

Prepared Statement

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Members of Congress, Distinguished Co-Panelists, Esteemed Guests:

On October 29 of this year, a shift from a One Child to a Two Child norm was announced by the Central Committee of Chinese Communist Party at the Fifth Plenum of the 18th Party Congress.¹ In other words, the Party signaled that it would be abandoning the One-Child Policy it had promulgated in the very early 1980s, and would now be moving to allow all parents in China to have two children.

To be clear: that shift has not yet taken place. To the contrary: just days after the October 29 announcement, China’s National Health and Family Planning Commission, which oversees the population program, emphasized that the new norms were not yet “valid,”² and described the Two-Child Policy as a “proposal,”³

¹ “China to allow two children for all couples,” *Xinhua*, October 29, 2015, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-10/29/c_134763645.htm.

² “China denies immediate validity of two-child policy,” *Xinhua*, November 2, 2015, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-11/02/c_134774830.htm.

indicating furthermore that this proposal would have to be approved by Beijing's legislature next year before it might eventually be enacted.

Suffice it thus to say that all the particulars of this new Two-Child Policy still remain to be seen. It is not too soon, however, to make a few basic points.

First: The end of the One-Child Policy will *not* mean the end of coercive birth control in China. This critical fact must be underscored. The Chinese government is *not* retiring its enormous apparatus of involuntary population plan enforcement. Beijing is *not* relinquishing its claim that the state, rather than parents, is the proper authority for deciding how many children China's families may have. Instead, the Chinese Communist Party is merely preparing to recalibrate the limit that it will impose on its subjects. By all indications, the sorts of ugly human rights violations that other witnesses will be describing here this morning—up to and including criminalizing out-of-quota pregnancies and forcibly compelling abortions against the will of the mother—will still be very much part and parcel of China's population policy agenda.

Second: Any Two-Child Norm would necessarily and inescapably still expose parents who desire more than two children to coercive birth control. While we cannot calculate the size of this group of parents with any great precision, it would appear that this group could include millions upon millions of would-be parents in contemporary China. That group would also disproportionately include China's ethnic minorities, including those of Muslim cultural background. Last month *The Economist* detailed the intensification over the past year of an anti-birth drive against the Uighur population in China's northwestern province of Xinjiang.⁴ For China's population planners, there is no contradiction between raising the permissible birth quota and deploying the power of the state against birth quota "violators."

Third: In addition to its obvious demographic focus, China's population program should be understood to serve more broadly as an instrument of population control, in the more general sense of social control. And it is not a "stand alone" policy in this regard. We must also bear in mind contemporary China's *hukou* system of

³ "China stresses two-child policy not yet valid," *Xinhua*, November 10, 2015, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-11/10/c_134802823.htm.

⁴ *The Economist*, "Family planning in Xinjiang: Remote control," November 7, 2015, <http://www.economist.com/news/china/21678007-government-xinjiang-trying-limit-muslim-births-remote-control>

household registration and residence permits—a system the likes of which is only otherwise seen today in North Korea.

In principle every Chinese citizen today must have government authorization to move outside his or her officially designated *hukou* locality, for example in search of work. Persons living and working outside their official *hukou* are in effect illegal aliens within their own land, and may in theory be rounded up and deported back to their place of origin at any time. (And this is not just a theoretical possibility—tens of millions of idled migrant workers were sent back to their homes during the global crash of 2008 to forestall any possibility of unrest in the urban areas to which they had moved.) At this writing, a distinct majority of the young men and women in China's big cities are *de facto* illegal residents, violating established *hukou* rules. [SEE FIGURE 1] Absent far-reaching *hukou* reform, an ever greater share of China's urban population is on track to be comprised of *hukou* violators, given the outlook for urbanization. One might think the obvious solution here should be to relax these *hukou* restrictions—or to scrap them altogether. Despite considerable talk about *hukou* reform over the past two decades, Chinese authorities have shown extreme reluctance to do away with *hukou* system in practice.

Though more intrusive and arguably abusive than pre-Communist instruments of social control, these instruments do have antecedents in Chinese dynastic history. Indeed, in his classic study of the vast and oppressive bureaucratic edifice for maintaining social control over rural China under the Qing dynasty, Kung-chuan Hsiao describes a number of techniques (such as the *baojia* neighborhood surveillance system) that would have an eerily familiar ring in China today. Over the course of two thousand years, observed Hsiao, China's rulers strove to develop and perfect “an administrative apparatus which helped emperors to assure obedience and forestall rebellions.”⁵ Given both the nature of current Chinese rule and the tradition that predates it, we should not be surprised if authorities in Beijing prove themselves surprisingly attached to coercive population policy precisely because of the social control it affords the rulers over the ruled.

Fourth: It is worth noting that some Chinese researchers and academics are already calling for more aggressive measures to stimulate population growth, and the Chinese government is at the very least granting such voices a hearing in the

⁵ Kung-chuan Hsiao, *Rural China: Imperial Control in the Nineteenth Century*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1960), p. 3.

state controlled media. Days before the announcement of the new Two-Child Policy, for example, the official *China Daily* carried a story titled “Need seen as ‘urgent’ for boosting population,” in which a Peking University professor is quoted as proclaiming “two children are good, and three are even better.”⁶

Is it possible that Beijing might reverse course in the future, and veer from an anti-natal policy to pro-natalism? If so, China would hardly be the first postwar Asian government to conduct such an about-face. Japan, the Republic of Korea, the Republic of China (Taiwan), and Singapore have all done exactly that already. The distinction here, of course, is that none of these other governments ever attempted to enforce *involuntary* birth control. A coercive population policy forcing Chinese parents to have unwanted births is certainly hard to imagine nowadays—but that does not necessarily mean that such a program should be dismissed out of hand as an absolute impossibility. As population and human rights activist Steven Mosher warned shortly after the announcement of the new Two-Child Policy, “The same party officials who have been responsible for decades of forced abortions and sterilizations would presumably have no qualms over enforcing mandatory pregnancy on young women, if they were ordered to do so.”⁷

Finally: Among the many unanswered questions concerning coercive birth control in China, the most important—and perhaps also surprising—is its ultimate demographic impact. Strange as this may sound, demographers and population specialists have yet to offer a plausible and methodologically defensible estimate of just how much this extraordinarily ambitious and ruthless adventure in social engineering has actually altered the size and composition of China’s population.

The problem is that we lack any clear idea of what China’s population trends over the past three and a half decades would have looked like in the absence of coercion. Over the decade before the One-Child Policy, China’s birth rates were plummeting. [SEE FIGURE 2] At the advent of the One-Child Policy era, demographers now estimate that fertility levels in the Chinese countryside were well under half their level just ten years earlier, and that fertility was far below replacement in China’s cities. Indeed, during the 1960s and 1970s, birth levels in urban China were already apparently considerably lower than in Hong Kong or Taiwan. [SEE FIGURE 3]

⁶ Shan Juan, “Need seen as ‘urgent’ for boosting population,” *China Daily*, October 17, 2015, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2015-10/17/content_22206185.htm

⁷ Steven Mosher, “A new dawn of reproductive freedom in China? Hardly,” *The Federalist*, November 6, 2015, <http://thefederalist.com/2015/11/06/a-new-dawn-of-reproductive-freedom-in-china-hardly/>

Chinese population control authorities like to claim their efforts have averted a cumulative total of over 400 million births.⁸ They apparently arrive at that figure by tallying up abortion totals during the One-Child Policy era. But if so this would be a fundamentally flawed approach to measuring the demographic impact of coercive birth control policy. It fails to distinguish between voluntary and involuntary abortions, while also ignoring the scope and scale of pregnancies averted altogether in the first place under the glare of anti-natal pressure. As an approximation of demographic impact, this figure cannot be taken seriously—although admittedly it would be highly meaningful to know just how many involuntary abortions Chinese authorities believe they are responsible for.

Perhaps the closest approximation to the true demographic impact of the One-Child Policy we could hope for might come from tracking the gap between wanted family size and actual family size over time and by region or locality for China—if such data were available. Over twenty years ago, a path-breaking study by Lant Pritchett and Larry Summers demonstrated that desired family size was the single best predictor of achieved family size the world over, irrespective of a country's culture or income level.⁹ (That same study made a powerful case that *voluntary* family planning programs typically had very little impact on overall national fertility levels.)

Around the world today, differences in wanted fertility can apparently account for over 90 percent of intercountry differences in actual fertility. [SEE FIGURE 4] This is an extremely high correlation—but it is not perfect. In other words: even if we possessed detailed time-series data on desired family size for China in the One-Child Policy era, we could not be sure that any differences between real existing fertility levels and reported wanted fertility were completely due to coercive pressures. Moreover: it is by no means obvious that ordinary social science survey techniques are capable of eliciting reliable responses about desired fertility in a setting where answers to these questions are as fraught and politicized as they obviously are in China today. It is telling that Beijing's serious over-estimate of the expected demographic impact of its 2013 relaxation in the One Child Policy was reportedly due in part to survey research in which respondents indicated they would be inclined to have an additional child if they had the opportunity; in

⁸ *People's Daily*, "400 million births prevented by one-child policy," October 28, 2011, <http://en.people.cn/90882/7629166.html>

⁹ Lant Pritchett, "Desired Fertility and the impact of population policies," *Population and Development Review* 20, No. 1 (Population Council, 1994): pp. 1-55. Summers withdrew his name from the study because he had assumed a prominent position in the Clinton Administration by the time it was ready to appear in print.

retrospect it looks as if the interviewed couples may just have been trying to provide their official questioners with the answers they thought their interrogators wanted to hear.

The devilish difficulty of ascertaining the demographic dimensions of the bite from China's police state population control policy has most recently been underscored by an important study by Dr. Daniel M. Goodkind, who has carefully re-examined the relationship between China's population program and the country's rising gender imbalance at birth.¹⁰ Many observers (including me) take it as a given that the One-Child Policy has been the cause and the driver of rising sex ratios at birth in China over the past three and a half decades, but Goodkind challenges us to take a second look. Among his many other points, sex ratios at birth are currently at least as high as China's in a number of former Soviet states that have never been subjected to coercive population programs.

One curious aspect of Chinese census-taking in the One-Child Policy era is that more boys and girls seem to be enumerated for any given birth year in every successive national population count—despite the fact that China is a slight net out-migration country, and despite the predictable toll that mortality must exert. All other things being equal, we should expect the counted totals for males and females to decline, not rise, from one census to the next. Steady increases in enumeration for given birth years since 1980 are not characteristic, we should note, of either India or Indonesia—two other huge Asian populations with slight net out-migration.¹¹ [SEE FIGURES 5 TO 7]

How then to explain the steadily rising count for children born in the One-Child Policy era? China's levels of illiteracy are not higher than Indonesia's or India's—nor would we ordinarily think of the Chinese government's reach as distinctly more limited. Some other explanation must account for this.

It is tempting to take these rising population counts for given birth years in contemporary China as a reflection of a widespread tendency for parents to “hide” their children from authorities at a time when penalties for violating birth quotas could be severe. And this may be part of the dynamic revealed in Figure 5—but no more than part of it. For enumeration by birth year seems to keep on rising for this

¹⁰ Daniel Goodkind, “The claim that China's fertility restrictions contributed to the use of prenatal sex selection: A skeptical reappraisal,” *Population Studies* 69, 3 (Routledge, 2015): pp. 263-279.

¹¹ I would like to thank Mr. Alex Coblin of American Enterprise Institute and Ms. Katherine Cole of Dartmouth for their research assistance in preparing these figures.

generation of Chinese on into their teens, and then into their twenties. It is difficult to envision plausible storylines for how a forcible birth control policy could incentivize people to avoid enumeration at those stages in the life cycle.

Forcible birth control looks to be the Chinese government's preferred policy path for the indefinite future. What is incontestable is that this path guarantees systematic human rights abuse. Much less well understood is what impact forcible population control stands to exert on the demographic rhythms of Chinese society. Demographic specialists need to pay much more attention to this question than they have to date.