

A New Dawn of Reproductive Freedom in China?

Despite the new Two-Child Policy, the Chinese Communist Party remains as firmly in control of fertility as ever.

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Introduction

The Chinese Communist Party has decided that all Chinese couples will soon be allowed to have a second child, rather than being restricted to only one, as some now are.

Foreign observers have generally greeted the apparent end of the one-child policy with euphoria, as if it somehow represents a new birth of reproductive freedom in China. Some have publicly commended the Chinese leadership as if they had decided to completely abolish a policy that has caused so much physical, emotional, and spiritual damage to the families in the nation.

But the Chinese leadership has done no such thing. China is not backing away from draconian birth limits because Communist Party leader Xi Jinping has suddenly developed a conscience. No one in the senior leadership has ever lost any sleep over the 400 million unborn and newborn children their policy has killed over the past 35 years, or shed a tear for the hundreds of millions of young mothers forcibly aborted and sterilized over this same period, or had a moment's regret for China's tens of millions of missing baby girls.

What keeps them up at night is the dawning realization that their misguided policy is crippling China's future economic growth. For at least the past two years, China's workforce has been shrinking. Last year, the potential workforce fell by [3.71 million](#), a significant number even by China's standards. At the same time, the over-sixty population is exploding. According to U.N. projections, it is expected to more than double by 2050, reaching an astonishing 437 million. China is growing old before it grows rich, and the strains on China's nascent pension programs will be enormous.

The [parallels](#) between China's current demographic and economic malaise and Japan's demographic and economic decline are striking. The Japanese economy has never really recovered from its "demographic recession" that began in the nineties, brought on by a shrinking workforce and a rapidly aging population. China may not recover either (as the leadership is now belatedly coming to understand) despite the move to a two-child policy.

But there is another reason, even more fundamental, why I am not celebrating the end of the one-child policy. Regardless of whether Party leaders allow Chinese couples to have one, two, or even three children, the *underlying* policy has not--and probably will not--change.

What underlying policy, you may ask? I am referring to the policy of “Planned Birth”--*jihua shengyu* in Chinese--under which the Chinese state, rather than the Chinese people, decide how many children are to be born in China each year.

It was none other than Chairman Mao himself, the founder of the People’s Republic of China, who first put the Planned Birth policy in place. The Great Helmsman, as he was known, decided way back in the 1950s that the five-year economic plans being drawn up by the Chinese Communist Party should control not just production, but *reproduction*. And they have, ever since.

The Planned Birth Policy: Coercive From the Beginning

Not long after the founding of the People’s Republic of China, the Party-State undertook to control the fertility of the Chinese people. A national Planned Birth program was in place and operational by 1953 which--except for periods of major political upheaval--has continued to the present day. Some imagine that these early days were a kind of “golden age” where women were merely “informed” about their “reproductive choices,” and then left to use the drugs, devices, and surgeries of their choice. *This has never been the case*. As a general rule, the Chinese Party-State has never been content to simply provide education in, and encouragement to use, family planning methods. Rather, it has always viewed population as a mathematical equation to be solved, and been all-too-ready to resort to quotas and widespread compulsion when its proposed “solution” meets resistance from the masses. This tendency to use coercive measures is literally “built into” the Planned Birth program, not to mention into the Dictatorship of the Proletariat itself. When a one-party dictatorship draws up a plan, the masses are expected to follow in lockstep. Opposition to the plan is seen as seditious, and is oftentimes even characterized as counterrevolutionary. The Planned Birth campaign is no exception.

The first phase of this program of state-planned births ran until 1958, when it was derailed by the economic chaos of the Great Leap Forward and the mass famine that followed. The campaign resumed in 1962, but this second phase was barely under way before it was abruptly terminated in 1966 by the virtual civil war that was Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. After the People's Liberation Army was called in to restore order in 1969, the campaign resumed. From that point forward, the Planned Birth campaign has continued more or less continuously to the present day.

Strong-arm measures were already apparent in the first phase of the Planned Birth campaign. Although they were less noticeable in the second, truncated phase, they increased markedly during the third phase *even before the start of the one-child policy*. The two main strategies used by the Party during the early-to-mid 1970s--often linked in the Planned Birth propaganda of the time--were (1) to delay age at marriage and (2) to mandate that multiparous women wear IUDs. Although the state-run media remained largely silent on the question of coercion, there are credible reports that officials sometimes resorted to forced IUD insertions and forced sterilizations during this period. The end result was that the Chinese birth rate plummeted as the decade progressed.

Coercion in the 1970s

When the Party-State began to function again in 1969, it resumed its efforts to control China's population. No longer would China's children be allowed to run riot as Red Guards; instead, their numbers would be drastically restricted. The Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, in conjunction with the State Council, soon issued a "Directive on Promoting Planned Birth Conscientiously" which left no doubt about who would decide how many babies were to be born in China. It read:

To promote Planned Birth in cities and in densely populated rural areas and to appropriately control the natural population growth rate so that the problem of births will

gradually *turn from a state of no planning to a state of planning* is a confirmed policy of socialist construction in our country. (italics added)

The Party began by having its propaganda outlets attack the “feudal custom” of early marriage and repudiate what it called “the reactionary theory on marriage” that had supposedly been “advocated by Confucius and Mencius,” who were all-purpose whipping boys in those late Cultural Revolution days. Late marriage, on the other hand, was exalted as part of the “thought of Mao Zedong” and an important aspect of the “class struggle.” Nationalism was also used to whip up enthusiasm for birth planning by describing it as an essential part of a “patriotic health campaign.” As the Party-State apparently intended, this harsh “class struggle” campaign rhetoric inspired equally harsh measures on the part of lower-level officials to control births. The Shanghai Party Committee, for instance, designated the week of January 25, 1970 as “shock week” for the promotion of birth control and late marriage. During this week, the Committee ordered, the masses were to be “mobilized,” every family was to be visited by officials “in a penetrating and vigorous manner,” and “remedial measures” were to be taken “whenever problems are discovered.” “Remedial measures,” of course, are a veiled reference to coercive practices such as forced IUD insertion and worse. Similar campaigns were soon being undertaken in other cities and in rural areas.

In January 1971 the *People’s Daily* made the astonishing claim that “to promote with great effort late marriage and planned births and mobilize commune members to practice Planned Birth” was one of the “*demands*” of Chinese women.(italics added) In fact, there was considerable opposition to the *de facto* two-child policy that the Party-State was effectively imposing on the Chinese people by insisting that all women who had borne two children wear IUDs. But, in typical fashion, the Party-State blamed opposition on “class enemies” rather than admit to the existence of popular dissent. PRC President Liu Shaoqi, who was purged by Mao during the early stages of the Cultural Revolution, was a particular target. It was Liu’s “poisonous influence” that was responsible for the opposition to the planned birth campaign, went the official line, for he had spoken “disparagingly” of the Party-State’s efforts to regulate births.

In contrast, planned birth was said to have been encouraged by the Great Helmsman himself. Direct statements by Chairman Mao Zedong on the policy are hard to find, although he was said to have remarked during the 1950s that childbearing in China was “in a state of anarchy.” Other than this we find his name invoked in a more general way:

Planned Birth is a work of momentous significance promoted by great leader Chairman Mao and the Party Center and is an important measure for carrying out Chairman Mao’s great strategic plan, “Be prepared against war, be prepared against natural disasters, and do everything for the people.” ...

Thus, Planned Birth is an important thing bearing on the health of the nation, not a trifling matter concerning [only] an individual or a family...

Elsewhere we find the *People’s Daily* asserting that Planned Birth work was “in accordance with Chairman Mao’s brilliant instruction that mankind has to control itself and to multiply in a planned way.” When local cadres proved reluctant to impose the Planned Birth policy on their fellow villagers, whom they lived among, Mao’s earlier remark that childbearing in China was “in a state of anarchy” was resurrected, but without attribution:

Planned Birth is a social revolution aimed at changing the customs and habits, breaking the old and building the new. On the question of childbirth, to go over from *a state of anarchy to the practice of planning* will inevitably meet with resistance. Such resistance comes mainly from the sabotage of the class enemies and from the influence of old ideas and old concepts left over from several thousand years. (italics added)

It is not surprising that most couples in China were upset, even angry, over the Party’s usurpation of their traditional prerogatives in childbearing. Rather than bowing to the popular will, however, the Chinese leadership doubled down. It launched a nationwide propaganda campaign which claimed that opposition to the new policy was being fomented by “class enemies” and

“counterrevolutionaries,” even as it acknowledged that “feudal ideas” about childbearing were deeply etched in the minds of the Chinese people. By making opposition to the state’s Planned Birth policy tantamount to treason, the Party raised the stakes for those--both within Party circles and among the population at large--who might otherwise have opposed it.

At the same time the Party’s propaganda machine went into overdrive to try and create at least the *perception* of popular support. Newspapers like the *Guangzhou ribao* insisted that state birth planning was not only in “the interests and aspirations of the masses of people,” but was in fact “an urgent demand of the broad masses of the people.” Not only that, but Planned Birth was “gradually becoming the compelling demand and spontaneous action of the masses.” The Party’s broadsheet was in effect claiming that Chinese couples were so excited by the prospect of limiting their progeny that they were lining up and *demanding* to be contracepted, sterilized, and aborted. State-run radio broadcasts were similarly over the top. Radio Hangzhou breathlessly asserted that a large-scale sterilization and IUD-insertion campaign carried out locally in Zhejiang province had not only been a success, but had won “the acclaim of the masses.” Like the *Guangzhou ribao*, it made the highly dubious claim that “the spontaneity of the masses for practicing late marriage and Planned Birth control for the revolution is being continuously enhanced.”

By August 1974 the Chinese Party-State was ready to announce to the world, through its official news agency, XINHUA, that the country’s Planned Birth policy had “achieved initial success.” Anticipating that the international community might suspect that this “success” had been achieved through coercion, XINHUA’s English-language dispatches insisted that Chinese families had merely been “advised to have no more than two children” and that the Planned Birth policy was being carried out out “on a voluntary basis under state guidance,” Later that month, that same chilling line--that the policy followed the principle of “voluntary with state guidance”--was repeated in the English language journal *Beijing Review*. How the Planned Birth policy could be “voluntary” when couples were expected to follow “state guidance” in bearing children was not explained. Later, I was to witness the Party’s version of “voluntarism” in action as groups of three

or four officials would “guide” distraught pregnant mothers to a local clinic for “voluntary” second- and third-trimester abortions.

These several articles also asserted that oral contraceptives, IUDs, and sterilization were generally accepted, that the program was now being spread to the countryside, and that it was there meeting with increasing success. In February 1975 XINHUA touted one of these supposed successes: Nangong county, located in Hebei province, had reportedly seen its population growth rate drop by 74% in the two years since the policy had been implemented in 1973. “Wherever you go [in the county],” the official news agency boasted, “you can hear people saying ‘Planned Birth is good.’” The policy had become “deeply embedded in the hearts of the people throughout the county,” making Nangong a “model” for other counties to emulate.

In spite of the fact that, according to Party propagandists, the enthusiasm of the masses over this new policy knew no bounds, local radio broadcasts from this time suggest that there was considerable resistance both from cadres and locals in large parts of the country. Why else would these broadcasts urge local cadres to “strengthen leadership” over the work, grasp it “firmly and well,” “mobilize the masses,” and make the Planned Birth campaign a top priority? Why else would they need to “grasp the class struggle” and the struggle between the “two lines” (revolutionary and reactionary) in order to “enhance the spontaneity” of the cadres and the masses? Above all, why else would they be told that they must “consolidate the dictatorship of the proletariat,” an ominous phrase which meant that that they were now free to use the mailed fist of state power to crush any and all opposition to the Planned Birth policy of the Party? Still, as some reports noted, the “fierce struggle between the two classes” in planned birth work continued, and “sabotage” by class enemies remained a problem. All localities reported “successes” in the efforts to implement the policy--they could hardly do otherwise--but not a few admitted that, despite their “successes,” the work was “uneven” and they had been unable to meet the “demands” (i.e., targets and quotas) laid out by the Party.

The Planned Birth campaign rhetoric of the early 1970s reflected the harsh, aggressive tone of the Cultural Revolution, a time when every statement of the authorities was freighted with ideological overtones, and every act charged with political menace. This was a time when Lin Biao, Vice Chairman of the CCP and Chairman Mao's designated successor, attempted to flee Mao's wrath but died when the plane he had commandeered crashed in Outer Mongolia. It was a time when Mao's third wife, Jiang Qing, an ambitious woman who had arrogated more and more power to herself as Mao slipped into his dotage, made the planned birth policy a centerpiece of the continuing Cultural Revolution.

Lin Biao's name was quickly added to the political invective of the day. Along with his fellow "counterrevolutionary" Liu Shaoqi, and the long-dead "reactionaries" Confucius and Mencius, Lin was accused of having "sabotaged" the Planned Birth campaign. Every provincial, county, and commune-level cadre in China was ordered to help expose his "towering crimes" against the campaign and publicly criticize him. Since there was absolutely no evidence that he did any such thing, the already strident Planned Birth propaganda of the time now began to read like the paranoid ravings of a mad political zealot:

We must seriously organize the masses to study the theory of the dictatorship of the proletariat, implement and propagate Chairman Mao's instructions and the Party's policy on Planned Birth and grasp well the struggle between two lines and two kinds of ideology on Planned Birth work. We must criticize the reactionary fallacies on the question of family, marriage, and childbearing preached by Liu Shaoqi, Lin Biao, and Confucius and Mencius... We must eradicate their poison. We must enhance the masses' spontaneity for practicing late marriage and Planned Birth. We must train a large number of activists in planned birth work and give full play to the backbone and vanguard role of revolutionary cadres, Party members, China Youth League members, and militiamen.

In other words, all of the organizations controlled by the Party-State were to be enlisted into the struggle to impose the Planned Birth policy on “the masses.” And “the masses” were going to like it--“spontaneously” of course--or else. Or again:

To practice Planned Birth is a profound revolution in the ideological sphere. To carry out this ideological revolution for ‘getting rid of the old and establishing the new’ and ‘changing existing habits and customs,’ we must thoroughly break away from the traditional relations of ownership [of children], the traditional concepts, and eradicate the old ideas and habits on the issue of marriage and parenthood left behind over the past several thousand years. Therefore, to make a success of Planned Birth work is an important aspect of consolidating and developing the victorious achievements of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. The remnant poison of the reactionary fallacies spread by Confucius and Mencius... is very extensive and their influence is extremely deep. Bourgeois rights also are reflected in the issues of marriage and parenthood. The class enemies also try by every way possible to carry out sabotage. Therefore, in order to institute Planned Birth, we must also take the class struggle as the key link, persist in the Party’s basic line, seriously study the theory of the dictatorship of the proletariat, persist in exercising all-around proletarian dictatorship over the bourgeoisie, firmly grasp the struggle between two classes, two lines, and two kinds of ideology in marriage and parenthood, develop revolutionary mass criticism deeply and protractedly, criticize thoroughly the reactionary fallacies advocated by Liu Shaoqi, Lin Biao, Confucius, and Mencius on the issue of the family, marriage, and parenthood, and eradicate their remnant poison.

In Junan Commune, located in the Pearl River Delta of Guangdong province, where I did my original field research in China, these were the years in which virtually every women of childbearing age with three or more living children was either inserted with an IUD, or given a tubal ligation. Interviews with local women who had been

sterilized under duress convinced me that local cadres had followed their orders to the letter. They had indeed “firmly grasped the struggle between the two lines” and ensured that “the dictatorship of the proletariat” had carried the day. The “reactionary fallacy” that couples could have as many children as they wanted was in retreat, replaced by the new Party line: the Chinese Communist Party, and the state apparatus that it controlled, would henceforth be in charge of regulating births under a state plan.

Childbearing Under a State Plan Will Continue

This is why the shift to a two-child policy is occurring as part of the next five-year plan, approved at the latest meeting of the CCP Central Committee. The official communiqué [about the meeting](#), [released](#) by China’s official Xinhua News Agency on October 29th, made clear that in the 13th Five-Year Economic Plan, China’s leaders had decided to ramp up both production *and* reproduction.

The communiqué itself, written in the almost unreadable pastiche of slogans that the Party resorts to on such occasions, read: “Promote the balanced development of the population; resolutely carry out the basic policy of Planned Births; thoroughly implement the policy of each couple birthing two children; actively begin to address the aging of the population.”

Of course it is already far too late to “rebalance” the population in order to stop the rapid “aging of the population.” Those trends are already baked into the demographic cake, as it were. No spike in planned births, however robust, is going to offset the hundreds of millions of “planned” deaths that preceded it.

Moreover, it is doubtful whether the new policy will have much of an impact at all. When the one-child policy has been relaxed in the past--first for rural couples whose first child was a girl, then for all rural couples, then for urban couples where both the husband and wife were only children--the results have been underwhelming.

The last tweaking of the Planned Birth policy, which occurred just two years ago, was particularly disappointing to Party leaders hoping for a baby boomlet. The government had [“announced”](#) that couples in which only one spouse was an only child would be allowed two children, and planned for 20 million births in 2014. Only 16.9 million babies actually materialized. And out of 11 million couples eligible to have a second child, only 1.45 million had applied for a “permit” by May of this year.

These figures suggest that, at least among China’s urban population, millions of couples are not eagerly waiting to fill the maternity wards. Forty years of anti-natal, anti-child propaganda has left its mark on the Chinese psyche. Few Chinese young people, who are themselves only children (and often the children of only children), are inclined to be generous when it comes to having children of their own. They would rather spend their limited incomes on themselves than, say, disposable diapers.

The Chinese are not alone in having below-replacement fertility. Every developed Asian country, from Japan and South Korea, to Taiwan and Singapore, is suffering from the same demographic malaise. The difference is that these countries grew rich before they began growing old. China, as a result of its misguided one-child policy, is growing old before it is rich.

What will the China’s leaders do if, as now appears likely, the Chinese people do not procreate up to plan?

At present couples are *permitted* to have a second child, but I don’t expect the matter to end there. Soon they will be “encouraged,” then “motivated” and finally “ordered” to bear children. A government bent on regulating its population under a state plan will do whatever necessary to “produce” the number of children it has ordered reproduced.

If this prediction sounds, well, a little overwrought, consider what China has been doing to young, pregnant mothers for the better part of two generations now.

At the outset of the one-child policy, Paramount Leader Deng Xiaoping ordered his officials to “Use whatever means you must” to force the birthrate down. “With the support of the Communist Party, you have nothing to fear,” he assured them. They took him at his word, and women were rounded up *en masse* to be aborted, sterilized, or contracepted.

Even today, these kinds of abuses continue. As recently as two months ago, a mother was [forced to sacrifice](#) the life of her unborn child to save her husband’s job. She was eight months pregnant. Not long before, a Shaanxi woman was taken by force from her home by a gang of Planned Birth officials and given an abortion. She was seven months pregnant, according to reports from the [Guardian](#).

The same Party officials who have been responsible for decades of forced abortions and sterilizations would presumably have no qualms enforcing mandatory pregnancy on young women, if they were ordered to do so.

An example of just this kind of coercive pro-natal policy comes from neighboring North Korea, one of the most rigidly controlled countries on earth. Dictator Kim Jong-un, worried about the country’s falling birth rate, has just ordered ob-gyns to stop inserting IUDs, and has declared that abortion will henceforth be illegal.

If the higher birthrate called for by China’s new Planned Birth policy can not be achieved voluntarily, China’s leaders may take similar actions. Childbearing may become mandatory. Regular pelvic examinations will be instituted to monitor menstrual cycles and plan pregnancies. Abortion may be forbidden. Such measures, long in place in China to restrict childbearing, may be instituted to increase the number of children born.

Recommendations

1. China's leaders should abandon the Planned Birth policy altogether. They should allow couples to freely choose the number and spacing of their children, and have as many, or as few, as they desire.
2. China's leaders should respect the consensus of the international community as expressed in the policy of the UN Population Fund, which affirms that couples enjoy the right to responsibly decide the number and spacing of their children.
3. The **National Health and Planned Birth Commission (NHPBC)**, created in 2013 from the merger of the Ministry of Health and the National Population and Planned Birth Commission, should revert to its former role as a Ministry of Health, and its Planned Birth arm abolished.
- 4.

Only if these reforms are undertaken will forced abortions and forced sterilizations, which have characterized China's Planned Birth policy from the beginning, come to an end.