

Shrinking China: 'Sick Lizard,' Not 'Fire-Breathing Dragon'
Gordon G. Chang (Opinion) - Newsweek



Getty Images Residents wear masks while watching the scenery at the scenic platform beside the Yangtze River on August 5, 2021 in Wuhan, Hubei Province, China.

A team at the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences now believes that China's population peaked last year. Three years ago, it issued a forecast that the country would reach the high mark in 2029.

If "the true power of China's rise is a powerful reproductive force"—as many of its people evidently believe—then the Chinese state is heading for collapse. The country is on track to suffer the biggest fall in population in world history in the absence of war or disease.

China's National Bureau of Statistics [reports](#) that the country's population hit 1.4126 billion last year, after a 0.034% increase from 2020.

In reality, China stopped growing years ago. Yi Fuxian of the University of Wisconsin-Madison [believes](#) the population has been shrinking since 2018. The last time China's population fell was during the famine caused by Mao Zedong's Great Leap Forward, six decades ago. Tens of millions perished then.

Beijing's last national census, in 2020, [reports](#) that the country's total fertility rate (TFR)—generally the number of children per female reaching child-bearing age—was 1.3. Countries generally need a rate of 2.1 to maintain a stable population.

The [BBC puts](#) China's TFR in 2021 at 1.15. Even that could be an overestimation. Yi argues that in 2020, the TFR was about 0.90. The number has certainly dropped since then.

Anecdotal evidence suggests the lower estimates are closer to the mark. For instance, according to a survey conducted by the Communist Youth League, [44% of urban](#)

Chinese women do not plan to get married, which means they will not be eligible for birth permits. "Birthrates in Beijing and Shanghai are now the lowest in the world," writes Peter Zeihan, in Barron's this month. "We are the last generation, thank you" was a popular—and now censored—meme last month.

The regime has not been able to encourage procreation: Beijing's frantic efforts to reverse demographic trends—rapidly moving from a one-child to a three-children policy, for instance—have failed. The Chinese people have, by and large, given up on large families.

As a result, China will experience rapid population decline. The medium variant of the UN's 2019 Revision of World Population Prospects estimates the country will have a population of 1,064,993,450 in the year 2100. The low variant predicts 684,049,526, and is far more consistent with analyst estimates.

Even official Communist Party publications are admitting that a demographic collapse will occur. For instance, Peking University's Yuan Xin, writing in China Daily this month, estimated a population of about 700 million in 2100. That's still too high, but it's far more realistic than previous regime estimates.

Elon Musk this month tweeted that China would lose about 40% of its population every generation. Others generally agree. Last fall, Chinese demographers from Xi'an Jiaotong University estimated that China's population could halve within 45 years, assuming the country maintained a 1.3 TFR. Zeihan, the author of The End of the World Is Just the Beginning, cites a study showing that the number of people will halve by 2050.

The Chinese brag about their country being the world's most populous state. Yi Fuxian, however, believes that India now has that title. If he is right, this is the first time in at least three centuries that China has not topped the world's demography chart, and perhaps it is the first time in history.

Beijing faces another disturbing trend. "Nearly all of China's 600 million-strong population growth since 1970 isn't from more births, but from longer life spans and fewer deaths," Zeihan points out. As a result, China today is fast moving to an inverted population pyramid: too many in the older cohorts.

The country's workforce—generally the population cohort of those 15 to 59—peaked in 2011, according to the official National Bureau of Statistics. Some believe China's working-age population in 2100 will be less than a third of what it was at the high point.

So can China, over the course of decades of rapid decline in its workforce, maintain GDP growth? Unlikely. The projected fall is too great for automation, immigration, or other workarounds to fully offset.

Moreover, there is a geopolitical dimension to the aging. "One of the reasons for the disintegration of the Soviet Union was that its shrinking labor force could not support its strategic expansion," wrote Yi Fuxian. China faces the same limitation that ended Soviet ambitions.

Xi Jinping, China's extraordinarily ambitious ruler, relies on intimidation to get what he wants from foreigners, maintaining that his regime is the wave of future. Deluded by distorted economic and demographic data, he has expanded his already large ambitions. Yet he will soon realize, if he does not already, that trends have moved against him. He will thus have to act fast, while China still looms large in imaginations.

Soon, everyone will realize that, as Yi tells us, [China is not a "fire-breathing dragon."](#) It is a "sick lizard."

Peter Zeihan comes to this conclusion: "China is dying."

**** Gordon G. Chang is the author of [The Coming Collapse of China](#).*