Population, Policy, and Politics: How Will History Judge China's One-Child Policy?

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One of the main puzzles of modern population and social history is why, among all countries confronting rapid population growth in the second half of the twentieth century, China chose to adopt an extreme measure of birth control known as the one-child policy. A related question is why such a policy, acknowledged to have many undesirable consequences, has been retained for so long, even beyond the period of time anticipated by its creators.

With the world's population growth rate now at half its historical peak level and with nearly half of the world's population living in countries with fertility below replacement level, we can look back at the role politics played in formulating, implementing, and reformulating policies aimed at slowing population growth (Demeny and McNicoll 2006; Robinson and Ross 2007; Demeny 2011). In this context, an examination of China's unprecedented government intervention in reproduction offers valuable lessons in appreciating the role of politics in the global effort of birth control in the twentieth century.

Aside from the rise and fall of Communism, family planning programs along with the Green Revolution could be considered two of the most consequential social experiments of the twentieth century. These two experiments differ, however, in both content and approach. The Green Revolution was aimed at feeding the population, while family planning programs were designed to curtail its growth. The Green Revolution was technological, economic, and global, while family planning programs were social, political, and often country specific.

Nowhere in the world did politics and policies figure more prominently in the effort to control population growth than in China. The policy of al-

lowing all couples to have only one child finds no equal in the world and it may be one of the most draconian examples of government social engineering ever seen. In this essay, we cast China's one-child policy in the changing global context of population policymaking, we revisit the supposed necessity of such a policy by examining the claim that the policy was responsible for preventing 400 million births, and we discuss the reasons such a policy, with all its known negative consequences, has been allowed to stay in place for more than thirty years since its inception.

Entry: Population and politics

The world in the second half of the twentieth century saw the fastest rate of population growth ever in human history. While the main driver of this growth, the unprecedented lengthening of human life expectancy, had its seeds in the previous centuries, the momentum of population growth by the early twentieth century was spreading from industrialized countries in Europe and North America to the rest of the world, especially Asia and Latin America, where the majority of the world's population resided (Reher 2011).

Rapid population growth created challenges in many societies and led to a global movement of birth control, soon with the active involvement of national governments. This movement can be dated to the early 1950s, shortly after the end of World War II, with events such as adoption of the first national population policy in India, the establishment of the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF), and the founding of the Population Council with the support of the Rockefeller Foundation (Sinding 2007). Two views of birth control programs emerged: the earlier one focusing on providing contraceptives for voluntary use without joining forces with governments in order to avoid interfering with individual reproduction choice; the later one legitimating and promoting the role of government in restricting individual reproductive freedom for the sake of controlling population growth (ibid.).

By the mid-1960s, the population control movement had gained new allies, with more and more international organizations identifying population growth as a hindrance to economic growth and a potential risk to political stability in the world's less developed areas. Funding increased from both governments of the developed world and private foundations. The United Nations established its Fund for Population Activities (now the UN Population Fund) in 1969. The first UN-organized World Population Conference was held in 1974 in Bucharest.[1] Although the conference ended in some controversy, it represented a "great step toward better national solutions and ultimately toward a better world" (Demeny 1984, p. 359).

China was an example of the contradiction between rhetoric and action evident in Bucharest. At the conference, the Chinese delegation denounced

the call for population control from the West as part of an imperialist agenda and claimed that population is not a determinant of national economic growth and well-being (Demeny 1985). At home, however, a nationwide birth control program was already well underway. Ten years before the Bucharest conference, China had established the Birth Planning Commission within the State Council to lead its birth control efforts, with a long-term goal of reducing the population growth rate to 1 percent by 2000 (Yang, Liang, and Zhang 2001, p. 34). (The growth rate in 1962 was 2.7 percent.) In talking with the American journalist Edgar Snow in the mid-1960s and later, Mao Zedong complained that few rural women were practicing contraception. In 1971, a Chinese State Council document made reducing the population growth rate to 1 percent in cities and 1.5 percent in rural areas by 1975 part of China's fourth Five-Year Plan. By the time of the Bucharest conference, fertility in urban China, at 1.98, was already below replacement. A year after the conference, another goal was set to reduce the rural population growth rate to 1 percent and the urban rate to 0.6 percent (Liang 2007, p. 116). The national growth rate in 1975 was 1.57 percent.

China was not the only country where rhetoric did not match reality. Eight years before the Bucharest conference, India's Ministry of Public Health had been renamed the Ministry of Public Health and Family Planning, and a special department on family planning was formed within the ministry. Two years after the conference, at which an Indian delegate famously argued that "development is the best contraceptive," a National Population Policy statement proclaimed that sharply reducing fertility was a "top national priority and commitment." India's notorious forced sterilization campaign was carried out between 1975 and 1976, during which more than 8 million sterilizations were performed (Harkavy and Roy 2007; Visaria 2002). The campaign led to the collapse of Indira Gandhi's government in January 1977 and resulted in new approaches to birth control. In 1977, family planning in India was renamed family welfare, and sterilization targets were sharply reduced. By the mid-1990s, all targets related to birth control had been removed (Harkavy and Roy 2007).

In a number of other countries with large populations and rapid growth rates, such as Bangladesh and Indonesia, coercive methods of a lesser degree were also used (Sinding 2007, p. 8). All around the world, governments in countries experiencing rapid population growth recognized the challenges they faced and considered the level of fertility in their country too high. Between 1976 and 1996, the number of governments viewing their population growth rate as too high increased from 55 to 87 (UN 2010).

By launching a nationwide policy of limiting each couple to only one child, China, of course, established an unprecedented level of government control of births. What forces and political contexts led China to adopt the one-child policy? Moreover, why did opposition to intrusive measures of birth

control lead to a quick reversal in policy in India, while in China the one-child policy continues to the present? Three features of the Chinese political system and associated policymaking help explain the Chinese exception: a statist tradition and bureaucratic institutions that treat individual citizens as subjects of the state; a post-revolutionary regime that places birth control at the heart of its political legitimacy; and a policymaking process that is carried out among political elites shrouded with secrecy and lacking public scrutiny. Combined, these three features of the Chinese political system help explain not only the design but also the survival of the one-child policy.

The one-child policy was launched at a time when China's political leadership was reestablishing its political legitimacy following the death of Mao Zedong in 1976. In contrast to Mao and his generation of leaders, who based their political legitimacy on armed revolutions that led to the founding of the People's Republic, the post-Mao leadership could no longer count on such a legacy. The devastating aftermath of the Cultural Revolution at the time of Mao's death presented the greatest crisis for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in its nearly three-decade rule. The post-Mao leadership consequently made economic development the new mandate and the fundamental basis of its political legitimacy. The measure used to gauge its success in increasing living standards of the population was per capita GDP growth. With this new mandate and focus, controlling population growth became a critical component of this legitimacy. In 1982, birth control was announced as a "basic state policy" (*jiben guoce*).[2]

Historical studies of the design of the one-child policy reveal a fluid, complex, and at times confused process involving many actors. The core calculation leading to the policy began soon after Mao's death (Sun 1987; White 2006; Greenhalgh and Winckler 2005; Scharping 2003; Liang 2007, 2010; Greenhalgh 2008). As part of the modernization drive, a goal was proposed in September 1977, of reducing China's annual population growth rate to below 1 percent within three years. The goal, formally stated in the government's Working Report in February 1978 (Yang, Liang, and Zhang 2001, p. 62), was not achieved until 1998. The planning mentality, treating population simply as a number that can be planned and regulated, was clearly evident.

The idea of one-child families, as a means to achieving the goal of reducing the birth rate quickly, came from political leaders as early as 1978, two years before the policy was announced nationally. In June 1978, the policy measure of "encouraging couples to have one child, at most two" was formally stated in a CCP Central Committee document, to be followed by concrete measures adopted in over ten provinces in the same year. These measures included rewarding parents having only one child and punishing those with two or more (Liang 2007, 119).[3] By January 1979, official Chinese news outlets, the *People's Daily* and Xinhua News Agency, reported and printed editorials that clearly called for one child per couple, with "at most two."

They also reconfirmed the measures already proposed in some provinces, namely to reward couples pledging to have only one child and to punish those with two or more. In June 1979, the headline in the *People's Daily* report of a speech by Chen Muhua, then head of the National Family Planning Leading Group, read: "To move the focus of birth control work to having one child is the best approach." The leaders who lent the strongest support to this goal, not surprisingly, were those in charge of economic planning.[4]

A coherent set of demographic goals emerged by February 1980 in support of the economic developmental goals advanced by the Chinese leadership. These goals included a total population of 1.2 billion by 2000 and a population growth rate of zero, supported by concrete measures of restricting 95 percent of urban couples and 90 percent of rural couples to having only one child. The 1.2 billion population size figure, while still unclear how calculated, clearly conformed to the overall goal set by Deng Xiaoping of quadrupling China's per capita income between 1980 and 2000, to $1,000. Given that a per capita income goal was already set and the growth of the total economy (the numerator for calculating the per capita GDP) could be projected at a certain rate, determining the denominator, namely the total population, should not be difficult.

A strategy of GDP growth has remained the chief goal at all levels of the Chinese political system, and population has been made a lifeless number, not an aggregation of individual lives, in this pursuit. Such a pursuit is further reinforced by the CCP's cadre performance evaluation system that measures government officials' performance with numeric indexes, such as GDP per capita or government revenue per capita.[5] This per capita metric, using population size simply as part of the political calculation for achieving political goals, has been a constant driving force to justify the continuation of the one-child policy.

With an overall political goal set and with population size entered into the calculation of achieving that goal, the policymaking process led directly to the promulgation and continued existence of the one-child policy. Here, an extremely important policy justified by the goal of maintaining Communist Party legitimacy was left in the hands of elite political leaders, whose decisions few could challenge. Dissent and reservations notwithstanding, Party elders were instrumental in implementing the policy. Seizing on these signals for an even stricter birth control policy than those implemented by other governments in the 1970s, Chinese scholars, especially those with updated knowledge and skills in the natural sciences, offered more definitive calculations and population projections under different fertility scenarios, and pushed for the formalization of the one-child policy (Greenhalgh 2008). Both the temporal sequence of policy formulation and the prevailing style of decisionmaking of the CCP, however, suggest clearly that the idea of the one-child policy came from leaders within the Party, not from scientists who offered evidence to

support it (Liang 2007).[6] But the work of the scientists nevertheless provided what the leaders wanted: population numbers that suggested a doomed future for China if extreme measures were not taken. Moreover, these scientists provided fertility numbers to achieve the goal the planners wished, under a cloak of scientism that evinced authority, confidence, and elegance (Greenhalgh 2008). The fears of neo-Malthusian crisis increased, fanned not only by the scientists but also by academia and the state-controlled media (Lee and Wang 1999).

The one-child policy strangely was never issued as a government order nor written explicitly in Chinese law, but rather was announced in the form of an Open Letter to members of the Chinese Communist Party and the Communist Youth League, in the language of "advocating" such a policy. Worries about the consequence of the one-child policy, such as population aging and lack of old-age support, sex imbalance, and future labor shortages, were acknowledged in the Open Letter. Demographers argued that there were alternative ways of reaching the population target of 1.2 billion by 2000 (Liang 1983; Bongaarts and Greenhalgh 1985). Facing resistance both within and outside the CCP, China's legislative body, the National People's Congress, resisted suggestions for enacting a national law requiring one child per couple.[7] The Open Letter contained both recognition of the sacrifices that Chinese families would have to endure and a promise to change the policy in 25–30 years. As for the difficult task of enforcing the policy, it was left to each province to translate the policy into concrete requirements and to specify the exemptions allowed (Gu et al. 2007).

Legacies: What contributions has the one-child policy made?

At the time the one-child policy was announced to the Chinese public, the designers of the policy anticipated a faster pace of population aging as a result and acknowledged the policy's deleterious effect on the kinship structure of Chinese families. Over the course of the policy, unanticipated consequences also emerged, such as physical, often violent abuses, sex-selective abortion, and, more recently, a risk of a depressed fertility level that could lead to irreversible population aging, labor shortage, and economic slowdown and stagnation (Wang 2011). For its critics, the one-child policy is a blunt violation of basic human rights and an intrusion into individuals' and families' reproductive freedom.

Supporters and sympathizers, even some of the critics, however, have accepted the policy in the belief that it has played a positive role in containing global population growth and in saving the world from unbearable population pressure. A common claim is that the policy has prevented some 400 million Chinese births. This claim originated with the Chinese government,

which credits the policy for undergirding China's economic miracle. In the Party's view, the fertility reduction helped create a population age structure favorable for economic growth. The government has even suggested that its population control effort was a major contribution to the global effort to address the negative consequences of climate change. No one, however, has seriously examined the validity of this claim.

Where did the claim of 400 million births prevented come from, and how credible is it? The original calculation of the number of the births prevented came from a project sponsored by China's National Population and Family Planning Commission, completed in the late 1990s, with a goal to evaluate the inputs and the benefits of China's birth control program (Yang, Chen, and Wei 2000). The authors used a simplistic extrapolation method, projecting what the crude birth rate would have been by 1998 had China's birth rate followed the trajectory of decline between 1950 and 1970. Their projected crude birth rate for China was 29.7 per thousand by 1990 and 28.4 per thousand by 1998. Given that the observed birth rate after 1970 fell far below these rates, the authors calculated the number of births attributed to the difference between the predicted and the observed birth rates as the number of births "averted." For the period 1970 to 1998, the number derived was 338 million. In the decade after the publication of this number, the number of births averted was raised to 400 million.

In stating that the one-child policy averted 400 million births, the promoters of the policy first misinterpreted the original results from the study mentioned above. The number of births averted was for the period since 1970, not from 1980, when the one-child policy was formally implemented nationwide. This mistake is crucial because most of China's fertility transition was completed during the decade of the 1970s—that is, *before* China's one-child policy was enacted. Within that decade, China's total fertility rate dropped by more than half, from 5.8 in 1970 to 2.8 in 1979. Most of the births averted, if any, were due to the rapid fertility decline of that decade, not to the one-child policy that came afterward.

Even the number of 338 million births averted appears to be a result of over-generous assumptions, not reality. To examine what China's birth rate or fertility would have been in the absence of the one-child policy, we use data from countries that had a birth rate similar to China's in 1970 to compare the trajectory of change in these countries with that of China. There were 16 countries in 1970 with a population of at least one million that had a birth rate between 30 and 38 per thousand, 12 of which had a level that was higher than China's at the time, 33.4 per thousand (Table 1). The average of these 16 countries was 35.6 per thousand. The average birth rate in this group of countries declined to 26.6 per thousand by 1990 and 22.0 by 1998, both significantly below the levels predicted by the authors who arrived at the "births averted" numbers. This comparison shows that in other countries

TABLE 1 Assumptions and comparison of birth rates, China and 16 other countries, 1970, 1990, and 1998

	Births per 1,000 population		
Country	**1970**	**1990**	**1998**
South Korea	31.2	15.4	13.8
Costa Rica	32.8	27.0	21.2
Albania	33.0	24.3	18.6
Lebanon	33.0	25.7	21.9
Jamaica	34.4	25.2	22.2
North Korea	34.6	20.6	17.9
Brazil	35.0	24.2	21.4
Uzbekistan	36.5	33.7	23.4
Malaysia	36.6	30.4	24.3
Thailand	37.0	19.7	16.4
Venezuela	37.1	28.6	23.9
Turkmenistan	37.2	34.7	24.6
Paraguay	37.4	33.5	29.0
Panama	37.5	26.1	24.0
Colombia	37.6	27.2	23.8
South Africa	37.8	29.3	25.1
Average of 16 countries	35.6	26.6	22.0
Government projection for China	32.9	29.7	28.4
China observed	33.4	21.1	15.6

SOURCES: Birth rate by country: World Bank, 2010. Government projection for China: Yang, Chen, and Wei 2000.

without a one-child policy the birth rate also declined, and it declined below the level predicted for China.

To further examine the claim that China's one-child policy was necessary to lower fertility, we also explore a counterfactual: what would China's fertility be if there were no one-child policy? We use the Bayesian model developed by Alkema et al. (2011), the same used for the latest United Nations population projections (United Nations 2011). The Bayesian model projects China's future fertility scenarios based on: 1) the fertility trend in China before launching the one-child policy and 2) fertility trends in all other countries.

Fertility in China would have continued to decline if the country's rapid fertility decline in the 1970s offers any hint about the country's future fertility trajectory. According to the Bayesian model, the decline would have continued after 1980. By 2010, fertility would have fallen to its currently observed level of around 1.5 children per woman.

Moreover, the counterfactual scenario shows that the fertility level observed for the early 1980s was somewhat higher than what would be expected from the empirical Bayesian model. This seems to be counterintu-

itive, but it might be explained by the anxiety caused by policy uncertainty, which prompted many couples to have children earlier than they would have otherwise. This tempo effect is shown in the declines in ages at first marriage and first childbearing in the 1980s. In addition, the policy overemphasized meeting short-term (period) targets (e.g., reducing the population growth rate to 5 per thousand by 1985) and overlooked the tempo and cohort effects in reducing population momentum. Calculations of a universal two-child policy with spacing, as advocated by Liang Zhongtang, have demonstrated that such an approach would not only have achieved China's population control goal, but would also have produced more favorable social and demographic conditions (Gu and Wang 2009). If we apply the same empirical Bayesian model to contemporary China, lifting the one-child policy is unlikely to have a major impact on population size. Experience from other countries shows that raising fertility is probably an even more challenging task than reducing it (Frejka, Jones, and Sardon 2010; Goldstein, Sobotka, and Jasilioniene 2009).

If the one-child policy did not achieve its goal of preventing hundreds of millions of births in China, the question then becomes why is it widely criticized as a cause for many of China's short- and long-term social problems, and why have so many both in China and abroad urged that it be phased out. The one-child policy is criticized not just because of the demographic uncertainty it has caused. More fundamentally, it is seen as an ill-conceived policy that has prevented Chinese individuals and families from having the number of children they desire. It is a policy that has forcefully altered family and kinship for many Chinese, has contributed to an unbalanced sex ratio at birth, and has produced effects that will be felt for generations, with its burden falling disproportionately on those many couples who were forced to have only one child. In other words, at the same time as the demographic effect of the one-child policy in controlling population growth has been exaggerated, its long-term impact on Chinese society has been underappreciated.

A particularly long-lasting consequence is the hundreds of millions of families with only one child. Although, with declining fertility, some families would opt for one child voluntarily even if the government had not imposed the draconian restriction, there is little reason to believe that the proportion of families with only one child in China would ever have reached the level we currently observe. To quantify the social effect of the one-child policy, we estimate the proportion of Chinese families with only one child. We restrict our calculation to women aged 35 to 44 in 2005. We focus on this group for two reasons: first, these women spent their prime reproductive years under the one-child policy; second, by age 35 and over, they have mostly completed their childbearing.[8]

Among this group of women, numbering just over 110 million, who were born between 1961 and 1970 and by now are all aged over 40, a large proportion will complete their childbearing with no more than one child. In

2005, nationally, over 40 percent of them had only one child. The proportion of one-child women varies widely by province, from a high of nearly 80 percent in the urban centers of Shanghai and Beijing, to a low of less than 20 percent in the western provinces of Guizhou, Yunnan, and Tibet. In 11 of China's 31 mainland provincial-level administrative regions, over half of women aged 35–44 had only one child. If we treat each married woman as representing a single-couple family, then roughly 50 million families in this age group will have only one child.

The share of families with only one child is even more pronounced in China's cities, where the one-child policy is most strictly enforced (Gu et al. 2007). Couples with non-agricultural household registration status (*hukou*) not only face a stiff fine for violating the one-child rule, but also risk losing employment and being unable to register their children for health care and education. Among women in our sample, roughly 18 percent have non-agricultural household status. Among these urban families, the proportion of one-child families is 86 percent. In ten Chinese provincial regions, this share exceeds 90 percent, and in the three provincial-level urban centers, Beijing, Shanghai, and Tianjin, and in Liaoning province, the share is over 95 percent. Among urban Chinese families of the 1960s birth cohort, who will begin to reach age 60 in less than a decade from now, a virtually universal one-child family world is already a reality.

In contrast to the demographic effects of the one-child policy in reducing population growth, which can at best be very small, the policy's social effect in depriving a large proportion of Chinese families of a second child is enormous. A simple calculation illustrates the magnitude of this impact: allowing 15 million families in this age group to have a second child results in 1.5 million more births per year over a ten-year period and could virtually eliminate all one-child families in this age group of urban families.[9] Applying the figure of 15 million to the whole country, the share of one-child families nationwide in this age group would drop from 42 percent to 28 percent. The figure of 15 million is trivial in comparison to the total number of births over a ten-year period in China. Assuming most of the women aged 35–44 in 2005 had their children during the years 1985 to 2000, and given that the annual average number of births for this period was about 22 million, the additional 1.5 million births amounts to only 6.8 percent more births, a number that is inconsequential for total births for each year or for population growth, but extremely consequential for a large number of Chinese families.

The policy's long-lasting social consequences will be judged by the future lives of China's one-child generation and their parents. China today has about 150 million families with only one child, accounting for more than a third of all families.[10] Among the post-one-child generation of parents, the share is even higher. This is the population structure with which China will have to confront the challenge of rapid population aging at the societal level.

Exit: People vs. population

In less than half a century, the alarm that unprecedented population growth caused in many counties in the mid and late twentieth century has turned to concerns over population decline and aging. Moreover, the twentieth century saw not only population growth but also extraordinary growth in material wealth (Lam 2011). While, in parts of the world, especially sub-Saharan Africa, rapid population growth still poses serious challenges to poverty reduction and economic prosperity, more and more countries are now concerned with sustained low fertility and its consequences. The number of countries where the government considered its fertility level too low had increased from 16 in 1976 to 47 in 2006. Among 48 countries with a total fertility rate below 1.8 children per woman in 2009, over 70 percent considered their fertility too low (United Nations 2010). Countries in Europe and Asia have begun incentive programs to encourage couples to have more children (Demeny 2003; Frejka, Jones, and Sardon 2010; Demeny 2011). The latest entry is Iran, where total fertility dropped from 4.8 in 1990 to 1.9 in 2006 (Roudi 2012).

China today is also economically, demographically, and socially vastly different from 35 years ago, when the one-child policy was officially initiated. The goal of quadrupling per capita income from $250 to $1,000 by the year 2000, seemingly wildly ambitious when first set by Deng Xiaoping in 1980, was achieved in roughly half the time. Today, with per capita GDP at over $8,000, China has joined the ranks of the high-middle-income countries. China's economy is second only to the United States in total size, and the question for the future is not whether but when China will become the world's largest economy. While China's economic growth exceeded the goal set at the start of the post-Mao era by a wide margin, the goal of not permitting the population to exceed 1.2 billion was not achieved, even with the draconian one-child policy. China's 2000 census reported a total population of 1.26 billion. However, in light of the much faster economic growth, the extra 60 million should be of little concern.

Even with the better-than-expected economic growth, however, Chinese policymakers have not revised their original population goals to allow couples to have more children. Unlike other governments around the world, under which declines in fertility level have led to revisions and reversals of their population policy, in China the process of policy review and revision has been surprisingly long and slow. Almost 35 years after it was ushered in as an emergency response to population growth, the one-child policy, with its many known deleterious consequences, is still in place.

Why has China been so slow in phasing out a policy that has become increasingly unpopular among the public—a policy that was initially defended by deeply flawed science? This policy was only able to survive because of those three features of the Chinese political system and policymaking process

that we outlined earlier. Moreover, the huge birth planning apparatus that was created in the process of implementing the one-child policy has become a main force of resistance to policy change. Not only does it produce and disseminate misinformation such as that the one-child policy has averted 400 million births, but it continues the practices of coercion and other heavy-handed tactics.

The question, however, is not whether, but when, the one-child policy will be phased out. Politically, the Chinese leadership has come to realize that the country can no longer continue the old development model that sacrifices long-term benefits for short-term gains, that ignores individual rights and welfare, and that elevates economic development above everything else. Socially, China's younger generations, especially those born under the one-child policy in the 1980s and 1990s, have become the most critical segment of the population not only economically but also socially and politically. These generations are the best educated in Chinese history, are highly mobile geographically, and exert their power and voice in the sphere of social media. China's single-child generations are no longer willing acceptors of the country's statist orientation. While many of them are voluntarily postponing marriage and childbearing, and hence form the driving force of today's below-replacement fertility, they also increasingly regard it as their right, not the government's, to decide whether and when to have children. To them, population is no longer a number of aggregated subjects, but individual lives that should be respected and cherished.[11]

The opening up of Chinese society and the revival of population studies as an academic discipline have also produced an independent force that can confront government pressure. A decade and more of research by scholars has shown consistently that fertility remains well below the replacement level (Retherford et al. 2005; Guo and Chen 2007; Cai 2008; Morgan, Guo, and Hayford 2009), and has revealed that the one-child policy is not a main driver of China's low fertility (Cai 2010; Gu and Wang 2009; Zheng et al. 2009). Leading demographers have formed a collective voice calling for phasing out the policy (Gu and Li 2010; Zeng 2007). Insistence on maintaining the policy has become increasingly a political liability.

History will remember China's one-child policy as the most extreme example of state intervention in human reproduction in the modern era. History will also likely view this policy as a very costly blunder, born of the legacy of a political system that planned population numbers in the same way that it planned the production of goods. It showcases the impact of a policymaking process that, in the absence of pubic deliberations, transparency, debate, and accountability, can do permanent harm to the members of a society.

The one-child policy will be added to the other deadly errors in recent Chinese history, including the famine in 1959–61 caused largely by the industrialization and collectivization campaigns of the late 1950s, and the Cultural

Revolution of the late 1960s and early 1970s. While those grave mistakes both cost tens of millions of lives, the harms done were relatively short-lived and were corrected quickly afterward. The one-child policy, in contrast, will surpass them in impact by its role in creating a society with a seriously undermined family and kin structure, and a whole generation of future elderly and their children whose well-being will be seriously jeopardized.

Notes

1 There were two earlier World Population Conferences, in 1954 and 1965. Unlike its predecessors, the delegates to the 1974 meeting had the authority to commit their governments to decisions taken at the conference.

2 The other 5 "basic state policies" added subsequently, are environmental protection (1990), gender equality (1992) resources saving (1997), farmland protection (1998), and opening to the outside world (2007). «http://politics.people.com.cn/GB/1025/10016373.html».

3 CCP Central Committee document No. 79, 1978.

4 Two CCP leaders in charge of the economy, Chen Yun and Li Xiannian, were the most vocal in their support. Chen Yun, then Vice Chairman of the CCP, made it clear in conversations with other party officials on 1 June 1979 that clear laws and regulations needed to be formulated to require only one child per couple (Liang 2010, p. 5).

5 In November 1979, the CCP released the "Notification on the Implementation of the Cadre Evaluation System," marking the formalization of government officials' performance evaluation.

6 The work by Song Jian and his colleagues, who were the main scientists providing support to the one-child policy, was not brought to the attention of Chen Muhua until February 1980 (Liang 2007, p. 193; Greenhalgh 2008, pp. 269–270).

7 It took two decades, until 2001, for China's National People's Congress to pass a family planning law, but still "advocating," not "requiring," each couple to have no more than one child.

8 We use data from China's 2005 mini-census to calculate the proportion of women with only one child. The calculation was done using a 20 percent micro sample from the 2005 mini-census, equivalent to 2 per thousand of China's total population. The total number of women included in the calculation is 220,747. Inflating this number with the sampling ratio gives a number for the women in this age group of 110,373,500, or about 110 million.

9 This number is derived by multiplying the share of women with non-agricultural household registration status and the total number of women in this age group, which gives a number of women in cities of 19,867,230. Our figure of 15 million accounts for 75.5 percent of these women.

10 The total number of Chinese households counted in the 2010 census was 402 million.

11 A recent example is the case of Feng Jianmei, a woman in Shaanxi province, who was forced, in July 2012, to abort a seven-month fetus because the child would have been her second. Her case caused national outrage and produced a quick government apology (see Wikipedia page on Feng Jianmei: «http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Forced_abortion_of_Feng_Jianmei»).

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