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CHINA'S POPULATION SITUATION AND POLICIES

Wu Cangping & Mu Guangzong

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Wu Cangping & Mu Guangzong

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Preface

Population is an important and chronic variable that affects a country's development. The Chinese population problem, generally speaking, has two aspects: One, the problem of population control, that is, how to alleviate the pressure of the consumption demand arising from population growth by controlling the growth of the population; and two, the problem of how to change the population burden into a benefit through human capital investment and the development of human resources.

So far as population control is concerned, "the development of man" will bring about a fundamental change in the birth policy of the individual persons and families — from the birth policy of the family standard deeply affected by the traditional culture to the personal standard birth policy which can better manifest the rationality of the market economy, namely, from early marriage, early birth, partiality for male babies, more births and more babies to late marriage, late birth, fewer births and healthy babies, thus turning the conflict into harmony between the micro birth policy and macro control goal. "The development of man" dealt with here is embodied mainly in the improvement of the educational level and the rise of the social and economic status of the general population. Many studies have shown that the employment of better-educated women of childbearing age in the non-agricultural fields is very helpful for the achievement of a low birth rate. In fact, the visible drop of the birth

rate in China in the past twenty years is inseparable from the improvement of the education and employment of Chinese women. In short, the modernization of man will bring about a revolutionary change in the birth policy of the Chinese people. The drop in the urban birth rate is an indication of this. Fewer but healthier children who are provided with the best possible care and education is now the standard ambition of the majority of urban people. In the countryside, the problem of population control will be increasingly linked to the blending of town and country.

China has a surplus of raw human resources, but a deficiency of special human resources, namely educated and skilled people. The problem of the low educational level of the majority of the population has existed for a long time. Only by placing emphasis on the strategy of the “development of man”, can China really bring up a high-quality labor force that can compete in the international community and meet the needs of the development of the market economy, thereby laying a firm foundation in terms of human capital and human resources for the sustainable development of China.

To adopt the “development of man” as the strategy for sustainable development is a reliable choice for coming out of the dilemma of the increase of low-quality population. The population issue is not simply a question of population increase and control. To be sure population control is a necessary condition for realizing development goals, the most important question, however, is to invest in and develop the existing population. In short, the investment in man is the most important investment and the development of man is the most important development. To realize this and do so will surely allow China, the most populous country in the world, to write a glorious chapter in the 21st century.

Chapter 1

A Huge Population Is China's Most Basic and Characteristic National Condition

It is universally acknowledged that there are too many people in China, and therefore the population must be controlled by means of family planning.

At present, the population on the Chinese mainland has reached 1,265,830,000. If the Chinese people in the Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan regions are also accounted, the total Chinese population comes to 1,295,330,000. This means that China is the most populous country in the world, having more people than the total of all the populations in the developed countries and regions.

The solutions to many problems in China, major or minor, are all related to the basic factor of its large population.

(1) Why Is It Said That the Chinese Population Is Too Large?

The huge population has always been a basic national condition in contemporary and modern China. The “problem of too many people”^[1] emerged over a century ago. The Chinese population exceeded 100 million in the middle of the

¹ This problem is central to Gong Zizhen's “Immigration Theory,” Wang Shiduo's “Birth Control Theory” Tan Sitong's “Overpopulation Theory” and Yan Fu's “Evolution Theory.”

17th century, and rose to 300 or 400 million 200 years later. After the mid-18th century, the problem of “more people and less farmland” became more and more acute, developing into a focus of social contradictions. The excessive and rapid growth of the Chinese population began to arouse more and more concern and discussion.^[2] Overpopulation had become a national problem by the 19th century. The contradiction between population growth and the shortage of land resources further aggravated the class contradictions under the historical conditions of the time, and became a major cause of social crisis and upheavals. Luo Ergang, He Bingdi and other historians held the view that behind the outbreak of the Taiping (Heavenly Peace) Revolution (1851-1864) was the pressure of population growth, a historical factor that cannot be neglected. Karl Max suggested, one year before the Taiping Revolution, that the slow but growing overpopulation in China had already turned its social conditions into heavy shackles for the majority of its people.^[3]

However, the fastest population growth was witnessed after the founding of the People’s Republic of China — from 540 million in the early years of the People’s Republic to double that figure in the following 40 years, with an average increase of 100 million every seven years. In mid-February 1995, it surpassed the 1.2 billion mark. The fifth national census conducted in 2000 showed that China’s population was close to 1.3 billion.

Overpopulation has posed tremendous challenges to the economic construction in China. Confronted by the world’s largest population, China has a very limited living environment. If the country does not make big efforts to control its population, the “trouble of having too many people” will undoubtedly become even more serious in the future and the

ability of the environment to accommodate such a population will come to a breaking point.

The areas of habitable plains and rolling country in China account for 12 percent and 9.9 percent of the total land area, respectively. Basins, mountains and plateaus account for 18.8 percent, 33.3 percent and 26 percent, respectively, of China's territory. Most of the basins, which are mainly inhospitable deserts, are located in northwest China, such as the Qaidam, Junggar and Tarim basins. There are even more areas on the mountains and plateaus that are not suitable for living. From another angle, the humid and semi-humid areas in China that are suitable for habitation account for 32 percent and 15 percent, respectively, while the dry and semi-dry areas account for 31 percent and 22 percent, respectively. On the basis of the figures collected during the third census in 1982, the National Bureau of Statistics estimated that 20.3 percent of the Chinese population lived in areas with poor living conditions at or higher than 500 meters above sea level, and half of them lived at or higher than 1,000 meters above sea level. Only an average of 10 percent of the world's people live at or higher than 400 meters above sea level.

Professor Hu Huanyong proposed in 1935 that if China was divided into two parts, with the Aihui-Tengchong line as the boundary, the basic pattern of the geographical distribution of the Chinese population would show that 95 percent of the population live in the southeastern half and 5 percent live in the northwestern half, mostly in arid and semi-arid areas. Such was the situation in the 1930s, and it is almost the same at present. The poverty and ignorance of a considerable part of the 35 million people in China who live in poor conditions at present are closely related to their extremely bad living conditions. It is difficult to solve the problem of overpopu-

lation in some areas of China by relying on large-scale domestic immigration. The development of hilly areas for cultivation after the farmland on the plains became insufficient to support the population took place in the mid-20th century. If serious consideration is not given to the resources environment and social and economic conditions, future population growth can only proceed within the given living space. Under huge population pressure, acts of harming the environment, such as destroying forests for land reclamation and lumber, and excessive grazing on the pastureland will be hard to avoid. Therefore, we can easily imagine the deterioration of the quality of life.

The population carrying capacity of the environment cannot be ignored. Today, the international community tends to think that this refers to the non-destruction of the ecological environment and guaranteeing that finite resources can be used permanently and ensuring the maximum population figure for sustainable development. It is difficult to fully determine the environmental capacity because of many uncertain factors. At present, many Chinese scholars hold that the country's maximum population carrying capacity may be 1.5 to 1.6 billion. China has made great efforts to control its population precisely because it is unwilling to see the enlargement of the population exceed the maximum limit permitted by its own resources and environment, and wants to avoid fundamental damage to the living quality of the Chinese population and to ensure sustainable development of the society. China's fundamental population-control policy has been applauded by the majority of natural and social scientists.

The relatively limited per capita possession of natural resources is an objective fact, and the relative shortage of resources arising from the growing population pressure is

becoming more and more acute. This has caused damage to the natural material foundation for the survival and development of the Chinese nation.

As is well known, the absolute quantity of China's natural resources ranks among those of the top countries in the world, but because of the large population, the per capita amount is small. The country uses only 7 percent of the world's farmland to feed 22 percent of the world's population. By the end of 2000, China had a little more than 126 million hectares of farmland, but the per capita farmland was only 0.1 hectare, about 45 percent of the world's per capita farmland. In about one-third of the provinces and municipalities, the per capita farmland is less than one-fifteenth of a hectare. The acute shortage of farmland resources and the excessive growth of the population have produced a sharp contradiction. Moreover, industry, transport and large-scale capital construction in both the cities and the countryside use up a lot of land, mostly fertile farmland. As a result, the per capita farmland has dropped year by year. At present, the per capita forest area in China is less than one-seventh of a hectare, and the per capita forest reserve is only nine cubic meters. The per capita grassland in China is only one-third of the world's per capita area and the per capita forest area is only one-fifth of the world's figure. As compared with the forest cover rate of 8.6 percent in the early mid-20th century, China's present forest cover rate has risen to 16.5 percent, but is still far below the world's average of 27 percent. China's water resources total about 2,800 billion cubic meters per year, ranking sixth in the world, but the per capita amount of water is less than 2,200 cubic meters, only one-fourth of the world's per capita amount. Generally speaking, the total amount of resources in a given period is relatively

stable. Therefore, the continued population growth will inevitably increase the negative effect of the denominator, forcing the per capita amount of resources down continually.

At the same time, the continued growth of the population has also exerted great pressure on the environment. There are indications that the current population of China has already approached or in some regions has even exceeded the limit of the carrying capacity of the ecological system. For example, the continued growth of the population in modern times has sharpened the contradiction between the growing population and the decreasing farmland with each passing day, and the per capita amount of farmland has dropped year by year. There is already overpopulation in some parts of the country. As a result, in addition to the destruction of forests for reclamation and excessive felling of trees, existing problems include soil erosion, water loss and land desertification. Many poverty-stricken areas are experiencing a vicious circle of "the poorer the people are, the more land is reclaimed; the more land is reclaimed, the poorer the people are."

The continued growth of the population has inevitably been accompanied by the swelling of basic demand, posing the danger of "draining the pond to catch the fish" and "killing the hen to get the eggs." At the same time, it will lead to a shortage of resources and further worsening of the environment. It is obvious that if China cannot check population growth swiftly, nor quickly put an end to excessive tree felling, loss of water and soil, encroachment on farmland and pollution of the environment over large areas, a serious environmental disaster will be inevitable, greatly threatening the minimum living conditions of the great majority of the Chinese people as well as future social and economic development.

Because of the large population and the limitations by other historical conditions, the overwhelming imperative in China for a long time has been the question of survival, the food problem and the problem of how to meet the consumption demands of the huge population. It is said that "People regard food as their primary want." The importance of farmland to an agricultural country is self-evident. The problem is that it will be difficult to avoid the tendency for the population to increase and farmland to decrease in the foreseeable future. Therefore, China cannot but depend more and more on raising the per-unit yield to increase food production to meet the growing demand of its billion-plus population. China's per-unit yield is already far above the world's average, and it will not be easy to further increase the per-unit yield on the basis of the current farming methods and scientific and technological level. According to predictions, even if there should be an optimistic estimate of the increased food production, because of the denominator effect of the big population growth, the average food consumption of the majority of the Chinese people will remain at a fairly low level for a long time.^[4]

Of course, the pressure of the consumption demand of the Chinese population is not limited to food. The annual increase of ten million or more newborns devours a huge part of the national income every year (a rough estimate of 30 billion *yuan*). This hampers efforts to improve the living standards of the present population. The huge pressure of the consumption demand inevitably affects accumulation, and then affects many aspects of social and economic development.

In short, the introduction of family planning to control the population growth as a major decision policy conforms to the national conditions in China.

(2) The Historical Evolution of Population Growth in China

We have no choice but to create our new history on the basis of the current large population. The study of the issue of population growth in China specially needs a historical consciousness. Reviewing the history of Chinese population growth, it is not difficult to find two basic characteristics: namely, accelerated progressive increase and cyclic fluctuation. First, China's population fluctuated between 50 million and 70 million from the second year of the Yuanshi reign period of Emperor Ping of the Western Han Dynasty (AD 2) to around 1650 in the reign of Emperor Shunzhi of the Qing Dynasty. Sometimes it even dropped to about 10 million. After the middle of the 17th century, the Chinese population began its continued growth, surpassing 100 million in 1686, 200 million in 1762, 300 million in 1790 and 400 million in 1843. It took 1,600 years for the population to rise from 50 million in AD 2 to 100 million, 76 years from 100 million to 200 million, and 72 years from 200 million to 400 million. To sum up, China's population growth experienced five peak periods historically. The period from the Western Han Dynasty (206 BC to AD 220) to the Wei and Jin dynasties (220-420) was the first peak period, during which the population was between 30 million and 50 million. The period from the Southern and Northern Dynasties (420-589) to the Five Dynasties (907-960) was the second peak period, during which the population stayed between 16 million and 50 million. The period from the Song Dynasty (960-1279) to the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) saw the third peak, when the population was between 50 million and 63 million. The more than 200 years of the Qing Dynasty saw the population rise shar-