

Hong Kong reverts to Chinese rule but won't introduce China's strict birth-control policies

Janet Rae Brooks

When Hong Kong reverted to Chinese rule July 1, women living in the former British colony continued to decide for themselves how many children they will have. In mainland China, meanwhile, the government continued to decide for them.

These different approaches to birth control, which are to be enshrined under China's "one-country, two-systems" policy, reflect the different economic and cultural influences that have shaped the world's most populous country and its tiny capitalist powerhouse.

Hong Kong already has one of the lowest birth rates in the world — 11.9:1000 — without any state intervention. China, which limits urban couples to 1 child, has a birth rate of 12.9:1000, down from 33.4:1000 in 1970.

Forty years ago big families were common in Hong Kong, but the size has shrunk as the territory's economy soared. A "Two is Enough" campaign initiated in 1975 urged residents to practise family planning.

"The changes in the demographic picture are in line with Hong Kong moving from an early fishing village to industrialization to a cosmopolitan city," said Dr. Susan Fan, executive director of Hong Kong's Family Planning Association.

In Hong Kong, condoms are on display by the 7-Eleven cash registers and birth-control pills are sold over-the-counter in pharmacies.

The population problems of the colossus to the north are of a different magnitude. China must feed 22% of the world's population on just 7% of the world's arable land. Its population has more than doubled since 1953 and hit 1.2 billion in 1995, a target the government had hoped to delay until 2000. With the population increasing by 14 million annually, Chinese officials have set a new goal of holding the population to 1.3 billion by 2000, and 1.4 billion by 2010. China introduced its tough family-planning policy in the late 1970s as its population raced toward 1 billion after 2 decades of promotion of big families.

Females pay the price

Today urban couples are strictly limited to 1 child. In rural areas couples are allowed 2 children — 3 if they belong to certain minority groups.

Fines and penalties are imposed for failure to comply, and the draconian policy has led to allegations of compulsory sterilization, forced abortions and female infanticide. The policy has radically altered China's demographics. In 1970 the average Chinese woman bore 5.8 children. Today the number is 1.86.

The policy is enforced by an army of 300 000 full-time family-planning workers, plus 80 million volunteers — the "granny police." Their job is easiest in urban areas and in the more affluent coastal regions, where many couples opt to have only 1 child.

Chinese women follow a standard pattern: they use no birth control until the birth of their first child, then they are fitted with an intrauterine device (IUD) until their child is past the period of greatest infant mortality. Then they are sterilized.

"Many Chinese women shun the pill, thinking it is harmful to their health," an official with the State Family Planning Commission said. "IUDs are more convenient and the pill is not accessible in remote places."



Features

Chroniques

Janet Rae Brooks is a Canadian freelance writer living in Hong Kong.

Can Med Assoc J 1997;157:183-5



Reid Hamilton photo



This Chinese billboard says birth control is the country's basic policy and both men and women are responsible for using it

Chinese couples are banned from marrying before a certain age, usually 22 for men and 20 for women. Couples wishing to have a child must apply to local officials to be included in the region's annual birth quota. Women must apply for a pregnancy permission slip before conceiving.

Infractions carry heavy fines. A mill manager was fined US\$37 000 in 1995 when she refused to abort her second child. Authorities said that the Communist Party member was setting a bad example.

The tough laws, when combined with the Chinese preference for sons to carry on the family line and help with farm work, has led to a serious gender imbalance. No shortfall of female babies was evident until the 1980s, when census figures began showing hundreds of thousands of baby girls going missing each year. A 1992 survey showed that the sex ratio had reached 118.5 boys born for every 100 girls, compared with 106:100 in the West.

"Some Chinese don't even consider girls members of their family, so it is very natural that they under-report," said Jiang Zhenghua, vice-minister of the State Family Planning Commission.

Other couples choose to abort female fetuses; this is possible because unauthorized ultrasound services have mushroomed. China introduced legislation in June 1995 banning the services; 3 months later a retired doctor was sentenced to 4 years in jail for providing ultrasound services to 10 pregnant women. Eight of the women, who were told they were carrying female fetuses, had abortions.

Female infanticide, which has a long history in China, was eradicated by strict punishments introduced after the communists took power. However, the tough family-planning policy caused the practice to reappear. A Shenzhen farmer was jailed for 3 years in October 1995 for trying to kill his newborn daughter by burying her. Passersby dug the infant out after hearing her cry.

Other families resort to elaborate ruses to have sons. One couple faked the kidnapping of their daughter in June 1996 so they could have another child. After hiding her with their in-laws, they claimed kidnappers had taken her.

Occasionally, the policy leads to violence. Three people were executed in August 1995 for murdering 2 family-planning officials who had come to investigate an unsterilized couple that already had 2 children.

A government white paper released before the UN World Conference on Women was held in Beijing in 1995 said that criticism of China's family-planning policy ignored challenges posed by its huge population. Critics were charged with "distorting and disregarding the basic facts."

"This is unacceptable," the paper said, acknowledging only that the "the working style and service level of family planning remain to be improved in most rural areas." It said the government opposes using abortion as a means of contraception.

"To carry out family planning is the correct choice to ensure human rights," it said, arguing that allowing "indiscriminate reproduction" would halt development and sentence everyone to poverty.

Conference president Chen Muhua of China added that population control is "a matter of national sovereignty." The policies, she said, should be "determined by the country itself — it is not up to others to give instructions." The Australian government appears to have endorsed this view by refusing to recognize fear of fertility-control measures as grounds for Chinese refugees to seek asylum.

Despite the conference's final declaration that women have the right to control their reproductive health, Chen said China's population-control program is "necessary and irreversible" and the conference declaration was not legally binding.

Besides causing some international criticism, China's family-planning policy has also produced some unexpected internal problems, including spawning a generation of "little emperors" — spoiled only children doted on by 2 parents and 4 grandparents.

The policy may also lead to a dearth of brides. Because of the preponderance of male babies born under the policy, Chinese newspapers have been predicting the emergence at the turn of the century of an 'army of hoodlums' — millions of single men who cannot find wives. "This could create serious social problems," said Jiang Zhenghua, vice-minister of the State Family Planning Commission. In coastal Jiangsu province, data show that there are 720 000 unmarried men over age of 21 but only 420 000 single women.

The policy, coupled with a doubling of life expectancy to 70 years since 1949, has also caused China to become the fastest aging nation in history. The average age of mainland Chinese has risen to just over 33 years from 28



years in 1990; unless the 1-child policy is relaxed, people over 60 will comprise 10% of the population by 2000, nearly 20% by 2025 and about 25%, or almost 400 million people, by 2040. This will require ever-increasing spending on social programs for the elderly.

The biggest threat to meeting family-planning goals is the growing number of transient workers. In the last decade, an estimated 120 million rural Chinese have left the land for jobs in cities. Shanghai authorities estimated from a 1993 survey that newcomers were 13 times more likely than native residents to break family-planning rules. Migrants "have become one of the most difficult groups with which to carry out family planning," said Peng Peiyun, director of the State Family Planning Commission, at 1995 conference. "In some areas, about two-thirds of unplanned births reported are in transient families."

In 1995, Beijing's municipal government announced a new law barring migrant women from getting work permits or renting apartments without documentation of their marital status and family size. In November 1995, officials in Shenzhen sent work crews to demolish makeshift schools built for an estimated 4000 children of undocumented residents.

Positive benefits of population-control

The strict population-control policy has produced positive benefits by raising living standards and producing extremely low rates of teenage pregnancy. It has also helped ensure that 98% of Chinese women receive prenatal care and that 94% of births are attended by trained workers. The infant mortality rate dropped from 50:1000 to 36:1000 between 1991 and 1995. Deaths during birth fell from 94.7:100 000 births in 1989 to 61.9 in 1995.

The policy has also brought women greater freedom. For nearly 2000 years Chinese women were little more than chattels who could be bought, sold, beaten or raped at will. No longer obliged to produce numerous children, Chinese women are now free to view sex as recreation after they've had 1 child, usually by age 30.

Belatedly, China is joining the sexual revolution. The divorce rate has risen, up tenfold from the 1960s. Explicit radio call-in shows such as Shanghai's *Midnight Whispers* are proliferating throughout the country. Beijing's first marital aids shop, the Beijing Adam and Eve Health Centre, offers weekly seminars on sex and a sex-manual videotape. Last fall, for the first time, first-year students at universities in Shanghai were given AIDS literature and information on how to use condoms even though students caught having sex still face probation or even expulsion. The National Research Institute for Family Planning says about half of all abortions are now performed on unwed women. Prostitutes, forced to give up their trade after

the communists took control, now openly solicit business.

In Hong Kong, there is also a growing willingness to deal openly with sexual matters. A telephone hot line offering recorded information in Cantonese and English was launched in July 1996 by the Department of Health and the Hong Kong Sex Education Association. A 1995 survey by the manufacturers of Durex, the top-selling condom in Hong Kong, found that 20% of buyers are women, compared with almost none 3 years earlier. The Family Planning Association has been overwhelmed by the response to its sex-education programs for Hong Kong primary schools, which were launched in 1994. "The number of schools who request these programs is beyond our capacity to cope," said Fan, the Family Planning Association's executive director.

Dr. Emil Ng, chief of service in the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Hong Kong, sex therapist at Queen Mary Hospital and vice-president of the Hong Kong Sex Education Association, contends that Hong Kong retains even stronger traditional attitudes toward sex and sex education than China.

"The Chinese are doing sex education very energetically," said Ng, who is also known as Dr. Sex. "Maybe the Hong Kong government got too busy taking care of the transition period so they're putting it aside, but to the Chinese government population control is important, and if you want population control you must have good sex education."

Hong Kong's Christian-educated politicians also affect the type of sex education provided, said Ng. "A lot of politicians and legislative councillors still have very conservative attitudes about sex — they are very half-hearted about promoting sex education."

Although the subject is compulsory in mainland schools, more than 57% of Hong Kong schools say their teachers are unwilling to teach it. "After 1997 the Christian influence will die down so sex education will be much better," said Ng.

A 1995 study of first-year university students in Hong Kong and Shanghai found that Hong Kong students were less sexually active but more likely to use birth control. Almost 70% of Hong Kong students who had sex used condoms, compared with 15% in Shanghai.

The Chinese government also supports sex education because it fears the spread of disease, said Ng. "In Hong Kong, the problem is not so serious now, so people are not so concerned." In China, more than 300 000 new cases of sexually transmitted disease, two-thirds of them gonorrhea, were registered in 1995. However, the real fear surrounds HIV. Although only 1700 Chinese are officially infected, experts put the actual figure at around 100 000 and warn that the country is heading towards a severe AIDS crisis. ?