

Observing changes in Chinese society from a demographic perspective: An overview

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Not only is China the world's most populous country, but it also has the largest ageing society. The current total population in the country has exceeded 1.3 billion and it is estimated that growth will continue until it reaches 1.45 billion. Demographically speaking, after thirty years of Reforms and Opening up, China is now facing huge challenges in four areas, namely, in age structure, sex structure, population flows and questions concerning one-child families. These issues are having a deep impact on the development of society.

I. An ageing Chinese population: how will the situation evolve?

In China, the population ageing phenomenon is going to be further accentuated given that the fertility rate is maintained at a low level. Du Peng, Di Zhengwu and Chen Wei (2005) have projected a population ageing trend in the 21st century based on data collected from the fifth national census and the number of primary school enrolments, and also by drawing reasonable hypotheses from birth rates and average life expectancy at birth. They forecast that the ageing population in China will increase to 30 million in 2023, peaking at 100 million in 2053, and that the percentage of elderly in the total ageing population is forecasted to increase by 23% in 2053 to reach 30% in 2100.

II. "Getting old before getting rich": a current feature of population ageing in China

Du Peng and Yang Hui (2006) have methodologically studied the question of whether China is 'getting old', whether or not she is 'rich', the possible reasons for the 'getting old before getting rich' phenomenon, and the significance of this phrase. According to the article, China's age structure suggests that the country is already 'old'. But if one looks at indicators such as the average GNP, GNP per capita calculated by purchasing power parity (PPP), urbanisation, industrialisation and social security measures, China is still 'young'. The phrase "getting old before getting rich" is therefore a relative concept, which is stamped 'Chinese' and has an incremental feature.

III. How has the high sex ratio at birth phenomenon emerged in China?

Yuan Xin and Shi Hailong (2005) have carried out an in-depth study on the reasons for the rising sex ratio at birth.

1. The socio-economic and cultural grounds in China have conditioned a high sex ratio at birth.
2. Technologies that alter the sex ratio at birth are conveniently accessible.
3. A low birth rate is a catalyst for the phenomenon.

IV. What has the Chinese government done to resolve this problem?

The National Population and Family Planning Commission (2005) has gathered and catalogued results obtained and issues identified by the project.

1. Rapidly raise public awareness and foment productive discussion of the issue of high sex ratio at birth in a rapid and comprehensive way.
2. Implement pilot programmes and promote in-depth development of the 'Care for Girls Program'

3. Fundamental steps to achieve these goals include: to establish directives as a central focus. To lay the groundwork, extensively implement and promote the programme and encourage mass media advertising. As key components, provide a legal framework that governs in an all-inclusive way and condemn the 'two illegal acts'¹. To guarantee in-depth development of the programme, tackle root problems and the phenomenon itself in order to eliminate the cause. As determining factors, highly value leadership, monitoring, and inspection.

4. Main issues include work imbalance among regions, insufficient cooperation between regions and government departments, the need to raise awareness of the 'Care for Girls Program' and the need to intensify efforts in combating the 'two illegal acts'. Certain regional administrations have not emphasized the value of human life and their approach to this work remains at a level at which rigid administrative measures are adopted to proceed. Besides, certain regions have maintained improper assessment methods leading to inaccurate statistical calculations.

V. Government objective: to stabilise a low fertility level

Chen Wei et al. (2000) have illustrated the implications of a stable, low fertility rate, its challenges and opportunities, and the related demographic issues.

1. Maintaining a stable, low fertility rate is conclusive to demographic issues and fertility rate estimation. This measure is considered to be an important, strategic task. That is to say that the objective is to keep a fertility rate below the replacement level,² in order to maintain a stable demographic evolution in national scale that could go hand in hand with regional fluctuations.

2. Challenges and opportunities in attaining a stable and low fertility rate. (1) Opportunities include socio-economic development, expanding urbanisation, changes in attitude towards giving birth (these are major guarantees to attain a low fertility rate; family planning practices and optimisation of population control mechanisms (as bases to achieve the low fertility rate); moreover, fertility rates in midwest China is experiencing a greater decline, and the number of females at peak marriageable and child bearing age has considerably dropped. (2) Challenges include influences of traditions about on giving birth that has a relatively important impact on birth control, which has recently slackened; secondly, there is a gap between the desire to found a family and policy requirements on birth control; thirdly, potential dangers lie in the deficient rural social security system and inaccurate statistics etc.

3. A stable low fertility rate and related demographic issues

(1) As lackening fertility rate to resolve the problem of population ageing is much more harmful than beneficial to supporting the elderly in the future. (2) A low fertility rate will lead to a sluggish growth in the young labour force, but will not cause a future labour shortage in the country. (3) Reasons for a high sex ratio at birth include concealment and omission from birth statistics, artificial sex selection by using modern equipment, drowning and abandoning baby girls, the greater perceived usefulness of having boys than girls for Chinese parents. The consequences of a high sex ratio at birth include an increase in elderly marriages, which will also give rise to a series of social problems and complicate pension matters.

1 That is to say, illegal fetal sex identification and sex-selective abortion without medical grounds[非法鉴定胎儿性性别和非医学需需要的选择性别终止妊娠 (简称“两非”) 不法行为]

2 Replacement level refers to the level of fertility at which a couple has only enough children to replace themselves, or about two children per couple. (source: Population reference bureau, <http://www.prb.org/Educators/Resources/Glossary.aspx#R>)

VI. Preferences for giving birth to boys and the phenomenon of the “marriage squeeze”³

Based on the impact of remarriages on the first-marriage market as well as drawing on a new assessment model for the marriage squeeze, Li Shuzhuo et al. (2006) have examined this phenomenon in China from 2001 to 2050.

1. After the year 2000, a serious male marriage squeeze⁴ was observed in China: (1) The years 2009 and 2027 will be the trough and peak respectively in the excess of eligible men. After the year 2013 the excess male population of marriageable age will rise above 10%, and the figure will exceed 15% during 2015 and 2045. Each year there will be an average of approximately 1.2 million men will not be able to find partners for first-marriages. (2) The high sex ratio at birth will have a tremendous impact on the population born after 2000 when they enter the marriage market. (3) Remarriages have a considerable influence on the excess population on the first-marriage market.

2. Social consequences of preference for giving birth to boys and of marriage squeeze: (1) the marriage squeeze phenomenon is a deprivation of women's birthright and right to life itself. Not only will it damage the overall welfare of society and the population, but it will also endanger sustainable development in the country. (2) The abundance of passive single males might trigger massive social problems. (3) Today, certain poorer regions in western China are beginning to see the phenomenon of bachelor villages. Deviant behaviours might thus result from the contrast between expectations and reality. If they express their discontent and turn individual conflicts into group actions against society, social stability will likely be disturbed.

VII. The phenomenon of an over-age, unmarried population in China today: causes and solutions

Ye Wenzhen and Lin Qingguo (1998) have looked into issues such as whether a marriage squeeze had existed before 2000, whether the scale, characteristics and reasons for the over-age, unmarried population would correspond to the future marriage squeeze, and ways to tackle or avoid this massive bachelor-spinster phenomenon.

1. Characteristics and consequences of an over-age, unmarried population. (1) Characteristics. In 1990, the eligible yet unmarried population aged over 30 in China reached 12.4 million, of which three quarters aged between 30 and 40. The number of bachelors is 16 times greater than spinsters. Nearly 80% of the over-age, unmarried population is found in rural areas, among which unmarried men are concentrated in villages whereas unmarried women are scattered in towns and cities. Over 70% of this population have received only primary education or below, and the unmarried rate is high among men with lower occupational status and women with higher occupational status. (2) Consequences: Although marrying late or remaining single can reduce the number of newborns by 3.7 million and thus favouring population planning, the quality of life and average health level will however be affected; this will also challenge or even threaten the existing marriage institution. Moreover, criminal acts such as marriage frauds and the trafficking of women will impair social stability.

2. Reasons for the over-age, unmarried population phenomenon. (1) Spouse choices according to the marriage gradient by which men should have a higher status than women. (2) Preferences for getting married in certain regions with a greater degree of socio-economic development. (3)

³ The term *marriage squeeze* refers to the demographic imbalance in which the number of potential brides does not approximately equal the number of potential grooms. When not everyone has an opportunity to marry, some will be squeezed out of the marriage market. (source: Marriage and family encyclopedia <http://family.jrank.org/pages/1143/Marriage-Squeeze.html>)

⁴ An excess of eligible men on the marriage market is called a male marriage squeeze. Likewise, an excess of eligible women is called a female marriage squeeze. (ibid.)

Personal considerations. (4) Limited choices of spouse due to confined networks in remote areas.

3. Suggestions for possible solutions. (1) Women who are over-age, unmarried and have a better social standing should lower their standards when choosing a spouse. (2) Men who are over-age, unmarried and not considered as qualified should develop and improve themselves. (3) Families, work units and society should show this group more care and understanding. (4) The traditional hypergamy mindset should be changed and encouragement given to equal and complementary marriages.

VIII. Modes of post-marriage settlement of only-child couples in China

Feng Xiaotian (2006) has conducted surveys and investigated the modes of post-marriage settlement of only-child couples and non-only-child couples in the Chinese cities.

1. Situation and comparison of young adults' modes of settlement after marriage. (1) Almost two thirds of young couples live away from their parents and settle in nuclear families whereas around one third live with their parents from either side. (2) The proportion is the highest for couples living away in small families when both sides are only children (close to three quarters). The proportion is the lowest for couples living away in nuclear families when only one of them is an only child (below 60%). Only-child couples represent the highest proportion living with the wife's parents. When both sides are not only-children, couples are most likely to live with the husband's parents.

2. Influences of gender factors. (1) The mode of post-marriage settlement for couples of which one side was born an only child is the most affected by gender factors. When the husband is the only child, the proportion of those 'living away in nuclear families' and 'living with the husband's parents' is about the same, totaling over 90%. (2) When only the wife is the only child, the proportional decrease of those 'living with the husband's parents' is 2.3 times greater than the proportional increase of those 'living with the wife's parents'. The proportion of those couples 'living away in nuclear families' has risen by 10%.

3. The difference in the level of education. (1) The number of non-only-child couples having received a relatively lower education and living with the husband's parents, is considerably higher than those couples that are only-children. (2) The proportion of non-only-child couples with a relatively higher education that live away in nuclear families is considerably higher than that of only-child couples. (3) The level of education has no influence on the mode of post-marriage settlement of only-child couples.

4. The mode of post-marriage settlement of only-child couples is closely linked to their parents' pension possibilities. (1) The scale and proportion of the 'empty nest' phenomenon, appearing as the parents of only-child couples grow old, will significantly increase. (2) This will have an impact on the lifestyle of only-child couples, such as in the 'retro-nurturing' family relationship and interactions.

5. A new cultural concept of living with the wife's family is already underway and is erasing the traditional gender perception and the idea of living with the husband's family. This change in settlement modes is socially significant.

IX. Changes in Chinese families and in living arrangements for their elderly

Zeng Yi and Wang Zhenglian (2004) have studied the elderly population in China during 1982 and 2000.

1. Family size is in continuous decline. The average household size after adjustments was 4.35, 3.94 and 3.61 persons per family for the years 1982, 1990 and 2000 respectively. During the periods between 1982 and 1990 and between 1990 and 2000, the average annual rates of decline for Chinese household size were 1.26% and 1.36% respectively.

2. Situations of the elderly living with their children in the years 1990 and 2000. (1) On the whole, the proportion of elderly men and women aged above 65 living with their children dropped by 11.4% and 7.2% respectively. (2) Inter-generational support within Chinese families is the major source of elderly protection and care. The proportion of traditional family structures had already decreased in the 90s. (3) The proportion of elderly people living with their spouses greatly increased while the proportion of elderly living alone has dropped.

3. Urban-rural differences in household structure and living arrangements for the elderly in 2000. (1) The average household size for urban and rural areas was 3.2 and 3.6 persons respectively. (2) The proportion of one- and two-person households in rural areas is much lower than that of urban areas. (3) The proportion of extended three-generation households in rural areas was 1.4 times higher than that in urban areas. (4) The proportion of one-person households in urban areas was lower than that in rural areas; this could be explained by the fact that the remarriage rate is higher in cities while the percentage of spouse loss is greater in the countryside. (5) A large majority of elderly people live with their adult sons, and the proportion of urban elderly living with their daughters is higher than that rural ones.

4. Reasons for changes in Chinese families and in living arrangements for the elderly include: rapid socio-economic development, migration and urbanization, the time lag effect on household structures triggered by the low birth rate, the role played by the traditional idea of 'filial piety' and the dependence of Chinese rural elderly on their children's care and support.

X. The social status enjoyed by Chinese women

1. Their economic status. There is a considerable gender difference in terms of social security for urban labourers in China. When the time has come to reap the rewards of socio-economic development, women are often less advantaged than men. Yet when it comes to sharing losses and hardships brought about by social reforms, women suffer to a greater extent from the loss of benefits. Besides, there is a growing tendency of feminisation in agriculture.

2. Their educational status. When educational resources are limited, a greater share is allocated to educate men, thus hampering equal education opportunities that should be received by women.

3. Their political status. During the period of 1990 to 2000, the chances for women to participate in politics increased, although their share of power is less than their male counterparts.

4. Their status in marriage and family. There is a higher proportion of un-arranged marriages and a greater parity in marital relationships for both urban and rural female populations. Although rural women enjoy significantly fewer family rights than men and these rights are fewer as compared to their urban counterparts, they seem to be more satisfied with society and their family than the two other groups.

5. Their legal status and health level. The legal status of Chinese women is being marginalised. Health disparities are most prominent between genders and rural-urban areas. Rural women are considered to have the worst health.

6. Their gender perceptions and lifestyles. There has been progress in gender perceptions vis-à-vis the continuation of family lineage, and gender roles are generally fading away. In terms of range of occupations and decision-making power based on individual behaviours, young women are catching up with their male counterparts. However, gaps still exist between men and married women in terms of consumption and social relations.

During the process of change and adjustment related to demographic issues in China, the country's socio-economic development has played an essential stimulating role. Meanwhile, new demographic changes will challenge the country's future socio-economic development in many ways.

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