

China's new family planning policy comes from old playbook

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China's universal three-child policy was passed into law this past August to boost the country's birth rate, after a two-child limit—implemented more than five years ago—failed to do so.

Yun Zhou, University of Michigan assistant professor of sociology, talks about the history of China's [one-child policy](#), which ended in 2016, and its lasting impact on today's three-child policy, persistent son preference and China's low fertility "problem."

Why did China shift from a one-child to a three-child policy?

When China implemented the one-child policy in 1980, the country's total fertility rate had already been declining dramatically throughout the 1970s. The consensus among scholars is that the one-child policy was part and parcel of China's efforts in achieving development goals after the Cultural Revolution. After a tumultuous decade, the party-state was eager to reclaim and reestablish its political legitimacy, and viewed spurring economic development as central to accomplish this. Based on pseudo-scientific demographic projections, limiting birth to one child per married heterosexual couple was thought as the way to achieve a [population size](#) perceived most optimal for China's economic development.

The universal two-child policy in 2016 and the most recent three-child policy are designed to combat issues related to persistent low fertility, such as rapid population aging, rising need for pension support, shrinking labor pool and diminishing demographic dividend. Crucially, these relaxations are not about expanding reproductive rights. Again, the new policies' primary objective is to manage the population for achieving the state's desired economic and development goals.

In these policies, birth is limited to heterosexual married couples. Unmarried women who want to have children still face many hurdles in obtaining maternal benefits. Reproductive rights for LGBTQ people are invisible altogether.

Are there any changes in Chinese preference for sons?

There are some changes, but there are remarkable consistencies. According to the most recent 2020 census data, the sex ratio at birth (SRB) remains imbalanced and above its natural level of about 105 male live births per 100 female live births. The official report of the 2020 census puts China's SRB at 111.3 in 2020.

One of my working papers looks at highly educated urban Chinese women's sex preference attitude for offspring. I found that son preference persists in this group, and paradoxically among women who otherwise support gender equality. However, their reasonings are quite nuanced. Some women want sons so that their children can be spared from the gender discrimination that they themselves are facing. They also view raising daughters in a gender-discriminatory society as emotionally taxing work. Of course, this raises an interesting question: Despite the nuanced reasoning for son preference, to what extent will such reasonings and preference challenge the existing patriarchal order?

Why is a baby boom not going to happen in China?

My research mainly focuses on highly educated urban individuals. For this group, they frequently highlight the tremendous financial and time constraints as obstacles that keep them from having more than one child. Women also view having a successful career as fundamentally incompatible with having multiple children. These women often want a life that is not limited to the private sphere. The one-child policy has an impact on people's fertility desires as well. For those who have grown up as singleton children and have peers that are overwhelmingly singleton children, the one-child policy also shaped their imagination of what an ideal family looks like.

The low fertility rate is not a problem unique to China. What would you recommend the Chinese government to do?

When I teach about fertility in my courses, I always ask my students: Why is low fertility a problem? And if it is a problem, it is a problem for whom? Is low fertility a problem because it poses issues for the state? Is low fertility necessarily a problem for individuals if individuals are actively opting out of having children? When is low fertility a problem for individuals too? It is always important for us to be mindful of these questions as we problematize fertility or frame low fertility as a problem—or not.

These new policies—universal two-child and three-child—have come from the old playbook of managing population and women's reproduction for economic goals and political objectives. I always say that population [policy](#) has to be about human rights—particularly women's (and birthing parents') rights.

Provided by University of Michigan

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