

William McGurn: Consequences of Population Control Policies¹⁴

[...] the idea that nations could become rich only if they moved to control their population rates became an article of faith among Western and Western educated intellectuals in Asia – a faith backed up by aid dollars linked to the willingness of recipient countries to develop control measures. In the Philippines, for example, the U.S. Agency for International Development obtained a provision in the Marcos-era constitution granting the state authority over population levels. The Western missionary fervor once directed at Christianizing Asia has been channeled, in the second half of the twentieth century, into proselytizing for fewer Asians.

Despite its notable failures, moreover, population control has become orthodoxy in a number of states, especially China. Through the 1950s, Maoist doctrine held large populations to be assets, with increased size corresponding to increased output. In this Mao was right, as the subsequent development of its neighbors demonstrates. Where Chinese communism erred was not in its estimation of the Chinese but in its estimation of communism.

This is not the place to discuss the well-documented horrors of population control in Asia: the forced abortions, sterilizations, and even infanticides. I want to suggest, however, that these horrors are a direct consequence of the idea that development requires poor nations to limit their populations – which also explains, I believe, the pronounced indifference in the West to practices that would provoke outrage were they applied to people in Scarsdale or San Francisco instead of Shanghai and Bombay. Without the economic imperative underlying population control, the abuses have no rational motivation [...].

Most of the freer Asian countries at one time or another adopted policies penalizing large families or offering incentives to small families, whether through the tax code or through benefits like preferential housing and jobs. And over the years most of these nations have succeeded in lowering their total fertility rates. From 1953 to 1993, the annual number of births per thousand people in Taiwan dropped from forty-five to sixteen and the average number of children in a Taiwanese family dropped from seven to 1.7 (below the number for the U.S., Britain, and even China). With increased average life spans, it means a grayer and grayer Taiwan: In 1994 people over sixty-five years old accounted for only 7 percent of the population; by 2036 the figure will be three times as large – which means a smaller percentage of workers. In response to such trends, Singapore has already shifted from promoting smaller families to promoting larger ones. It is in China, however, where population control has been stringent, that two nasty side effects appear most clearly: the world's most rapidly aging society and a dangerously skewed ratio between boys and girls. [...]

¹⁴ The Population and the Wealth of Nations by William McGurn, *First Things*, available at <https://www.firstthings.com/article/1996/12/004-population-and-the-wealth-of-nations> (last visited Nov 22, 2022).

The demographic shifts are obvious to the most casual visitor. In the Temple of Heaven Park in Beijing, there are legions of adults for each child. [...] China already has the largest number of elderly in the world, and the projections of the number of workers compared to the number of retirees are stark. The Chinese Statistics Bureau reports that in 1987 the number of people over sixty years were 13.5 percent. As the effects of the one-child program make themselves felt, however, the numbers leap dramatically: to 23.8 percent in 2020, 36 percent in 2030, and 44.9 percent in 2050 - when more than 400 million Chinese will be over sixty years of age, and there will be almost one retiree for every two workers. The Japanese are already paying higher taxes imposed by leaders worried about their own graying society. But Japan's problems pale beside China's, which is nowhere near as wealthy, about ten times more populous, and aging at a much faster clip.

The practice of sex selection creates related problems. Within Asia generally, there exists a strong cultural preference for sons. [...] In China the combination of this bias in favor of sons and the one-child policy has in practice meant the aborting of many fetuses simply because they are girls. The result is that whereas the normal relationship is 104 to 107 boys for every 100 girls born, China now sees 119 boys born for every 100 girls. (Other Asian countries have corresponding figures: 114 in South Korea, 110 in Taiwan, and as many as 112 in India.) This shift too will begin to make itself felt [...] with harrowing ramifications for social order.

QUESTIONS FOR A DISCUSSION:

Explain how population control policies influenced population aging?

How did population control policies influence the male-female ratio in the countries which implemented them?