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The flawed assumptions of China's disastrous childbearing laws

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The Chinese government is finally considering ending all of its cruel and pointless limits on childbearing, after softening its one-child policy to a two-child policy in 2016. To increase the birth rate, a recent [South China Morning Post](#) editorial even recommended that China adopt an “at least one child” policy. That is because, in a dramatic reversal, the government is now worried that its citizenry is producing too few, rather than too many, children. Not long ago, the government feared just the opposite.

China's birth limits were intended to shrink the population, based on the idea that “too many” people spelled disaster. Overpopulation fears became popular among Chinese officials in the 1970s, when the central arguments behind the Club of Rome's report *The Limits to Growth* were translated into Chinese and promoted by a mathematician named Song Jian.

The book warned that population growth could deplete resources and lead to a “collapse” of global society. It relied largely on computer simulations based on a dubious set of assumptions.

Anti-population paranoia was not new. Thomas Malthus published an essay in 1798 expressing much the same fears, although without the elaborate calculations. But helped by alarmists like Stanford University biologist Paul Ehrlich and the members of the Club of Rome, overpopulation hysteria underwent a renaissance in the 1970s. *The Limits to Growth* also promoted the idea that planners could use “systems analysis” to compute a country's sustainable population size. In 1978, Song Jian calculated that China's ideal population was between 650 million and 700 million people — in other words, 280 million to 330 million less than its actual population at the time.

Hence in 1979, China imposed the infamous policy that restricted each family to one child. The consequences were tragic, with millions of sterilisations and abortions, many of them forced. Families who committed the grave crime of having more than one child could be forced to pay fines many times more than their annual income. The family size limits, combined with a cultural preference for sons over daughters, have also led to female infanticide, sex-selective abortions and a highly skewed gender ratio. In 2007, the ratio among newborns reached 1.17 boys for every girl. By 2015, the ratio improved slightly to 1.15 boys for every girl, still far outside the global rate of 1.05 boys per girl.

While the human rights abuses alone are reason enough to oppose birth limits, the premise that “overpopulation” is a problem at all is incorrect. More people in the world means more people to solve problems, and less resource scarcity. As economist Julian Simon has written: “For all

practical purposes there are no resources until we find them, identify their possible uses, and develop ways to obtain and process them. We perform these tasks with increasing skill as technology develops. Hence, scarcity diminishes.”

Human beings, with their inventive potential, are themselves, in Simon’s phrase, “The Ultimate Resource”. Each child born today eventually grows up to make resources less scarce, on average, by contributing to innovation and the global economy.

But perhaps the saddest part is that the birth restrictions did not even achieve their stated goal — ill-informed though it was. While China’s birthrate did fall during the period in which these childbearing policies were in place, the birthrate of neighbouring countries fell too, sometimes even faster — all without authoritarian laws limiting procreation. In fact, most of the fall in China’s birth rate occurred before the one-child policy was even implemented.

It is true that China’s birth rate was higher back in the mid-1960s, when the average Chinese woman had more than six children on average. But by 1979, the year the one-child policy began, that figure had already dropped to just under three children. The decline since then has been less dramatic, and perfectly in line with trends in neighbouring countries.

South Korea, where the fertility rate was very similar (and in fact slightly higher than China’s) in 1979, has seen an even steeper decline since then and today has fewer births per woman than China. So too does Hong Kong, an autonomous region of China where families are free to have as many children as they choose.

The data clearly indicates that the birthrate would have fallen without coercive restrictions on family size. Demographers widely accept that after a country’s average income passes about \$5,000, families tend to have fewer children.

Regardless of what the Chinese Communist Party decides, their limitations (or lack thereof) are unlikely to meaningfully affect the birth rate. The bottom line is that regardless of their effect, these restrictions unethically limit women’s and families’ choices and should be removed as soon as possible. And if implementing an “at least one child” policy, as the *South China Morning Post*’s editorial board desires, would involve punishing the childless, then that too is an inhumane and appalling idea.

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