

Book Review

NANCY E. RILEY, *Population in China* (London: Polity Press, 2017), pp. 237 + xiii, UK£37.07, ISBN 10: 0745688632 (Hardcover).

Written with lucid fluency, Nancy Riley addresses one of the world's most dramatic acts of social engineering, in what is still the world's most populous country. Flipping through the pages, before getting down to a serious read, I chanced upon a key phrase: starting in the late 1960s, China implemented not a policy of family planning, which might have addressed issues of health and family welfare, but of *birth* planning. Premier Zhou Enlai said in 1970: 'birth planning isn't a health question but a planning question' without which one cannot have a national plan (pp. 37–8). That effort to limit births, through the world's most draconian enforcement of a 'one child' policy, succeeded in avoiding some 200 million births. Having fewer mouths to feed helped to accelerate economic growth for a while, but by accelerating the normal societal process of 'demographic shift', it also produced sharp demographic impact, in the shape of precipitous decline in the birth rate, translating into a shortage of the working population, commencing around 2012.

Demography is a fascinating subject, connecting directly with economic growth, society and ethical issues, such as equity, income distribution and domestic balance. Primarily a social science, it is sometimes presented as 'destiny' in the sense that its outcomes have a measure of inevitability, but trends in demography can be mitigated, or accelerated, in different ways. No less fascinating is the notion of 'demographic transition', meaning that as countries move along their growth path, they tend to experience changes that are fairly similar, though not identical. These elements animate this fine work.

Riley presents the key facts: the rise in life expectancy in China after 1949 'was the fastest seen in any society in human history' (p. 17); it rose from about 35 in the 1940s to 68 by 1981 (in 2012, it was 66 years in India while China had reached 75 years: World Bank). China's total fertility rate (the average number of children born to women) fell from around 6 in 1960 to 2.1 by 2000 (considered to be the 'replacement

rate' to keep the population at a stable figure), and further to 1.7 in 2015, pointing to a declining population outcome. The other key demographic is the rural to urban migration, whose consequences 'will likely shake up Chinese society for decades to come' (p. 29). The centrepiece in managing the movement of people has been the *hukou* system of residence permits, which has enabled delivery of vastly better health, education and other services to the urban population, as a deliberate measure to spur economic growth. Some 130 million rural migrants live in urban areas, but lacking valid *hukous*, they cannot access urban services; this contributes to a severe income disparity, shown in the Gini coefficient figure of 0.55 in 2014, one of the highest in the world (pp. 33–4).

Riley closely examines the birth planning campaign which took shape in the 1960s including delayed marriage, longer birth intervals and fewer births; it was seen as an economic development measure, culminating in the official 'one child' policy launched in 1979. Having lived in Beijing in 1970–2, I can testify to the draconian enforcement of birth control much before this came into effect, from occasional unguarded comments from the Chinese domestic staff working with us, especially the pressures that pregnant women faced to resort to abortions, from their neighbourhood committees.

The One Child policy was accepted more readily in the urban milieu than among the rural population, as seen by Western and Chinese researchers that carried out surveys commencing in the 1980s. Rural areas were relatively lax in both enforcement and reporting population statistics; there were also some incidents of overt resistance. The policy underwent some relaxation, and by 2000, 22 exceptions to its rigorous rules were in place, starting with exceptions made for the country's 55 ethnic minorities (representing just over 8 per cent of the population). Commencing in the 1990s, the rhetoric of family planning emerged, including concerns for women's health.

The 2014 policy easing to a 'Two Child' norm had been long anticipated, but a UN survey carried out in 2015 suggests that owing to what has now become a strong voluntary preference for a single child, that easing may add only 23 million people to China's 2050 population, and may only postpone by a few years an absolute decline in the population number that is expected around 2026, at a peak of 1.43 billion.

Chapter 4 is devoted to internal migration and commences with acknowledging that exact figures for migrants do not exist, in part because of their fluidity of movement. The author's broad conclusion: the *hukou* system has 'institutionalized rural and urban inequalities to such an extent that there are by most definitions two Chinas' (p. 93). The following chapter examines the social indices, noting that the infant mortality rate for the country dramatically dropped from 48 in 1980 to 11 in 2013.

Another chapter looks at gender and population dynamics, noting that gender equality has taken 'a back seat to other state, Party and family goals. Population was one such state priority...' (p. 127). China's sex ratio at birth (SRB), against a normal figure of 105 males to 100 females, has hovered above 120 in recent years and was 117 in 2013, 'the highest SRB seen in a population of any size' (p. 143). This has

been the result of sex selective abortions, illegal female infanticide, often unreported and undocumented adoptions. But this is not mainly the result of birth control policies; 'new practices worked with old gender ideologies' (p. 153). This will produce profound consequences; one 2010 Chinese report noted that by 2020, one in five males may not be able to find a spouse. It would appear that the demographic impact of this profusion of such 'bare branches' (as unmarried males are called) has not been taken into account.

A relatively short penultimate chapter considers the family consequences of China's population policy. Longevity means that parents and grandparents have longer time with their children, though a shortage of family members has also caused hardship for some. As well known, China's 'dependency ratio' has begun to rise after 2010; while in 1998, there were six working age persons for everyone over 60 years in age, by 2040, there will be only two. It is small consolation that this ratio will be even higher for Japan and South Korea, insulated as they are by much higher per capita income levels.

In the concluding chapter, rather than predicting demography outcomes, Riley opts to discuss the likely issues that will dominate future discussion in China. 'Demography is not destiny', she asserts, meaning that the outcome of population change hinges on the social, economic, political and historical context (p. 193). Her conclusions: the state is powerful in China, but it is not the only force for change; population policy will remain linked to economic and social goals; resistance by ordinary Chinese to policies they do not like will also remain a factor in softening outcomes, now strengthened by the growing role of internal critics. China's demographic dividend has now ended, but the author resists predicting the consequences of a likely labour shortage, and similarly does not get into the future impact of growing income inequality and persisting gender inequity. Have families become weaker? She considers some trends, but also notes the growing role of females in their birth families.

The book ends with more questions than answers. That is surely appropriate in such a sustained examination of an issue that is at the heart of the world's most populous country, putative claimant to the title of the world's largest economy. The book also helps us to realize that demography is too important a subject to be left to specialists.

Kishan S. Rana

*Former Diplomat, Teacher, Author; Emeritus Fellow
Institute of Chinese Studies, Delhi
kishanrana@gmail.com*