

Q&A: The impact of China's rapidly aging society

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Due to its economic growth and large population, the People's Republic of China is widely viewed as a rising economic and military superpower. But declining fertility rates and increased life expectancies over the last

few decades have conspired to make China one of the more rapidly aging societies in the world.

Merril Silverstein, the inaugural holder of the Marjorie Cantor Endowed Professorship in Aging (a joint appointment in Syracuse University's Falk College of Sport and Human Dynamics and Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs), is an expert on aging in the context of family life who's uniquely qualified to examine the impact of China's aging population.

Silverstein, a professor in the Department of Human Development and Family Science at Falk and chair of the Sociology Department in Maxwell, is editor of the 2022 book "Aging Families in Chinese Society," which was recently released in paperback. The book focuses on the accelerated social and [demographic changes](#) in China and examines their implications for family care and support for older adults.

Combining [quantitative data](#) from social surveys in China, comparative surveys in Taiwan and Thailand, and qualitative data from in-depth interviews, "Aging Families in Chinese Society" explores the various challenges facing aging families in China as a result of reduced [family size](#), changing gender expectations, rapid economic development and urbanization, rural-to-urban migration, and an emerging but still underdeveloped long-term care system.

To dive into this topic in more detail, we asked Silverstein to discuss this phenomenon and its impact across the globe. Here's that conversation:

What are the factors making China one of the more rapidly aging societies in the world?

Primarily low fertility rates, which are caused to some degree, but not

exclusively, by the [one-child policy](#) starting in 1978. However, [fertility rates](#) have continued to fall since the policy ended in 2016, as preferences for small families have become entrenched. Explanations for these preferences include children becoming more expensive to raise, and women's growing access to [higher education](#) and the [labor market](#), which has delayed the timing of fertility and weakened the desire to have large families.

Can you talk more about the impact of the one-child policy, which limited the great majority of family units to one child each and was designed to reduce the growth rate of China's enormous population?

Growth in the older population relative to the declining number of children has increased the proportionate representation of older adults in China. China's population is beginning to shrink in size, producing questions about its future workforce and economic growth.

What are the challenges facing the elderly and their families in China?

Small families may mean less family support available to older adults. Also, high rates of internal migration have separated adult children from their older parents. Currently, there is little public support for long-term care services and pensions are relatively low, making children especially important but possibly less available to care for, and support, [older adults](#).

What are potential solutions to these challenges?

Increase the fertility rate. The government has virtually lifted all

restrictions on family size, but to only minor effect. One solution is to provide low-cost daycare, parental leave and child subsidies so people are incentivized to have more children.

What might be the potential political ramifications of this trend and will it ultimately diminish China's standing on the global stage?

The inversion of older and younger populations implies that it will become increasingly difficult for China to fund old-age programs with a diminished labor force. A slowdown in [economic growth](#) and reduced military power are also distinct possibilities with fewer workers and trained military personnel in the population.

Why should we in the United States care about this?

Our economies are closely linked in trade and supply chains. Economic decline in China will have consequences for global competition for world markets that has become increasingly acute as China continues to extend its sphere of economic influence and poses a threat to the independence of Taiwan.

Provided by Syracuse University

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