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Population policy

Gilding the cradle

BEIJING

China's one-child policy was illiberal and unnecessary. Will its efforts to boost births be more enlightened?

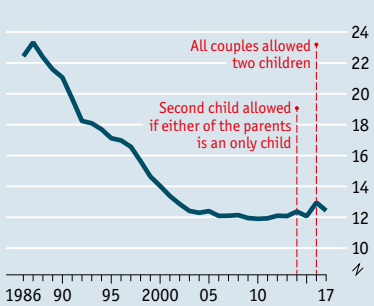
WHEN Li Dongxia was a baby, her parents sent her to be raised by her grandparents and other family members half an hour from their home in the northern Chinese province of Shandong. That was not a choice but a necessity: they already had a daughter, and risked incurring a fine or losing their jobs for breaking a law that prevented many couples from having more than one child. Hidden away from the authorities, and at first kept in the dark herself, Ms Li says she was just starting primary school when she found out that the kindly aunt and uncle who often visited were in fact her biological parents. She was a young teenager before she was able to move back to her parents' home.

Ms Li is now 26 and runs her own private tutoring business. The era that produced her unconventional childhood feels like a long time ago. The policy responsible for it is gone, swapped in late 2015 for a looser regulation that permits all families to have two kids. These days the worry among policymakers is not that babies are too numerous, but that Chinese born in the 1980s and 1990s are procreating too little. Last month state media applauded parents in Shandong for producing more children than any other province in 2017. It called their fecundity "daring".

At the root of this reversal is growing anxiety about China's stark demographic transition. Although the birth rate has recovered slightly from a trough in 2010, women still have less than two children on average, meaning that the population will soon begin to decline. The government predicts it will peak at a little over 1.4bn in 2030, but many demographers think it will start shrinking sooner. The working-age population, defined as those between 16 and 59 years old, has been falling since 2012, and is projected to contract by 23% by 2050. An ageing population will strain the social-security system and constrict the labour market. James Liang of Peking University argues that having an older workforce could also end up making Chinese firms less innovative than those in places such as America which have a more favourable demographic outlook.

Unwinding the one-child policy was supposed to help. But figures released in January confirm that after briefly boosting birth rates, its effect is petering out (see chart). Chinese mothers bore 17.2m babies last year, more than before the rules were relaxed but 3.5% down on 2016. Wang Feng of the University of California, Irvine, says the number of births was 3m-5m lower than the projections from the family-planning agency when the authorities were debating whether to change the policy, and below even sceptical analysts' estimates.

Nappy valley
China, live births per 1,000 people



Source: Haver Analytics

The reason is that as China grows wealthier—and after years of being told that one child is ideal—the population's desire for larger families has waned. Would-be parents frequently tell pollsters that they balk at the cost of raising children. As well as fretting about rising house prices and limited day care, many young couples know that they may eventually have to find money to support all four of their parents in old age. Lots conclude that it is wiser to spend their time and income giving a single sprog the best possible start in life than to spread their resources across two.

Meanwhile, more education and opportunity are pushing up the average age of marriage (that is a drag on fertility everywhere, but particularly so in societies such as China's where child-bearing outside wedlock is taboo). Women thinking about starting or expanding a family still have to weigh the risks of discrimination at work. Since the one-child policy was relaxed, many provinces have extended maternity and paternity leave, but are not always ready to enforce the rules when employers break them.

The Communist Party appears to recognise that it needs to do more to lower these barriers. A population-planning document released last year acknowledged that the low birth rate was problematic and referred to a vague package of pronatalist

measures that it would consider in response. The following month *China Daily* quoted a senior official who said that the government might introduce "birth rewards and subsidies" to overcome the reluctance of many couples to multiply.

Yet the lacklustre performance of pronatalist policies elsewhere in the world suggests that it would take vast investments to raise fertility, and that making child care cheaper should be a priority. At present it is difficult to imagine the party doing enough to make a difference—not least because it has yet to abandon its official position that some population-control measures remain essential. Leaders may be hesitating to ditch the two-child rule completely while they work out what to do with the army of bureaucrats charged with keeping birth rates low. They are probably also nervous that making too swift a U-turn will be seen as an admission that the party's draconian policies, which led to forced abortions and sterilisations, were misguided.

Without a clear strategy, efforts to push procreation will remain piecemeal and ineffectual. Eagerness to raise birth rates is probably one reason why party organs seem ever keener to talk up the joys of marriage. The other reasons are creeping social conservatism among party leaders—due in part to a desire to promote "traditional" Chinese culture over the insidious foreign kind—and the worry that a surfeit of unmarried men may pose a threat to social order. For some years the Communist Youth League has been inviting patriotic singletons to matchmaking events.

One big concern is that officials may end up trying to nudge busy and ambitious women into accepting more domestic roles. Leta Hong Fincher, an author and academic, argues that state media have helped popularise the concept of "leftover women"—a pejorative term for unmarried females in their mid-20s and later—in an effort to panic educated, urban Chinese into settling down sooner than they otherwise would. She thinks such propaganda is growing more aggressive. If that is indeed the kind of solution that is gestating within the bureaucracy, the hoped-for baby boom will be stillborn. ■

Hong Kong's democrats

Three men and a vote

HONG KONG

A clutch of separatists struggle to be allowed to run for office

THEY have become a familiar sight standing on courtroom steps. Since their pro-democracy protests in 2014, the young leaders of the Umbrella Movement—Joshua Wong, Nathan Law and Alex Chow—have bobbed in and out of court, and sometimes into prison. This week they appeared again, after an appeal overturned controversial custodial sentences handed down last year. But their mood was sombre. "Our hearts are heavy," said Mr Law. "We walk free but Hong Kong's democracy has lost a battle."

In July 2016 the trio was found guilty of breaking into a government compound and of inciting others to follow suit. A magistrate sentenced Mr Wong and Mr Law to community service and Mr Chow to a three-week stint in prison, suspended for a year. The government objected that these punishments were too lenient to deter others. Last year, after a review, the Supreme Court upped the punishment to between six and eight months in prison and outlined stricter guidelines for such cases. The men were jailed but then released on bail, awaiting appeal.

On February 6th Hong Kong's Court of Final Appeal found no precedent for custodial sentences and so quashed them. But the judges nonetheless said that they agreed with the lower court's stricter sentencing guidelines in principle, even though they should not have been applied retroactively. And they disagreed with the defendants' plea for leniency on the grounds of civil disobedience. Hence Mr Law's despondency.

On the steps again

Concern that Hong Kong's enthusiastic culture of protest may be dampened by the court's ruling is real. But activists espousing looser ties with China face a more immediate challenge. On March 11th by-elections will be fought to fill four seats left vacant by the disqualification of members of the territory's Legislative Council, known as Legco, who had expressed such views. (Two more seats remain empty while the ousted politicians appeal.)

The three men's custodial sentences would have made them ineligible to run for public office for five years. Though nominations for this round of elections have closed, the overturning of the sentences should allow them to run in future elections. (For Mr Wong, who was jailed and bailed for a different crime in January, the ban will stand.) Whether Mr Law, who was elected as a legislator in 2016, would in practice be allowed to run again is unclear, since he was one of the six legislators elected in 2016 but disqualified in 2017. Precedent suggests he may be able to, since Edward Yiu, a legislator disqualified at the same time as Mr Law, has been cleared to stand again.

But another ruling a few days earlier may have a greater bearing. Agnes Chow, a 21-year-old member of Demosisto, the political party founded by Mr Wong and Mr Law, was nominated to contest the seat left empty by Mr Law. But on January 27th her nomination was found by a civil servant to be invalid, since her association with that party, which advocates "self-determination", meant that she could not fulfil a required promise to uphold the territory's mini-constitution, known as the Basic Law, which defines Hong Kong as an "inalienable part of China".

In the past, candidates calling for independence have been disqualified, but "self-determination" is a much woollier concept that could involve China retaining sovereignty over Hong Kong. Both Hong Kong's and China's governments, however, were furious in 2016 when pro-independence politicians were elected to Legco, and seem ill-inclined to delve into the nuance of the dissenters' views.

Ms Chow's disqualification drew criticism from Britain, Canada and the European Union. Most damningly, two heavyweight backers of the government in Beijing ventured that the rules are unclear. One of them, Jasper Tsang Yok-sing, a former Legco president, said that by banning the candidates the returning officers may have "exceeded the expected scope of their duties", which are mainly administrative. And Hong Kong's chief executive, Carrie Lam, a Beijing loyalist, said the government would clarify the "very clear" rules if necessary. Speculation about how unwelcome candidates may be disqualified in future is rife, as ideology wrestles with constitutionality. ■