BY SALVATORE BABONES

Love, Marriage, and China's Demographic Crisis

Parents everywhere want the best for their children. The best schools, the best jobs, and — ultimately — the best mates. Choosing a partner may be the single most important decision we make in life, since for most people, marriage and family are the foundation of happiness. But finding a compatible match becomes ever more difficult as societies become more developed and more complex.

In traditional societies, children (both male and female, but especially female) had little choice about who to marry. One of the great accomplishments of the Communist era in China was the elimination of arranged marriages and the liberation of women. But that doesn't mean that people today marry only for love. Matchmaking is making a comeback, especially among China's middle class.

Matchmaking has now become something of a competitive sport in China's biggest cities. Matchmaking in today's China is the job of the mothers. They promote their children's prospects while enjoying a weekend out in a center-city park. Or not enjoying. Chinese mothers are known to be extremely competitive, and protective of their own children's reputation.

One of the many potential deal-breakers for prospective partners in China is the potential spouse's residency status, or *hukou*. Every person in China is registered to a particular place, and although the freedom to move residence is slowly increasing in China, people's legal *hukou* still has a strong influence on their access to education, healthcare, and property rights.

Legal *hukou* is especially important in big cities like Beijing and Shanghai. These cities are considered highly desirable places to live, and as a result their city governments are very selective in extending local *hukou* rights. When a registered resident of one of these cities marries an outsider, it can take up to 10 years for the spouse to gain local *hukou*.

As a result, parents in these major cities consider local *hukou* a strategic asset for their children, akin to inheriting an apartment or attending a good university. The proud matchmaking mother of a big-city child might demand that a prospective rural mate bring to the table a higher degree or more property than her own child, to even out the score.

But the more difficult the negotiations, the harder it becomes to find a mate. An unintended consequence of modern matchmaking is that people are marrying later. The average age at first marriage in China is now 26 years old, similar to the age in Western countries. For women in big cities like Shanghai the average age is over 30 — and climbing.

The later people marry, the less likely they are to have children. Since 2016, families in China have been allowed to have two children, but it is becoming clear that few will ever reach that point. Late family formation, career disruptions, and the high costs of raising children are discouraging Chinese families from going beyond one child.

Ironically, by encouraging their children to hold out for the perfect match, Chinese mothers may be reducing their chances of getting what many of them most desire: grandchildren. The longer people put off family formation, the fewer children they have. This is leading to the perpetuation of the "4-2-1"family structure in China, in which four grandparents and two parents all compete to share the affection of just one grandchild.

Childless China

China was once infamous for its draconian one child policy, under which most couples were limited to having just one child. Exceptions were made for some ethnic minorities, farm families, and families where both parents were themselves only children. But for the most part the policy was strictly enforced — by fines, denial of services, and even forced abortions.

Today, Chinese parents still need a license to have children, but all couples are now allowed to have two children. The problem for the country's demographic health is that they don't want to. For most Chinese families, one is enough.

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People in Western countries are also getting married later and having fewer children, but in Western countries there are two balancing forces that tend to keep the population stable. First, in Western countries there are at least some people, often recent immigrants, who have larger families. In China, every family is capped at two children.

Second, Western countries have come to accept the idea that couples can have children out of wedlock. In Anglo-Saxon countries like the United States and theUnited Kingdom, more than 40 percent of all children are born to unmarried couples. Many of those couples later go on to marry, but they don't have to wait until they're married to start having children.

In China, by contrast, having children outside of marriage is illegal and single mothers face substantial fines that can force them to give up their children for adoption — or worse.

The net result is that China's total fertility rate is now hovering at around 1.2 or 1.3 children per woman, well below the replacement rate of 2.1 required to maintain a stable population. Government policy is partly to blame. But similar problems across the region suggest that even without the one-child or two-child policy, China would still be facing a demographic crisis.

A Regional Crisis

China is not the first Asian country to face an aging crisis, and it won't be the last. Dramatic increases in life expectancy have combined with equally dramatic declines in fertility to produce rapidly aging populations throughout the region. Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan are already struggling to cope with huge populations of retirees. Vietnam is expected to follow over the next few decades.

But other Asian countries are making major efforts to address their declining fertility. For example, Singapore is holding a public debate about the needs of parents and the barriers they face in having more children. Options on the table include greater parental leave, split parental leave in which both the mother and the father take time off, and more family-friendly workplaces. Such measures go well beyond the blunt cash-for-babies subsidies of the past.

China doesn't have an open society in which people can air ideas about how to adjust to new social realities. While other East Asian countries debates the meaning of love, marriage, and raising children in the twenty-first century, in China, the government controls the debate and represses dissent. As a result, creative solutions that might lead to broad societal change never receive a hearing.

Most of the debate in China about changing family structures is happening inside government think tanks like the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. Ordinary people are left out, and left to their own devices. As young couples increasingly pursue twenty-first century lives, mothers get ever more desperate to match up their children. The solution is a more open society, but openness is the one solution that the Chinese government cannot accept.

About The Author

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