



**Two-child policy in China: rhetoric versus reality**

Journal:	<i>Annals of Human Biology</i>
Manuscript ID	Draft
Manuscript Type:	Commentary
Keywords:	two-child family planning policy, China, reproductive health

SCHOLARONE™  
Manuscripts

view Only

## Two-child policy in China: rhetoric versus reality

Sabu S. Padmadas

Department of Social Statistics & Demography and Centre for Global Health,  
Population, Poverty & Policy, University of Southampton

What led the government of People's Republic of China to relax the one-child policy? Is the two-child family planning policy a strategic response to address the current and imminent demographic crises or a tactic to pacify local and international dissent against human rights? Can the two-child policy reconcile and sustain China's demographic future? What does it imply for the health and reproductive rights of the next generation? These questions are still intensely debated in scientific, policy and media circles, both within and outside China.

China's one-child policy was one of the most strategic and controversial family planning policies ever implemented in the entire human history. At the time when it was introduced, in 1979, the Communist Party of China (CPC) held an undisputed mandate that reducing population growth was the only solution to tackling extreme poverty and boosting economic development (Greenhalgh & Winckler, 2005). The government took top-down 'coercive' methods to implement the policy, overriding basic human rights, imposing social restraint, confiscating personal belongings and even levying tough financial penalties on couples who contravened family planning regulations (Attané, 2002; Hesketh et al. 2005). Over time, there were exceptions and differentiation to the actual implementation of the policy, depending on geographical region, ethnic background and economic development at provincial- and county-levels (Gu et al. 2007). Couples in rural areas were allowed a second child if their first was a girl and, later, to those if both parents were the only children.

More than three decades after the introduction of one-child policy, there are still debates about the magnitude of the policy impact on population size. The

1  
2  
3 government claims, based on extrapolation methods, that the policy averted 400  
4 million births across China. However, this includes the period since early 1970s  
5 during the "*wan, xi, shao*" or "later, longer, fewer" family planning campaign which  
6 advocated for later marriage, longer birth intervals and fewer children through use of  
7 birth control methods (Wang et al. 2013). There is evidence to suggest that China,  
8 unlike India, had already completed its fertility transition during the 1970s even  
9 before the enactment of the one-child policy: fertility rates in China declined by over  
10 50% from 5.8 children per woman in 1970 to 2.8 in 1979. That said, China has ever  
11 since experienced a gamut of complex demographic challenges including structural  
12 changes in the population distribution and composition primarily driven by: fertility  
13 declining below sub-replacement (ultra-low) level, rising sex-selective abortions and  
14 female infanticide, intensification of male dominant sex-ratios resulting in over 30  
15 million excess bachelors, shrinking work force and unprecedented population ageing.  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25  
26

27  
28 A historical U-turn to one-child policy came through on 29 October 2015  
29 when the CPC publicly announced that couples in China can have a second child –  
30 with effect from March 2016 until the two-child policy is legally ratified. The first step  
31 to this historic shift was made in 2013, under the new leadership of President Xi  
32 Jinping, bending rules and allowing couples to have a second child if either parent is  
33 the only child (Basten and Jiang 2014). These policy changes were not expedited by  
34 unwary actions; rather systematically in stages through intense high-level political  
35 debates and ensuing the ideologies within CPC. Another important milestone  
36 coincided when China responded affirmatively to the International Conference on  
37 Population and Development Plan of Actions (ICPD-PoA), which advocated strongly  
38 in favour of protecting reproductive rights and enabling informed contraceptive  
39 choices to individual men, women and couples. The Chinese government, in  
40 partnership with the United Nations Population Fund, implemented three major  
41 cycles of reproductive health/family planning (RH/FP) country programmes – the  
42 evaluations demonstrated positive evidence which eventually convinced the Chinese  
43 government to scaling-up the programme nationwide and reorienting RH/FP  
44 services towards informed choices (CPDRC et al. 2011). However, there were still  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 challenges and gaps in the quality and provision of informed contraceptive choices  
4 (Fang & Kaufman 2008; Brown et al. 2010). Overall, the UN programme in China was  
5 instrumental in setting a strategic direction towards eliminating the birth quota  
6 system, regulated by the one-child policy.  
7  
8  
9

10 The broader operational context of the current two-child policy is far too  
11 different and complex than its antecedent: be it social, economic, demographic,  
12 political, cultural, technological and environmental. Today, most Chinese people, the  
13 aspiring middle-class generation, live in big cities and urban areas. Migration and  
14 mobility are its peak level, increasingly so amongst females. The current generation  
15 of Chinese women have relatively better social and economic position than their  
16 older counterparts, in terms of education attainment, participation in economic  
17 activities and access to information.  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24

25 Modernisation has also crept into Chinese family systems, especially young  
26 people increasingly opting for cohabitation unions and delaying marriage prioritising  
27 career and personal development over family obligations. Most young people,  
28 especially unmarried, prefer to have one child and in some cases wanting no children  
29 at all (CPDRC et al. 2011). Contraceptive options are no longer restricted to IUD or  
30 sterilization; condom use has risen substantially among younger cohorts of Chinese  
31 couples. There is even a natural tendency among future generation to follow a *later,*  
32 *longer and fewer* reproduction strategy. Younger generation are also conscious of  
33 the looming demographic and economic crises and most of them will see their  
34 parents living beyond 80 or even 100 years.  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44

45 As China gears towards the two-child policy, population planners are vigilant  
46 of the unfolding demographic developments. It is too early to forecast how the new  
47 policy will influence couples' fertility intentions and fix the irregularities in population  
48 age-sex structure. Nevertheless, the two-child policy is unlikely to trigger any major  
49 increase in absolute population size or reverse population ageing in China. While the  
50 rigidity of family planning systems, to some extent, will relegate, it is almost certain  
51 that the two-child policy is not liberal in terms of basic human and reproductive  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

rights. A take-home message for China is not to fiddle with numbers instead allow individuals and couples to make reproductive choices and decisions on their own.

## References

- Attané I. 2002. China's family planning policy: An overview of its past and future. *Studies in Family Planning*. 33(1):103–113.
- Basten S, Jiang Q. 2014. China's family planning policies: Recent reforms and future prospects. *Studies in Family Planning*. 45(4):493–509
- Brown JJ, Bohua L, Padmadas SS. 2010. A multilevel analysis of the effects of a reproductive health programme that encouraged informed choice of contraceptive method rather than use of officially preferred methods, China 2003–2005. *Population Studies*. 64(2):105–15
- CPDRC, NCWCH and University of Southampton. 2011. Quality of care in reproductive health and family planning in China: Focus on young people, gender and HIV prevention. Quantitative Evaluation Report. UNFPA/CHINA Sixth Country Programme 2006-2010. China Population & Development Research Centre, National Centre for Women and Children Health, Chinese CDC, Southampton Statistical Sciences Research Institute and Centre for Global Health, Population, Poverty & Policy, University of Southampton, UK.
- Fang J, Kaufman J. 2008. Reproductive health in China: improve the means to the end. *Lancet*. 372(9650):1619–20.
- Greenhalgh S. 2003. Science, modernity, and the making of China's one-child policy. *Population and Development Review*. 29(2):163–196.
- Greenhalgh S, Winckler EA. 2005. *Governing China's population: From Leninist to neoliberal biopolitics*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Gu B, Wang F, Guo Z, Zhang E. 2007. China's local and national fertility policies at the end of the twentieth century. *Population and Development Review*. 33(1):129–147.
- Hesketh T, Lu L, Xing ZW. 2005. The effect of China's one-child family policy after 25 Years. *New England Journal of Medicine*. 353(11):1171–1176.
- Wang F, Cai Y, Gu B. 2013. Population, policy, and politics: How will history judge China's one-child policy? *Population and Development Review*. 38(Suppl):115–129.