

COVER STORY

# DECIDING ON A SECOND CHILD

More and more regions have relaxed their family planning policies and are allowing some couples to have more offspring *By Wang Hairong*

A middle-aged couple residing in China's southern Guangdong Province have recently found themselves facing a dilemma: whether or not to have a second child.

Li Jun is the only child in his family, while his wife Zhang Li has a sister. Their daughter was born in 2006. Due to the recent relaxation of China's family planning policy, the couple is now eligible to have a second child.

Last December, the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, China's top legislature, decided to ease the country's decades-long family planning policy and allow couples to have two children if either parent is an only child, in a bid to raise fertility rates and ease the financial burden on China's rapidly aging population. But the change will take effect in provincial-level regions only after local legislatures revise their family planning regulations. On March 27, Guangdong revised its regulations.

Considering his own lonely childhood, Li is eager to have another child so that his daughter will have company. But Zhang does not see eye

to eye with her husband on this issue. Thinking of the troubles she underwent while conceiving and raising their first child, she is hesitant.

"I am already 38. Although I can still give birth, but I am not as energetic as I was in my 20s or early 30s," she told the Guangzhou-based *Yangcheng Evening News*.

Zhang, a mid-level manager in a company, said that she often has to work extra hours, and if she has another child, she might have to quit her job.

Furthermore, their only daughter has left them with little spare time, she said. Now, their daughter is in the first grade of primary school. They tutor her in the evenings and accompany her to extracurricular activities on the weekends.

Moreover, both her and her husband's parents are in their 70s, and no longer capable of caring for another baby, Zhang said.

## No explosive growth

Whether or not to have a second child is a question many couples of child-bearing age in China are wrestling with after the family planning

policy amendment was adopted.

The birth control relaxation was first implemented in east China's Zhejiang Province on January 17. By the end of April, 22 provincial-level regions on China's mainland had officially launched the new policy. Most of the remaining provinces and autonomous regions plan to implement the policy later this year, according to China News Service.

In regions such as Beijing, Tianjin, Chongqing, as well as Sichuan and Hainan provinces, after the birth of their first baby, a couple is required to wait for three to four years before having a second one, unless the mother is above a certain age limit, usually 28 years old.

At most 60 percent of eligible couples born in the 1980s will choose to raise a second child, said Wang Guangzhou, a researcher with the Institute of Population and Labor Economics

under the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, citing recent surveys.

As to whether the birth control relaxation will create a population explosion, Ma Xu, the lead researcher of the National Health and Family Planning Commission (NHFPC), estimated that every year, a maximum of 2 million more babies than normal would be born across the country.

Chen Yiping, Deputy Director of the Guangdong Provincial Health and Family Planning Commission, said that fewer than 150,000 families in the province are eligible to have a second child as a result of the policy change, and a survey showed that only about 70 percent of them are willing to have another baby. Despite this, Chen said that the policy change will make little difference to the population of Guangdong.

Guangdong, with a permanent population of 104.3 million, was the most populous province in China, according to the sixth national census conducted in 2010.

Nationwide, the policy will affect 15 million to 20 million eligible couples who are at child-bearing age and have already had their first child, said Zhai Zhenwu, a sociology professor with the Beijing-based Renmin University of China and Vice President of the China Population Association. The new policy will mainly affect urban couples of child-bearing age, he added.

The number of eligible families has not increased drastically because there were already a number of exceptions to the family planning policy in place. For instance, rural couples can have a second child if their first child is a girl or is handicapped. Families in which neither parent

has siblings are also allowed to have two children, and so are most ethnic minority couples.

Some families, like that of famous film director Zhang Yimou, have already chosen to pay fines and give birth to more children.

Moreover, some families chose not to have a second child even if they are eligible.

Because of the high cost of raising and educating children, many young couples will not grasp the opportunity without consideration, said Yin Zhigang, a professor at the Beijing School of Governance.

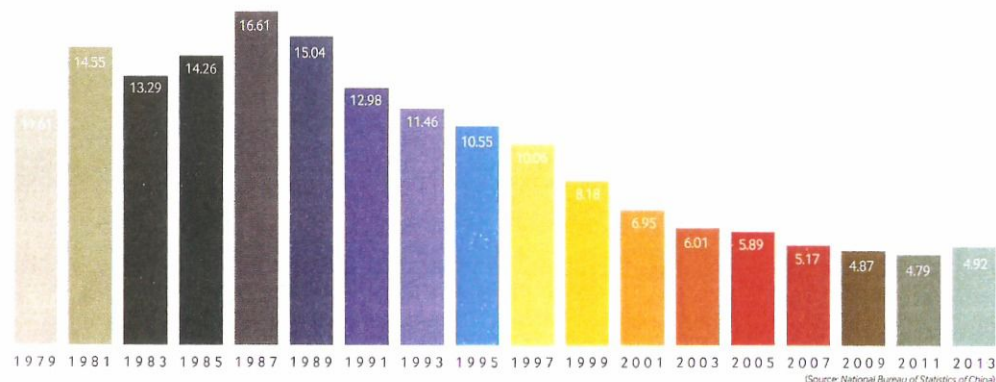
Eligible couples in large cities will be less willing to have second child than those in small and medium-sized cities, Zhai said. He noted that in the next four to five years, a small rise in the birth rate will appear, but the overall fertility rate is unlikely to exceed 2 per thousand. According to him, the fertility rate will begin to fall later and ▶▶



**SUPER DADDY:** More than 100 fathers and their babies attend a training activity in an early education center in Beijing



## Natural Population Growth in China (%)



## Policy Change

China introduced the family planning policy in the 1970s to curb population growth.

In the 1950s and 60s, China's population exploded due to a rapid drop in mortality rate and a higher birth rate, according to Zhai Zhenwu, a sociology professor at the Beijing-based Renmin University of China and Vice President of the China Population Association.

In the 1960s, China's population was around 600 million, and it grew at an annual net rate of 2.5 percent on average, Zhai said.

Since the early 1980s, most urban couples had been allowed to have only one child while most rural couples were allowed to have two if their firstborn was a girl. In late 2011, couples across the country were given the option of having two children if both of the parents

are themselves from one-child families. Last December, the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress decided to further relax birth control measures by allowing families to have a second child so long as at least one of the parents is an only child.

The country's total fertility rate dropped to below the level necessary to keep the population stable in the early 1990s and currently stands at 1.5 to 1.6 per thousand, which is comparable to the average level in developed countries, said Wang Peian, Vice Minister of the National Health and Family Planning Commission.

In the meantime, the demographic structure of the country has also changed, and some problems have surfaced.

China's working-age population has already begun to drop. The year 2012 saw a decrease

of 2.45 million working age people from the previous year, and after 2023, this group will dwindle by 8 million annually, according to Wang.

Furthermore, the population is quickly aging. In 2013, China had 200 million citizens aged 60 and over, accounting for one seventh of the total population, while by the mid-2030s, the number is expected to reach 400 million, accounting for one quarter of the total population, Wang revealed.

Wang said that recent adjustment to the family planning policy is conducive to maintaining an adequate working-age population, slowing down the aging of the population, and improving families' abilities to resist risk and to provide for the elderly. The policy adjustment will promote long-term balanced population development, he concluded.

remain low for some period.

Although the number of births will increase in the next few years after the implementation of the new policy, it will be close to the number of births around the year 2000, said Wang Peian, Vice Minister of the NHFPC.

According to Wang Peian, official estimations suggest that the total population in 2020 will be substantially lower than 1.43 billion and the population will peak at a figure below 1.5 billion. He said that he is confident that the re-

laxation of birth control will neither put pressure on China's food security nor on public services like healthcare, education and employment.

Nonetheless, Wang Peian said that family planning, as a basic national policy, shall be maintained on a long-term basis and those who violate the relevant laws and regulations will be punished.

A two-child policy for all couples would be impossible at this time because of the fluctuations in the number of births it would cause and

the resulting pressure on public services, Wang Peian added.

## Coping with change

After the implementation of the new policy, education and public health organizations are trying to deal with its expected impacts.

"The size of the population directly affects the size of education institutions at various stages and the resources they need, espe-

cially kindergartens," said Hua Aihua, Dean of the Pre-School Education Department of East China Normal University in Shanghai.

Even before the implementation of the new policy, kindergartens and obstetrical and pediatric departments of hospitals, particularly those in large cities, are already suffering from shortages. Now, people worry that a possible mini-baby boom will exacerbate the situation.

Because of the influx of migrants, Beijing's kindergartens, primary and middle schools have always been in short supply, an unnamed official of Beijing Municipal Commission of Education told *China Education News*.

In Zhejiang, education resources are also strained. "Our schools are already full. To ensure children's access to education, we can only enlarge the class size," said Jiang Feng, an official with the Education Bureau of Hangzhou, capital of Zhejiang.

Jiang estimated that under the relaxed family planning policy, primary school enrollment will grow by approximately 10 percent. He worried that larger class sizes might lead to poorer education quality.

Meng Fanhua, Vice President of the Beijing-based Capital Normal University, believes that there is still time for educational institutions to adjust for the upcoming increase in enrollment. He said that since babies born this year will enter kindergartens three years later and primary schools six years later, concerned government departments and education institutions should take planned actions to increase supplies to meet the growing demand.



**ELIGIBLE COUPLE:** He Shao Dong and wife Zhou Jun, residents in Hefei City, Anhui Province, show their permit that allows the couple to have a second child, on February 14. Zhou is the only child in her family.

The Shanghai Municipal Commission of Education said that it plans to continue to expand existing kindergartens, primary and middle schools and build new ones to meet the expected enrollment surge.

According to the commission's projection, at the end of 2015, the city will have about 540,000 children who need pre-school education and about 870,000 children reaching school age, while the enrollment capacity of the city's kindergartens and primary schools will be 538,800 and 874,000, respectively.

The public health system is also making preparations. After the adjustment of the family planning policy, demand for obstetrical and pediatric services will increase significantly, especially in large cities, said NHFPC Vice Minister Wang Guoqiang at a national meeting on women and children's health held on April 17.

Wang Guoqiang said that approximately 80 percent of the 2 million additional new-borns will be in cities, particularly large and medium-sized ones, which will add pressure to urban medical institutions.

Yue Hongni, Vice President of the Huai'an City Maternal and Child Health Hospital in Jiangsu Province, already feels the pressure. She said that obstetrical and pediatric departments experience higher instances of doctor-patient disputes and medical accidents, so many doctors are reluctant to work there, and current medical resources in these departments cannot meet the increasing demand.

For instance, Huai'an needs about 2,400 hospital beds for children, yet the city currently has only 933 such beds, Yue said.

Many women eligible for a second child are already at advanced maternal age, and face a higher risk of childbirth complications and their children face a higher risk of birth defects, Wang Guoqiang said.

He said that local governments should increase the capacity of maternal and child health services, and improve service quality. ■

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