

COMMENTARY

The End of China's One-Child Policy

Wang Feng, Baochang Gu, and Yong Cai

Starting on January 1, 2016, all Chinese couples are allowed to have two children. This marks the end of China's one-child policy, which has restricted the majority of Chinese families to only one child for the last 35 years. Yet, China's policy change came at least a decade later than it should have. The costly lessons to be learned are not only in politics and public policymaking, but also in how parts of the academic community informed and misinformed public policy-making. (STUDIES IN FAMILY PLANNING 2016; 47[1]: 83–86)

Starting on January 1, 2016, all Chinese couples are allowed to have two children. This marks the end of China's one-child policy, which has restricted the majority of Chinese families to only one child for the last 35 years (Gu et al. 2007). The process of ending the one-child policy occurred in three steps over the past three years. It began in March 2013, when China merged the National Population and Family Planning Commission with the Ministry of Health to create a new National Health and Family Planning Commission. Eight months later, in November 2013, China announced a partial policy relaxation that allowed couples to have two children if one parent is an only child. Surprisingly, among the estimated more than 11 million couples who were eligible to have a second child under the new rule, only 1.69 million had applied as of August 2015, accounting for 15.4 percent of such couples (Xi 2015). The third and final step took place in October 2015 to allow all couples to have two children in 2016.

With this latest change, the Chinese state has begun to withdraw its hand from controlling couples' reproductive decisions. An even more significant change that was announced as part of the third step is that couples are no longer required to seek approval from the government to have a child, whether the first or second, but only to register the birth afterward. While the announcement stops short of lifting all restrictions, and the official language still contains the rhetoric of "continuing the basic state policy of birth control," it would appear to be only a matter of time before Chinese families will be free to choose when and how many children to have.

The one-child policy was designed in 1980 as a temporary measure to put a brake on China's population growth and to facilitate economic growth under a planned economy that faced severe shortages of capital, natural resources, and consumer goods (Wang, Cai, and

Wang Feng is Professor of Sociology at the University of California, Irvine. Baochang Gu is Professor of Demography at Renmin University of China. Yong Cai is Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. E-mail: caiyong@unc.edu.

Gu 2013). However, the answer to China's underdevelopment did not come from its extreme birth control measures, but from reform policies that loosened state control over the economy. China's economic boom over the last few decades has lifted hundreds of millions out of poverty, sent almost 100 million young men and women to college, and inspired generations of Chinese, both young and old, to pursue their economic goals. As observed in many other countries and societies, socioeconomic and cultural transformations accelerated the pace of fertility decline. By the turn of the new century, China's fertility was well below the replacement level, and China began to face the mounting pressures associated with continued low fertility. To continue the one-child policy within such a demographic context was clearly no longer defensible (Cai 2013; Peng 2011).

Unlike the rushed launch of the one-child policy in 1980, which was primarily a political decision based on little understanding of demography and society (Bongaarts and Greenhalgh 1985; Greenhalgh 2008; Wang, Cai, and Gu 2013), researchers have played a much more active and meaningful role in calling for changes to end the policy. Scholars from leading institutions of population research in China formed an academic team in 2001 (Hvistendahl 2010). Their studies of China's new demographic realities and the harmful consequences of continuing the ill-conceived one-child policy, and their three collective appeals to Chinese policymakers to relax and to end the one-child policy, in April 2004, January 2009, and most recently in January 2015, served as the basis for policy debates in China. Their efforts, along with efforts from many other sectors of society, informed the public of China's new demographics and corrected the many misconceptions about population growth and the rationale for the one-child policy.

Yet, China's policy change came at least a decade later than it should have. Changes to phase out the policy have been delayed because of leaders who have made population control part of their political legitimacy and a bureaucracy that has grown increasingly entrenched in the course of policy enforcement. In addition, the Chinese public has been thoroughly indoctrinated by the Malthusian fear of unchecked population growth and by a social discourse that has erroneously blamed population growth for virtually all of the country's social and economic problems (Lee and Wang 1999).

China's one-child policy will be remembered as one of the costliest lessons of misguided public policymaking. Contrary to the claims of some Chinese officials, much of China's fertility decline to date was realized prior to the launch of the one-child policy, under a much less strict policy in the 1970s calling for later marriage, longer birth intervals, and fewer births (Whyte, Wang, and Cai 2015). In countries that had similar levels of fertility in the early 1970s without extreme measures such as the one-child policy, fertility also declined, and some achieved a level similar to China's today. While playing a limited role in reducing China's population growth, the one-child policy in the 35 years of its existence has created tens of millions, perhaps as many as 100 million, of China's 150 million one-child families today. For these families, the harm caused by the policy is long-term and irreparable. Population aging in China is a burden not only for Chinese society as the support ratio between the working-age population and the elderly declines, but also for many of working age who are only children (Wang 2011). Furthermore, China has had three decades of abnormal sex ratios at birth, as couples resorted first to female infanticide and then sex-selective abortion.

As a result, China now has a large pool of surplus men estimated at between 20 and 40 million (Cai 2014).

The lukewarm response of couples to the partial relaxation in the second step largely confirmed findings from a pilot study in Jiangsu Province in 2007–2009 (Zheng et al. 2009) that very low fertility in China is more the result of choice than of policy restrictions. Other societies in East Asia, like Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, have had little success in boosting their low fertility even with pronatalist and pro-family policies. The end of China's one-child policy therefore is unlikely to increase births in China by a significant number in the years to come.

What China has practiced under the one-child policy is clearly not voluntary family planning. To enforce the policy, China carried out massive sterilization and abortion campaigns. In 1983 alone, a year with about 21 million births in China, 14.4 million abortions, 20.7 million (predominantly female) sterilizations, and 17.8 million IUD insertions were performed (Whyte, Wang, and Cai 2015). A large proportion of these procedures were involuntary.

Future generations will likely look back at China's one-child policy with bewilderment and disbelief. To many it will be incomprehensible why, of all countries that faced the challenge of rapid population growth in the second half of the twentieth century, only China went to such an extreme; incomprehensible why in a society based on respect for the family, kin, and filial piety, the government enforced a policy that effectively terminated many kin ties for at least a generation; incomprehensible why China instituted such a policy after the country had already experienced substantial fertility decline; and incomprehensible why China waited so long to end such a harmful policy. The costly lessons to be learned are not only in politics and public policymaking, but also in how parts of the academic community informed and misinformed public policymaking.

While there are lessons to be learned from the misadventure of the one-child policy, it is worthwhile to recognize the importance of voluntary family planning services in reducing and averting unplanned childbearing and especially in improving the lives of women and children and in increasing gender equality. Access to safe, voluntary family planning services is a basic human right. The rapid fertility decline in China and around the world over the last half century would not have been possible without family planning services. Even in China, the government began to realize the central role of women in reproductive decisions and started to pay attention to the quality of family planning services in the 1990s (Gu, Zhang, and Xie 1999). With the ending of the one-child policy, there is a clear and urgent need for re-education of China's family planning and health service apparatus toward empowering couples to make informed choices about their fertility. China should continue providing free and safe access to voluntary family planning services and keep its focus on quality and on women's reproductive health.

REFERENCES

- Bongaarts, John and Susan Greenhalgh. 1985. "An alternative to the one-child policy in China," *Population and Development Review* 11(4): 585–617.
- Cai, Yong. 2013. "China's new demographic reality: Learning from the 2010 census," *Population and Development Review* 39(3): 371–396.

- Cai, Yong. 2014. "China's demographic challenges: Gender imbalance," in Jacques deLisle and Avery Goldstein (eds.), *China's Challenges*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Greenhalgh, Susan. 2008. *Just One Child: Science and Policy in Deng's China*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Gu, Baochang, Erli Zhang, and Zhenming Xie. 1999. "Toward a quality of care approach—Reorientation of the family planning program in China," in Jay Satia, Patricia Mathews, and Aun Ting Lim (eds.), *Innovations: Innovative Approaches to Population Program Management—Institutionalising Reproductive Health Programs*, Volumes 7–8, Chapter 4: 39–52. Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: ICOMP.
- Gu, Baochang, Wang Feng, Zhigang Guo, and Erli Zhang. 2007. "China's local and national fertility policies at the end of the twentieth century," *Population and Development Review* 33 (1): 129–147.
- Hvistendahl, Mara. 2010. "Has China outgrown the one-child policy?," *Science* 329(5998): 1458–1461.
- Lee, James Z. and Wang Feng. 1999. *One Quarter of Humanity: Malthusian Mythology and Chinese Realities, 1700–2000*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Peng, Xizhe. 2011. "China's demographic history and future challenges," *Science* 333 (6042): 581–587. doi:10.1126/science.1209396.
- Wang, Feng. 2011. "The future of a demographic overachiever: Long-term implications of the demographic transition in China," *Population and Development Review* 37 (Suppl.): 173–190.
- Wang, Feng, Yong Cai, and Baochang Gu. 2013. "Population, policy, and politics: How will history judge China's one-child policy?," *Population and Development Review* 38 (Suppl.): 115–129.
- Whyte, Martin King, Wang Feng, and Yong Cai. 2015. "Challenging myths about China's one-child policy," *The China Journal* 74: 144–159.
- Xi, Jinping. 2015. *On Explanation of the Proposed 13th Five-Year Plan*. Xinhua News Agency, November 3.
- Zheng, Zhenzhen, Yong Cai, Wang Feng, and Baochang Gu. 2009. "Below-replacement fertility and childbearing intention in Jiangsu Province, China," *Asian Population Studies* 5(3): 329–347.