20Population%20Research%20Institute%2C,have%20more%20children%20these%20days); National Development and Reform Commission (China).

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