China’s Draconian One-Child Policy Has Led To A Disastrous Baby Bust

Steven W. Mosher / January 31, 2022

Birth rates in China are in free fall. And the all-powerful Communist Party of China seems powerless to do anything about it.

The National Bureau of Statistics reported that only 10.62 million babies were born last year, down from 12.02 million in 2020, and the lowest number in recorded history.

Millennials are the problem — or should I say the generations of only children spawned by the one-child policy.

Many Chinese men in their twenties and early thirties seem to have simply given up on life. Unlike their fathers and grandfathers, who worked long hours at their jobs so they could buy an apartment, attract a wife, and raise a family, these coddled only sons have trouble getting out of bed in the morning. It’s not just indolence; it’s an entire way of life.

Tangping

They even have a name for themselves. They are tangping’ers — the Chinese expression means to “lay flat” — dedicated to doing just enough to get by in life. Their plans do not include marriage, much less children. It’s just too much work for the flat-layers.

Of course, the tangping’ers would have a hard time finding a bride in any case. The traditional preference for sons means that men far outnumber women in China, especially in rural areas. China has more than 30 million “surplus” men, and the competition for brides is fierce.

To make matters worse, many young women in China’s cities have taken themselves out of the marriage market altogether. They are focused on building careers, not marriages. Ask them about children and they will point out that they are already responsible for two aging and increasingly childlike parents.
Few members of either group will ever marry, much less have children, and together they number in the tens of millions.

Communist officials continue to insist that China’s population will stabilize at its present 1.4 billion, but they are whistling past the graveyard. With Chinese women averaging only 1.3 children, below even Japan’s anemic 1.34 children, China is surely already in absolute population decline, filling more coffins than cradles each year.

Aftermath of the One-Child Policy

Signs that officialdom is hitting the panic button are everywhere. Decades of anti-natal propaganda threatening severe punishment for violating the one-child policy (“Have an illegal child and we’ll tear down your house!”) have been replaced by exhortations to couples to bear a second and even a third child. Having a baby is “not only a family matter, but is also a state affair,” women are now being told.

Chinese feminist Xiao Meili has criticized the policy shift, complaining that “women’s
uteruses are not spigots, to be turned on and off at will by the state.”

But the state is surely trying.

Local governments have become matchmakers, setting up blind dates. Divorce is being discouraged. Some 90% of the country’s notorious “planned birth” clinics — used to enforce the one child policy by means of abortions, sterilizations, and IUD insertions — have been closed down.

But marriage and birth rates continue to plummet. And abortions — now voluntary — are running at a staggering 9 million a year, only slightly below births.

The demographic winter is not unique to China, of course. Fertility rates around the world are “dangerously low,” according to the World Bank, with birth rates well below replacement levels everywhere but sub-Saharan Africa. In the US, low birthrates and 64 million abortions since 1973 have thinned the ranks of the young and blasted a gaping hole in funding for Social Security and Medicare.

The difference between China and much of the rest of the world is that Communist leaders were not content to let demographic changes occur naturally. Instead, the party embarked upon a brutal population-control policy that — by forcibly sterilizing and aborting hundreds of millions of women — greatly accelerated China’s demographic collapse.

“So many people, including smart people,” Tesla CEO Elon Musk recently warned, “think that the population is growing out of control. It’s completely the opposite. Please look at the numbers — if people don’t have more children, civilization is going to crumble.”

The Chinese leadership finally looked at the numbers, and was horrified by what it saw. But its “three-child policy,” which it adopted in 2020 “to actively respond to the aging of the population,” comes far too late to reverse the coming collapse.

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