

China is reaping consequences of malthusian population policy

by Mary McCourt

The People's Republic of China is characterized by a large population, a weak economic foundation, and unbalanced economic development, Acting Premier Li Peng told a Beijing meeting of leaders of China's family planning commissions Jan. 20. Caught in the middle of these crises, China's leadership is responding with the malthusian policies that will only exacerbate its problems: a return to the stringent enforcement of the "one couple, one child" policy of the early 1980s.

Subject to the world economic crisis, and facing what one expert called "enormous technology transfer curbs" due to the U.S. government decision to punish China for selling weapons to Iran, the best solution that the Chinese leadership has come up with for its economic woes has been Zhao Ziyang's announcement Jan. 22 that China "should have a sense of urgency" about attracting foreign investment and management. He wants the investment for labor-intensive, low-wage export industries in the most densely populated coastal regions. That China does not anticipate future help from the advanced industrial nations, was shown in an article by Huan Xiang, the director of the Center for International Studies of Beijing, in the Feb. 15 issue of the official *Beijing Review*, on deteriorating Sino-U.S. relations. Huan warned that "trade imbalances, financial deficits, currency fluctuations, and stock market crashes in developed countries will lead to world economic instability in a few years."

Under these conditions, China's leadership has decided to take action to prevent a potentially enormous population increase, which would occur primarily because, over the next 10 years, the huge generation born in the 1960s will come of child-bearing age.

But these policies will be difficult to implement. The population, especially the increasingly (relatively) affluent peasants, will not accept reversion to the drastic policies that led to tens of thousands of forced abortions and female infanticide in 1981. Measures to limit births will have to depend on "persuasion," as Liang Jimin, the director of the State Family Planning Commission's general office, said Feb. 17.

At the same time, demographic disaster, the result of enforced malthusian programs, is already evident. China, which still has one of the lowest per capita incomes in the world, is very rapidly becoming an "aged" nation, with an

ever-larger, dependent retired population, and a shrinking labor force that will contract by 50 million over the next 25 years. The danger of this situation was demonstrated when Deng Yingchao, the 83-year-old widow of Chou En-lai, Mao Zedong's most faithful lieutenant, called for "Peace and Happiness Death"—euthanasia—for terminally ill cancer patients. Her statement was published in January by *Health News*, in an article reviewing China's first court case of "mercy killing" of an elderly woman with liver disease. The *Chinese Women's Journal* also reported that in a poll of 199 people in the province of Heilongjiang, 89% favored euthanasia for terminally ill cancer victims.

By the end of 1987, China's total population was 1.0722 billion, an increase of more than 14.99 million over 1986. China's goal had been to limit the population to 1.2 billion by the year 2000, but at the current rate, it will be much closer to 1.3 billion by then. After many warnings over the past 18 months that its late-marriage, one-child-per-couple policies were not being followed—especially in the countryside where 80% of the population lives—the Chinese government is taking action.

The British *Sunday Telegraph* reported Jan. 10 that test-tube baby research is now going on in China, and the first such baby is expected to be conceived in July. But the issue is not just to enable infertile couples to have children. As Dr. Lu Guangxiu, leader of the research team in Changsha, Hunan Province, told the British weekly, the trial conception would be "of importance for the future quality of births." The Chinese government is worried about the high numbers of mentally handicapped children born, the *Telegraph* said. There has been open talk of killing deformed children at birth, and a law on eugenics has been under consideration for years.

State policy

Acting Premier Li Peng announced Jan. 20 that family planning will remain a fundamental state policy. "As China is experiencing a child-birth boom, such practices as late marriage, late birth, and 'one couple, one child,' should continue to be encouraged," he told the leadership of the family planning commissions. Since 1978, he said, China's natural population growth rate has dropped from 20 per 1,000 in the decades of the 1950s into the 1970s, to 11-14 per 1,000

now. "Without family planning, an additional 200 million people would have been born, calculated according to the natural growth rate of 1970," Li said. "If we do not exercise population control . . . the wealth gained from productive development will be offset by the population increase."

Li expressed the great concern of China's leadership: How to fulfill China's superpower ambitions, as rapidly as possible, and yet maintain control—and this includes preventing famine. Under Mao's rule, the population nearly doubled in 30 years. China now has 20% of the world's population—but only 7% of its arable land. Modernization of peasant agriculture is fraught with difficulties, but the government considers importing grain a strategic problem.

At the same time, no one wants to risk widespread unrest by reinstating the murderous measures carried out in 1981. Population policy never became national law, because the government feared a backlash from the population, China analyst Jonathan Mirsky wrote in the *Independent* Feb. 18. But, he continued, every locality laid down regulations, including stiff fines and career limitations for families with extra babies. In 1981, officials in one county in Guangdong Province, afraid of not meeting local birth control targets, kidnaped and forced abortions on 47,000 illicitly pregnant women, Mirsky wrote. Female infanticide—to ensure the one legal child in the family was male—reappeared in the same period.

This time, population planning should be carried out only through education, and on a voluntary basis, Premier Li said, rather than through compulsory measures. Mass organizations and non-governmental organs should do their part, he said. Decision-making power on key issues concerning family planning should remain in the hands of the party committees, while governments at various levels should be responsible for implementation. Family planning should be taken as an important index in evaluating performance of governments at various levels, he said, and emphasis should be on rural areas. Li praised the various responsibility systems used in family planning, and called on localities to work out necessary decrees on the issue.

The "contract responsibility system" will be carried into national family planning, the *China Daily* reported Feb. 16. Grassroots organizations will be required to sign contracts with women of child-bearing age, and various social insurance policies taken out for those who practice family planning. Parents of "unplanned" children will pay a fine, 10% of their salaries, and party members are likely to lose their membership.

The Family Planning Commission announced Feb. 15 that China is starting a "nationwide survey on fertility and birth," said *China Daily*, because the country needs precise information on the actual population situation in China.

What they do know, a commission spokesman said, is that in 1986, more than 21 million babies were born, an increase of 18%, or 3 million births, over 1985. An estimated 22 million were born in 1987, a 10% increase. Such rapid

increases are not expected to stop until 1995, due to the number of women reaching child-bearing age, and the increase in planned second births in the countryside. Fertility and natural population growth will peak in 1988 and 1989, the official said. In 1986, the number of fertile women increased by 8 million over 1985, and in 1987, the figure was 7 million higher. The number will increase by 8 million in 1988, giving China a total of 297 million women of child-bearing age. Adding to the rapid population increase over time, is the fact that in 1986, women were marrying at an earlier age by several years than in 1981, and highest fertility has shifted from ages 25-29, to 20-24.

'Loss of population control'

Already on Sept. 23, 1986, the sixth anniversary of the formal adoption of the one-child policy, the official *Health News* editorialized that the program was a "long-range strategic principle policy. It is the wrong idea that there is no need to stress the policy since China's economy has developed." On the next day, Beijing's municipal Communist Party sent a letter to all members in the capital area, urging them to marry late, delay child-bearing, and only have one child. "The peasants' life has been greatly improved," the letter said. "However, if there is no efficient birth control, further increases in the standard of living will be restrained by population increases."

The loss of control was not partial. One Westerner, who lived in a small village in Shanxi Province during 1986, said he saw many families with three to five children, the *International Herald Tribune* reported on Sept. 29, 1986. "If they had baby girls, they just failed to register them with the government," he said. Unregistered children are not entitled to education, food rations, or other government benefits.

The *China Legal News* also said in September that female infanticide continues to be a serious problem, citing figures from the Women's Association of Western Chongqing, where, in 1984 alone, there were 2,800 cases in which baby girls were drowned or mothers of girls mistreated.

The Chinese State Statistical Bureau's Zheng Jiaheng warned the Fifth Session of the Sixth National People's Congress in April 1987, that China's population growth might run out of control if immediate action were not taken to curb recent sharp increases in multiple births, the *China Daily* reported April 2. He said 3.12 million more babies were born in 1986 than in 1985—1.6 million more than the state planned for last year, according to *Chinese Women's News*. In 1987, Zheng said, 3.2 million women will come to prime child-bearing age, and therefore, 1.2 million more babies are expected than last year, with a net population increase of 15.9 million.

Earlier, on July 1, the *China Daily* reported figures from the State Statistics Bureau, that 40% of rural women have given birth to three or more children over the past several years. China began to implement birth control in the early 1970s, but the rate of births picked up again in 1981, and

soared in 1986, when the rate of growth reached 14.08 per 1,000—the highest in four years. Compared with 1985, second births in 1986 climbed by 1.37 million to 6.92 million, and third births topped 2.88 million.

Some of the “effective measures” were outlined by the *China Daily* in January. China has a rapidly growing “transient” population, made up of many self-employed traders and temporary workers who come into the cities from the impoverished countryside. From 1979 to 1986, more than 10 million farmers were transferred to non-agricultural production. Some 80% found local work, but the rest went to the cities. In one survey of 100,000 transients in the city of Lanzhou, according to the Jan. 4 *China Daily*, 70% of the women were not following the state family planning policy. The government acted quickly on the survey results. On Jan. 26, the *China Daily* reported, local governments issued regulations to strengthen family planning in the transient populations.

Under new regulations, rural people who come to register for work in urban industry or commerce must produce a “family planning certificate” showing their marital status, without which they cannot start work. Family planning units will start a registration system to manage birth control of young couples more adequately, both in and out of the provinces, to find out their marital status and persuade them not to have more than one child. Priority in granting licenses and job opportunities will be given to those who marry late and have only one child. Couples with more than one child will be fined 1,500 yuan for each baby—twice the average annual income in the cities.

Too many elderly, too fast

Although China certainly considers it an achievement that its population now has an average life span of 69 years—

one of the 10 longest in the world—the shift to an elderly population is going too fast, the *Economic Daily* commented last June 26. An aged population, typical currently in the industrial nations, is one where 10% of the population is over 60, or 7% over 65. At current trends, continued the *Economic Daily*, by 2025, more than 20% of the Chinese population will be over 60, and 13.6% over 65. Where industrialized nations have generally taken 40-100 years for populations to shift to such a large percentage of elderly, the *Economic Daily* said, in China, the process is taking only 18 years. In 1985, China had 87 million people over 60: 22% of the people over 60 in the world.

“Though China’s economy is developing and its living standard is rising steadily, demand posed by the fast aging population might outrun the country’s social and economic capability,” the *Economic Daily* said. Of 1983 wages, 9.3% went to pensioners, but this will rise to 15% in the year 2000, and 30% in the year 2030. The proportion of able-bodied workers to elderly in 1982 was 12.5 to 1; in 2000, this will be reduced to 9.2 to 1; by the year 2040, there will be only 2.9 workers for each elderly person.

As the World Bank predicted, per capita medical expenses will double every 10 years, and expenses for the elderly are triple those for younger people, the daily said. China must reform its old-age pension system, and state industries must accumulate funds for pensioners. No such alternatives exist for the peasantry, who have no pension system to speak of, which is, of course, one of the primary motivations for them to have numerous children to care for them in retirement. The state may have to increase taxes to pay for pensions, the *Economic Daily* said, and, “If possible, the 87 million elderly citizens should be provided with an opportunity to work again, for the well-being of the country and themselves.”

There have been grimmer warnings of the potential plight of China’s too numerous senior citizens: A researcher from the Academy of Social Sciences told an Oct. 21 international symposium at the Institute of Population Research at Beijing University, that in a developing country like China, society can hardly afford to assume all the responsibility for supporting the elderly. According to the *China Daily*, social old-age welfare programs should be financed not only by the state and collectives, but also by families, he said. But there is one great problem: By the beginning of 21st century, the national pattern will be that only two children will be getting married, while there will be the impossible task of four old people to care for. “Old-age welfare has become a social concern in China,” sociologist Lei Jieqiong also told the same meeting.

Will the “right to die” lobby, contrary to centuries of Chinese tradition, gain power in China as it has in the West, and call for the elimination of the “useless eaters”? One frightening statistic that *China Daily* carried in August, is that cases of elderly people being ill-treated by their children, increased 125% in the city of Tianjin in 1987 over 1986.

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