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10 million new babies? China's hope for boom likely to become policy bust

Eased rule faces social, economic change

By [Cheryl Wetzstein](#)

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It was announced with great fanfare as a momentous shift in China's 35-year-old population control policy: The long-awaited "adjustment" in the country's one-child policy has raised hopes that 10 million "extra" babies will be born in the next five years.

But the early returns suggest the relaxation of the one-child limit may not produce the baby boom that many expect.

"I think 10 million new babies — 2 million per annum — is unlikely," said Timothy Beardson, a China researcher in Hong Kong.

Mr. Beardson's latest book, "Stumbling Giant: The Threats to China's Future," looks at China's alarming problems of anemic fertility rates, a workforce that is shrinking by the millions, an elderly population that is growing by the millions, and an eye-popping male-to-female imbalance. Some analysts estimate that China has more than 50 million "excess" males because of abortion and infanticide of girls under the one-child policy.

The new birth policy permits married couples to apply for a second birth permit if either spouse is an only child.

Projections of 2 million extra babies a year for five years are based on the assumption that there is "huge pent-up demand to have more babies," said Mr. Beardson. However, this remains to be seen, especially since other massive social and economic factors — especially urbanization — already discourage Chinese couples from having children, he said.

One-child policy eased

Although Mr. Beardson is not alone in his skepticism about a surge in births in China, Chinese officials and academics are hopeful that their people will respond to the policy change.

In November, Chinese officials said that to spur economic growth, married couples may apply for a second birth permit if either spouse has no siblings, including "half-blood" siblings. Previously, each spouse needed to be an only child to have a second child.

An estimated 15 million to 20 million people are affected by the policy, and 50 percent to 60 percent have indicated in surveys that they would consider having a second child, China's National Health and Family Planning Commission said.

With about 2 million extra births a year, in addition to the current 16 million births, the policy should help maintain a reasonable labor force, slow the pace of population aging, boost "sustained and healthy economic development, and creat[e] a sound population environment for the realization of the Chinese dream of rejuvenation of the great Chinese nation," Wang Pei'an, vice minister of the commission, said in November.

"Loosening of the one-child policy will slow the aging phenomenon and relieve pressure on pensions," Li Jianmin, a demographer with Nankai University in Tianjin, told China Daily.

Moreover, Chinese officials and academics have estimated that the policy change will boost China's total fertility rate of 1.6 children per woman to 1.8 children per woman, closer to the 2.1 children per woman that constitutes "replacement-level" fertility.

Baby boom?

But these rosy, baby boom forecasts for China run counter to broader trends that lower the childbearing rate regardless of government rules, Mr. Beardson, founder of Crosby Financial Holdings in Hong Kong, said at a recent event at the Cato Institute in Washington.

These include China's growing urbanization, the accompanying higher cost of living, the education and professional employment of Chinese women, and the tendency to marry later in life. Those trends have depressed childbearing rates in the developed world for decades.

Other barriers to childbearing in China include high costs of housing, education and care for children; 35 years of social messaging about how "one child is best"; and China's many rules about childbearing that are enforced — sometimes ruthlessly — by its massive family planning bureaucracy.

"It would be a blessing to Chinese society if China could have this additional 10 million" children, Yong Cai, a sociology professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, wrote to The Times.

But with all these factors in play, Mr. Cai said, the estimate of 2 million extra births a year is "overly optimistic" and it's "impossible that the surge will last for five years."

In other words, he said, "we will not see this additional 10 million."

Another China watcher is adamant that the one-child policy "needs to be abolished."

The "adjustment" "does nothing to stop the coercion that is at the core of the policy," said Reggie Littlejohn, founder and president of Women's Rights Without Frontiers and a vocal opponent of the one-child policy.

China's rules still are strict, she and other critics said. In some Chinese provinces, a mother must be older than 28 and have a child older than 4 before she can apply to become pregnant again. Couples who are expecting or have a baby without state permission face massive fines, seizure of property, forced abortions and other punitive measures, Women's Rights Without Frontiers reports.

Also, China's extraordinary issue of "excess males" surely will confound its hopes for a baby boom.

In 2010, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences estimated that China that could face a "bride shortage" of 24 million women by 2020. Since the one-child policy was implemented in 1979, millions of Chinese families aborted, killed or "lost" their girls to ensure that their "one child" was a son.

"The baby girls born over the next five years will not address the vast gender imbalance in the older-age cohorts," said Ms. Littlejohn, adding that abuses such as human trafficking, prostitution, bride buying and bride stealing are already happening.

China has "a little window" of time — about 20 years — to address its demographic challenges, Mr. Beardson told the Cato event. But "there's no quick fix."