



Demographic Profiles : China

Demographic Profile China Part 1: People Power

A quarter century ago, Chinese Premier Deng Xiaoping declared that “to get rich is glorious.” Thanks to an enormous population of workers, China is now cashing in. Will it last despite serious demographic problems?



Chinese children dressed in space suits during the International Children's Day in Beijing. State media said that an estimated 10 million minors lack the care of one or both parents as increasing numbers of parents are leaving for work in other cities (Photo: Reuters)

China has been the world's most populous country for centuries, but it was in the second half of the 20th century that its population really exploded. Numbers have more than doubled from 582 million Chinese in 1953 to over 1.3 billion today. Now, one in five people worldwide is Chinese.

What is more, China's demographic profile is ideally suited to economic expansion. Seven out of ten Chinese are aged between 16 and 64, and the average age is 34. China's labor force of over 800 million is over double that of the United States and the European Union combined. In 2009, China is forecast to overtake the U.S. as the world's largest manufacturer.

The seemingly endless supply of labor drives China's economic ascent. Hundreds of millions of people have been lifted out of poverty and a burgeoning middle class of between 100 and 150 million people has made China one of the most attractive markets worldwide. The outskirts of Beijing, Shanghai and other major cities now feature North American-style suburbs, malls, and office blocks.

A Divided Nation

These riches, however, are not distributed evenly. They are concentrated in the eastern and southern coasts and in large inland cities, such as Chengdu, Chongqing, and Wuhan. This reflects the longstanding demographic division in China between the arid West and the monsoon-fed, fertile East.

In the 1930s, Chinese demographer Hu Huanyong drew a line from Aihu in the northeast to Tengchong in the southwest. Not surprisingly, he

found that the vast majority of Chinese lived southeast of the Aihui-Tengchong line.



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Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms of the late 1970s strengthened these regional differences by propelling a traditional agrarian economy towards mechanization and industrialization. Today, the Aihui-Tengchong line divides economic boomtowns and poor rural areas.

This has prompted the largest rural-to-urban migration from in history. With mechanization and the help of fertilizers, tens of millions of peasants are no longer needed to work the land, and so they are leaving their villages for the cities. In 1978, only 20 percent of the population lived in towns and cities; today over 40 percent does. That proportion is growing, and for good reason: urban Chinese earn more than three times more than their rural compatriots.

China's rapid urbanization has left its marks. Old neighbourhoods had to make way for incoming industry, enterprise and, above all, people.

Growing old before getting rich?

As more Chinese become city dwellers, the Chinese family is changing as well. Urban families are smaller, partly because of socio-economic factors like education, career opportunities, and the costs of living. At the same time China's population control policies, most notably the one-child policy, are enforced more strictly in urban areas.

As rural areas take on certain traits of the more urbanized regions, families there are also shrinking, slowing China's population growth. Still, population will continue to grow for another twenty years, peaking at about 1.5 billion around 2035.

But while the old are living longer due to better living conditions and medical services, the young are becoming fewer. With fertility rates of 1.7 children per woman, China is now well below the "replacement level" of 2.1 children that guarantees population stability. Within several decades, China will be overtaken by a younger, more fertile India as the world's most populous country.

According to the United Nations, China's enormous workforce will start shrinking from 2015. Some argue that the slowdown will be felt later, because of the millions of rural migrants moving to the cities. Having fewer workers, some hope, will be offset by having better-educated workers. But by 2050, a third of China's population will be over 60,

three times the current proportion, putting enormous strains on the economy, flimsy social security systems, and Chinese families.

The challenge for China will be whether its economic success will make its people rich enough to enjoy their golden years like their peers in other aging societies in Europe and Asia.

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