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For China, Demography Is a Grim Destiny

by Gordon G. Chang | November 2025

“China has embarked on a road of demographic no-return,” writes Wang Feng of the University of California, Irvine.¹ “Left unaddressed, China’s demographic trap could precipitate a civilizational collapse,” Yi Fuxian of the University of Wisconsin-Madison tells us.²

China will suffer the biggest population collapse in history in the absence of war or disease. No aspect of Chinese society will be untouched as China goes from the world’s second-most populous state—it lost its population crown to India in the middle of 2023—to a mid-sized one. Demographic decline will make almost every problem more difficult to solve. China is destined for failure on many fronts.

The collapse has already begun. The country’s population peaked in 2021 at 1.413 billion. Since then, it has declined and will continue dropping, in all probability, for the rest of this century and beyond.

So far, the demographic erosion has been slow. China’s National Bureau of Statistics reports the country’s population was 1.408 billion at the end of last year.

The collapse will be evident soon, however. The most recent version of the U.N. World Population Prospects, issued in 2024, estimates that at 2100 China’s population will range between its low variant figure of 403.849 million and high variant figure of 890.436 million. The U.N.’s median variant estimate for the turn of the century is 633.368 million.

Others think the population will be far lower then. For instance, the University of Wisconsin’s Yi believes China will have 330 million people when the new century begins. His forecast is below all other estimates, but Yi’s figure is plausible given the trend of falling forecasts.

Yi's estimate assumes that China will stabilize its total fertility rate—generally, the average number of children born to a woman over her lifetime—at 0.8. China's TFR in 2023 was 1.0 and remained the same last year according to some estimates and rose to 1.2 according to others.³ Yi thinks the figure for this year could fall to 0.9.⁴ A country generally needs a TFR of 2.1 to maintain a stable population.

Yi, however, believes that China's TFR could eventually fall to 0.7, meaning China could have even fewer people than 330 million by 2100.⁵

China's impending population collapse will be the result of a convergence of factors. Most fundamentally, there is the country's extreme policies. Mao Zedong, the first leader of the People's Republic, generally believed there should be as many Chinese in the world as possible. The pro-growth attitude meant that at one point, in the beginning of the 1970s, there were 5.9 births per female.

Deng Xiaoping, Mao's successor, wanted to drastically reduce birth rates and instituted the one-child policy in 1979 as one of his first initiatives after assuming power. During the existence of the coercive program, "probably the largest social experiment in human history,"⁶ China's birth rate declined from 2.9 births per female to an estimated 1.0 in 2015, the last year the program was in effect.⁷

Although China moved to a two-child policy in 2016 and a three-child one in 2021, birth rates have continued to decline as decades of relentless propaganda have instilled in the young the notion that smaller families are better.

Moreover, the rapid development of the economy and society in China has, as in other societies,

depressed fertility. In 2021, when marriage was a requirement for obtaining permission to have a child, a Communist Youth League survey showed that 44% of urban women did not intend to get married.⁸

More important, pessimism has taken hold. Due to the extraordinary Covid lockdowns and the subsequent failure of the economy to recover quickly, people began withdrawing from society in large numbers. For many Chinese, it was the first time they had ever experienced a downturn. The last officially recognized recession occurred in 1976.

"'Lying flat,' 'Buddha whatever,' 'Kong Yijiism,' 'involution'—China today has so many memes for opting out," wrote the University of Pennsylvania's Victor Mair in his July 2023 Language Log posting titled "The Growing Supinuity of Chinese Youth."⁹ Since Mair's posting, young Chinese have also been "retiring" by leaving cities and taking up farming.¹⁰

The pervasive dark view accounts for Chinese leaving their country for good and for the precipitous drop in birth rates. "In this country, to love your child is to never let him be born in the first place," read a posted comment on a Chinese site in 2023.¹¹ Young Chinese who refuse to have children are calling themselves "the last generation," a phrase that gained great popularity throughout the country in 2022.¹²

"China's Communist elite presides over a decaying regime," Charles Burton of the Sinopsis think tank told me in May. "Xi Jinping's imposition of a neo-Stalinist program of ever-tightening repression and reversion to full-state control of the national economy has led to economic stagnation, social malaise, and greater regime fragility."¹³

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In this environment, the Chinese regime is apparently thinking of growing babies in machines *Matrix*-style, as Zhao DaShuai, who bills herself as an official propagandist for the Chinese military, suggested in a posting on X in 2023. “Sooner or later, reproduction will be an industrialized process, it’s the only way to maintain a healthy birthrate,” she wrote.¹⁴

China may actually have to resort to industrial production of humans because government programs to increase fertility have not been successful. As Wang Feng points out, “No country has successfully raised fertility with government policies.”¹⁵ “It is possible to use bayonets and police power to force birth rates down against the will of a people; it is very much more difficult to use state force to push birth rates up,” Nicholas Eberstadt of the American Enterprise Institute told me.¹⁶

As China’s population shrinks fast, the nation should become benign, at least in the long run. As Burton, also a former Canadian diplomat in Beijing, told me in October, “China’s aging population will tend to slow growth, and slow growth will intensify domestic pressures and push the regime to prioritize stability through increased surveillance, security spending, and propaganda.”¹⁷

Japan, with its narrowing horizons, is perhaps the best example of how falling population affects geopolitical ambition. A resurgence of Japanese aggression, which ravaged Asia last century, is unlikely anytime soon. Yet as Eberstadt points out, history offers examples to the contrary. Some graying societies, such as Germany in the 1930s and Serbia in the 1990s, were particularly violent and aggressive.¹⁸

The field of “security demographics” yields dire predictions for China. Xi Jinping, for instance, may see a closing window to achieve his ambitions—he has been pushing the imperial-era belief that Chinese emperors had an obligation to rule *tianxia* or “all under Heaven—and so may be impelled to act sooner rather than later to fulfill his imperial goals.

After all, intimidation is the core of his diplomacy, and he can only awe others if China is viewed as the globe’s next hegemon. He cannot intimidate if everyone realizes China will shrink fast. “No one is going to bow down to a country quickly transitioning from giant to midget,” said Blaine Holt, a China analyst and retired U.S. Air Force general, to me in October. “Xi, if he is to achieve his ambitions, has to act fast or not at all.”¹⁹

China can be dangerous even without Xi Jinping, however. Before his taking control of the country, Valerie Hudson and Andrea den Boer, in their much-discussed *Bare Branches: Security Implications of Asia’s Surplus Male Population*, served up grim predictions. Building on the work of others, Hudson and den Boer suggest a link between the existence of large numbers of unmarried males—the so-called “bare branches”—and the adoption of risk-taking foreign policies. “The security logic of high-sex-ratio cultures predisposes nations to see some utility in interstate conflict,” the pair argue.²⁰ China’s one-child policy resulted in some of the planet’s most skewed sex ratios as couples wanted their only child to be male to continue bloodlines. The result was tens of millions of excess men.

The presence of too many males has consequences. “It is likely then that controlling elites astutely underwrite such risky undertakings as territorial expansion or colonization, especially when the

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alternative is having the aggressive tendencies of the male citizens directed at themselves,” write Christian Mesquida and Neil Wiener.²¹

There is support for the Hudson-den Boer thesis. Gunnar Heinsohn, when he was a professor of sociology at Bremen University, made the case that excess males were largely responsible for European conquest from the late 15th century onwards. “The original population bomb was a weapon made in Europe,” he wrote. “Over the next few centuries, Europeans took control of 90% of the globe.”²²

Beijing’s leaders from the early part of this century have in fact accepted the bare-branches thesis,²³ and keen students of Chinese history would have to agree. One bare branch, Zhu Yuanzhang, founded the Ming dynasty, and the Ming house was eventually destroyed by another, Li Zicheng. The next emperors, the Qing rulers, were in part ruined by the consequences of sex-ratio imbalances. “China, it seems, is re-creating the vast army of bare branches that plagued it during the nineteenth century” write Hudson and den Boer.²⁴

Hudson and den Boer also argue that the existence of bare branches impedes democratization. “High-sex-ratio societies are governable only by authoritarian regimes capable of suppressing violence at home,” they write.²⁵ Accordingly, they think the prospect for “full democracy” in China is “poor.”²⁶ If one accepts the theory that free societies do not go to war with each other—the so-called democratic peace theory—then the deferral of the liberalization of the Chinese political system could ultimately have disastrous geopolitical consequences.

Chinese thinkers have long blamed ills on unmarried men. Li Jianxin, a Chinese demographer, states that behind mass-violence incidents are “shadows of surplus males,” who will magnify the challenges of maintaining social stability in the future.²⁷ Bare branches, write Jiang Zhenghua and Mi Hong in *Population Security*, pose a “huge humanitarian disaster.”²⁸ Li, in *The Structure of Chinese Population*, calls excess males one of the “time-bomb factors.”²⁹

Single males may indeed be “testosterone-powered violence machines”³⁰—a crude sexual stereotype that nonetheless appears accurate—but that does not necessarily mean a country with too many of them will embark on misadventure abroad. For one thing, bare branches can cause so much trouble at home that a country’s leadership would become preoccupied maintaining internal stability. Civil turmoil, instead of external conflict, would appear to be the more likely consequence of extreme gender imbalance.

We do not know what Chinese leaders are in fact thinking, yet we can see that the relentlessly enforced one-child policy has created some of the most unusual demographic patterns in history. This means, at a minimum, Valerie Hudson and Andrea den Boer are right to suggest that bare branches can sway the governments of mighty nations. At this point, however, we just do not know exactly how.

We do know, however, that China’s demographic problems undermine the country’s grand ambitions. Demography is not always destiny and it surely does not determine everything, but, as many have noted, population trends define the realm of the possible and are generally unforgiving. Policy mistakes, once

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they scar a country's demographic profile, can take generations to correct. China's regime, through unusual population programs, is now on a course with few good outcomes.

Now, China will have to overcome population factors instead of being aided by them. For instance, a shrinking workforce and shrinking population will, in all probability, mean shrinking economic output, which in turn will mean fewer resources. And fewer resources will lead, inevitably, to smaller budgets for the People's Liberation Army and other instruments of state power. "One of the most stunning demographic transformations in its history"³¹ will eventually result in the diminution of Beijing's ability to influence events abroad.

Demography, once China's best friend, will soon become its worst foe. Of course, there is no straight-line relationship between changes in a nation's population and changes in its power. If the United States could become the sole superpower with less than five percent of the planet's people, China should be able to do so with a population five times larger. But if "babies win wars,"³² as the Chinese evidently believe, then the paucity of newborns creates grave strategic concerns for policymakers in Beijing.

Gordon G. Chang is the author of *Plan Red: China's Project to Destroy America* and *The Coming Collapse of China*. Follow him on X @GordonGChang.

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MAILING ADDRESS

PO Box 60485

Pasadena, CA 91116

Tel 415-989-0833

SACRAMENTO OFFICE

2110 K Street, Suite 28

Sacramento, CA 95816

Tel 916-389-9774

PASADENA OFFICE

680 E. Colorado Blvd., Suite 180

Pasadena, CA 91101

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