



Written by [Angeline Tan](#) on January 18, 2023

China's Population Contracts for First Time in More Than 6 Decades

SINGAPORE — China's population contracted in 2022 for the first time in more than 60 years, official data revealed on January 17, suggesting that the world's most-populous country faces an impending demographic problem.

The communist government in Beijing indicated that 9.56 million people were born in China in 2022, whereas 10.41 million people died. This figure marks the first time deaths have exceeded births in China since the early 1960s, when the Great Leap Forward, despotic leader Mao Zedong's failed economic experiment, led to massive famine, starvation, and death.



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Beijing

Births fell from 10.6 million in 2021, which was the sixth consecutive year that the number had dropped. Observers said that such a drop, together with an increase in life expectancy, is plunging China into a demographic crisis that will have ramifications in this century, not just for the country and its economy but also for the world.

"In the long run, we are going to see a China the world has never seen," said Dr. Wang Feng, a professor of sociology at the University of California at Irvine who specializes in demographics in China. "It will no longer be the young, vibrant, growing population. We will start to appreciate China, in terms of its population, as an old and shrinking population."

The news comes amid difficulties the country is facing due to consequences from the abrupt shift of the zero-Covid policy and sudden opening up of the country to the rest of the world.

Over the past 40 years or so, China has become an economic superpower, leading to an increase in life expectancy and a decrease in births, as many women put off having children to pursue their economic ambitions.

Also, a traditional preference for sons has prompted many Chinese parents to abort female fetuses over the decades (the male-to-female ratio was disproportionate, being at 120-to-100 in some provinces). Consequently, there have been fewer women of child-bearing age.

By 2035, it is estimated, 400 million people in China will be over 60 years of age — almost one-third of its population.

That is accelerating another concerning trend, which is that China will not have sufficient people of working age to propel and sustain the economic growth that rendered it a formidable economic powerhouse. Labor inadequacies will also decrease tax revenue and contributions to a pension system that is already buckling under tight pressure.

The National Statistics Bureau declared in a statement that people should not worry about the decline



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in population, however, as “overall labor supply still exceeds demand.”

Chinese officials in 2022 admitted that the country was on the cusp of a population decline that would likely start before 2025. However, the decline came sooner than demographers, statisticians, and the ruling Communist Party of China (CCP) had expected.

Even authoritarian Chinese leader Xi Jinping recently prioritized raising birth rates for the country, promising “a national policy system to boost birth rates.”

While the government has stepped up efforts to slow the decrease in births, such as loosening the draconian one-child policy that had been in place for 35 years, raising the limit of children to three, and providing incentives like cash handouts and tax cuts to couples and small families to spur them to have children, observers contend that China’s dwindling birth figures indicate an irreversible phenomenon.

Along with Japan and South Korea, China has one of the lowest fertility rates in the world, trailing behind what demographers term as the “fertility replacement rate” needed for a population to grow. That figure would mean that every couple, on average, should have two children.

Existing government measures have been unable to influence young Chinese to have children. These Chinese mention the increasingly high costs of raising children, particularly with the government’s recent stringent Covid-19 policies that have brought China’s economy to its knees. Analysts speculate that the policies, entailing almost three years of mass testing, quarantines, and lockdowns, caused families to be separated for long periods of time and also may have prompted many to decide against having children.

Other factors leading to the hesitancy to have more children include the responsibilities that many young adults face in caring for aging parents and grandparents. Demonstrating this, online searches for baby strollers on the Baidu search engine fell 17 percent in 2022 and are down 41 percent since 2018, and searches for baby bottles fell by more than a third since 2018, yet searches for eldercare homes rose eightfold in 2022.

Even before the record overall decline, China’s working-age population had been shrinking for years, and estimates had depicted that one quarter of the population would be 60 or older by 2030.

If the fall in the number of people of working age gives rise to a decrease in the number of people actually working, the cost of labor in China may rise, augmenting the price of manufactured goods. Also, with fewer people starting families, there will likely be an adverse impact on the long-term demand for houses, affecting the demand for commodities such as iron ore.

To worsen matters, with fewer people actually working and paying taxes, the Chinese government may grapple with its underfunded national pension system, thus reducing the long-term growth potential of the economy.

In the longer term, fewer children may also decrease the number of Chinese students pursuing education in the United States, Australia, and elsewhere.



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