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**Beijing Purges Wuhan: The CCP Central Authorities  
Tighten Political Control Over Hubei Province**

*John Dotson*

**Introduction: The CCP Center Presses a Positive Narrative About Its Response to COVID-19**

Following a slow reaction to the initial outbreak of the COVID-19 virus, since late January the *zhongyang* (中央), or central authorities, of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) have conducted a concerted public relations effort to present themselves as actively engaged in directing efforts to combat the epidemic. This has included the creation of a new senior-level CCP “leading small group” focused on the epidemic ([China Brief](#), February 5), and a messaging campaign to assert that CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping has been personally “commanding China’s fight” against the outbreak ([Xinhua](#), February 2). Senior officials have also made a range

of recent public appearances intended to demonstrate *zhongyang* concern for, and control over, the campaign against the epidemic.

These actions have been accompanied by a host of positive news stories in state media about the response to the outbreak. The CCP Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC) reportedly held a meeting on February 3 focused on this issue; directives emerging from the meeting stressed that party organs must "perform well in propaganda education and strengthen work to guide public opinion" (做好宣传教育和舆论引导工作, *zuo hao xuanchuan jiaoyu he yulun yindao gongzuo*) about the epidemic response. To this end, media should emphasize not only inspirational stories about the efforts of local workers, but also "deepen propaganda on the major decisions and deployments of the party center" (深入宣传党中央重大决策部署, *shenru xuanchuan dang zhongyang zhongda juece bushu*) ([HK01](#), February 5).

### **The CCP “Central Guidance Group” for Relief Efforts in Hubei Province**

PRC Vice-Premier and CCP Politburo Member Sun Chunlan (孙春兰) has made seven visits to the Wuhan area between January 22 and February 21. Beginning with a trip on February 3, Sun was identified in official media as the leader of a "central [authorities] guidance group" (中央指导组, *zhongyang zhidao zu*) charged with reviewing relief efforts and communicating national leadership directives to local officials ([China Brief](#), February 5; [Xinhua](#), February 15; [Xinhua](#), February 21). The exact membership of this central guidance team is unclear, but it appears to be an *ad hoc* grouping of national-level officials rather than a formal organization. Nevertheless, it is making its presence known in asserting centralized direction over medical relief efforts in Hubei Province.

Authoritative CCP media organs have vowed that the government will take "strict measures to deal with unqualified and derelict officials during the prevention and control of the novel coronavirus" ([Xinhua](#), February 5). National media has also actively supported a narrative of inept local officials in Hubei being read the riot act by members of the central leadership guidance team. For example, the official CCP mouthpiece *People's Daily* provided an account of a meeting on February 10, in which central guidance team member Gao Yu [高雨], Deputy Secretary of the State Council and Director of the State Council Office Supervision and Investigation Bureau, excoriated local officials for their performance. Per this account, Gao gave a severe dressing down to an official from the Wuchang (武昌) District of Wuhan City, stating that "work has been sluggish, coordination has been disordered, [and] organization has been confused... as a result, seriously ill people have waited a long time for treatment and have lost morale... this way of doing things is completely unacceptable." Summing up the performance of local officials overall, Gao asserted that "Wuhan is currently in a state of war, and the actions of these people are completely unsatisfactory" ([People's Daily](#), February 10).

Another sign of central CCP leadership intent to tighten the reins on Hubei Province was seen in the dispatch of Chen Yixin (陈一新), who arrived in Wuhan on February 8 to act as the designated deputy head of the *zhongyang* guidance team ([China Daily](#), February 10; [SCMP](#),

February 12). Chen is a former Party Secretary in Wuhan; more importantly, Chen has served since March 2018 as Secretary-General of the CCP Central Political and Legal Commission (中央政法委员会, *Zhongyang Zhengfa Weiyuanhui*), which places him in authority over the PRC's police and courts systems. The appointment of such a figure is a possible indication of Beijing's concern over social unrest resulting from the epidemic—and of the need for a *zhongyang* point man to ensure that not only the party's civil apparatus, but also the domestic security apparatus, are kept in line with central direction.



*Image: Chen Yixin (center), Secretary-General of the CCP Central Political and Legal Commission and the designated deputy head of a “central guidance group” dispatched from Beijing to Hubei Province, “personally assumed command of the Wuhan Epidemic Prevention and Control Guidance Department” during a meeting on February 12. (Source: [Xinhua](#), February 13)*

### **The Sacking of Senior CCP Cadres in Hubei Province**

Despite such efforts, public anger has grown regarding the government's earlier efforts to suppress information about the initial stages of the COVID-19 outbreak in the Wuhan area ([China Brief](#), January 17; [China Brief](#), January 29). As a result, the reputation of the CCP and the prestige of its “core” leader Xi Jinping have been damaged ([China Brief](#), February 13). As has often been the case with past crises, local and provincial-level officials are now being made the subject of blame for poor response and information suppression in the early stages of the crisis—and personnel shake-ups are providing a mechanism for the Xi-dominated *zhongyang* to assert firmer control over the party hierarchy in Hubei Province.

Hints of potential cleavages between local and national CCP authorities first surfaced into public view in late January, when Wuhan Mayor and Deputy CCP Secretary Zhou Xianwang (周先旺) made an admission that warnings to the public “were not sufficient” ([SCMP](#), January 23). Zhou followed this with startling public comments on January 27 in which he offered to resign his post, but also asserted that national-level restrictions on the promulgation of information about infectious disease outbreaks had tied the hands of local officials

([Caixin](#), January 27; [China Daily HK](#), January 28). Despite these injudicious (and likely true) comments, Zhou has thus far held on to his positions.

Senior CCP officials in Hubei have clearly been concerned that they might be sacked, and have sought to “signal loyalty” (表态, *biaotai*) to the party center: for example, Hubei Party Secretary Jiang Chaoliang (蒋超良) pointedly made comments early in February that he would loyally implement Chairman Xi’s guidance, as well as directives communicated by Sun Chunlan ([China Brief](#), February 13). However, this was not enough to save his job, or that of other prominent local officials.

The first significant sackings occurred on February 11, when Zhang Jin, the CCP Secretary of the Hubei Public Health Commission, and Liu Yingzi, director of the same body, were removed from their posts ([SCMP](#), February 11). Then, on February 13, state agencies and media issued this announcement:

*On February 13, Hubei Province convened a meeting of leading cadres; at the meeting, [CCP] Central Organization Department Deputy Director Comrade Wu Yuliang (吴玉良) announced the decision of the central authorities... on the basis of the need for epidemic prevention and control work, and the reality of the Hubei Province leadership [personnel], and conducting consideration from every angle... the central authorities decided to make adjustments to the major responsibilities of comrades in the Hubei Party Committee ([CCDI](#), February 13).*

As a result, it was announced that Jiang Chaoliang had been removed from his positions as Hubei Province Party Secretary and member of the provincial party committee. Jiang was replaced by Ying Yong (应勇), who had previously served since 2017 as Mayor and Deputy CCP Secretary in Shanghai. In a parallel move, Ma Guoqiang (马国强) was stripped of his posts as Wuhan City CCP Secretary and Hubei Province Deputy CCP Secretary. Ma was replaced by Wang Zhonglin (王忠林), who left his former position as CCP Secretary of Jinan City in Shandong Province ([Xinhua](#), February 13; [China Vitae](#), undated; [China Daily](#), February 13).



Image left: Wu Yuliang, Deputy Director of the CCP Central Organization Department, reportedly served as the point man for the CCP leadership in announcing the sackings of the party secretaries of Hubei Province and Wuhan City in a meeting held on February 13. Here, Wu is seen speaking at a committee meeting of the PRC National People’s Congress in October 2019. (Image source: [PRC National People’s Congress](#))

*Image right: Wang Zhonglin (right), the newly-appointed CCP Secretary for Wuhan City, at a meeting for “leading cadres” convened the same day that Wang assumed office on February 13. The caption banner states that the meeting was held to “communicate decisions from the party center.” (Source: [Sina.com](http://Sina.com))*

### **The CCP Central Discipline and Inspection Commission in Hubei**

In addition to the personnel replacements in the top posts of the Hubei Province CCP hierarchy, other central CCP agencies have been dispatched to the region to ensure compliance with central directives—as well as to identify scapegoats for missteps in the early stages of the viral outbreak. To this end, teams of agents from the CCP Central Discipline and Inspection Commission (中共中央纪律检查委员会, *Zhonggong Zhongyang Jilu Jiancha Weiyuanhui*), or CDIC, have been sent to monitor local officials and local conditions in affected areas. Tasks assigned to the CDIC have included: monitoring the production, pricing, and availability of medical supplies and foodstuffs; monitoring local-level party cadres for compliance with higher-level directives about preventing spread of the virus (e.g., wearing masks, and registering persons who have traveled to Wuhan); and inspecting facilities for travelers such as hotels ([CCP Watch](#), February 6).

At least one senior-level Wuhan CCP official has been taken down by the CDIC amid the ongoing central government crackdown. The CDIC announced on February 22 that Cai Jie (蔡杰), a member of the Wuhan City CCP Standing Committee, had been relieved of all duties and expelled from party membership. Cai had slowly worked his way up the Wuhan City CCP hierarchy since the mid-1990s, rising ultimately in 2016 to become Secretary-General of the Wuhan CCP Committee. The announcement of Cai's expulsion accused him of "violating political discipline" and "violating regulations on morality" by impeding investigations, accepting bribes, and abusing his official positions ([CDIC](#), February 22).

The CDIC has also become involved in efforts by the CCP center to address one of the thorniest points of the epidemic in public relations terms. Li Wenliang (李文亮), a 34 year-old ophthalmologist in Wuhan, had run afoul of local authorities after he posted in late December to a WeChat account, informing medical colleagues about the appearance of a SARS-like virus in the city. Li was subsequently summoned by local police and threatened for “spreading false rumors on the internet,” at a time when both local and national officials were suppressing information about the disease ([BBC Chinese Service](#), February 4). Li himself subsequently contracted the COVID-19 virus, and died on February 7; his death prompted a massive outpouring of sympathy on the Chinese internet, and produced a severe embarrassment for the government. In response, the CCP has announced that the CDIC will investigate the treatment of Dr. Li ([China Daily](#), February 7). CCP propaganda organs have also attempted to co-opt the legacy of Li Wenliang, invoking his name in calls to “win the battle” against the virus ([People's Daily](#), February 7).

### **Conclusion**

Following an initial period of several weeks in which information about the COVID-19 epidemic and its seriousness were suppressed, since January the national CCP authorities have undertaken a comprehensive public relations campaign to present themselves as actively involved in directing efforts to manage the crisis.

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This has involved a series of highly-publicized leadership appearances, as well as a concerted propaganda campaign stressing both the capable leadership of the *zhongyang* and the need to adhere loyally to all its directives. In February, a new element was added to this campaign: an effort to channel public anger towards city and provincial-level CCP officials, while presenting an image of the party center as energetic, highly competent, and concerned for the welfare of the people.

To this end, it was almost inevitable that senior figures in the Hubei party hierarchy would be sacked. While there were certainly severe shortcomings with the initial response made by Hubei officials, part of this was due to problems that proceeded from Beijing: in particular, information restrictions relating to any matters that might impact “social stability,” and a top-down model that inhibits lower-echelon initiative while waiting for direction from Xi’s *zhongyang* on any major sensitive issue. Local and provincial-level officials are now being made scapegoats for flaws in the CCP’s governance model. Xi Jinping has consistently demonstrated that he believes the solution to any problem is always the further centralization of power, and that process is likely to further play itself out as the COVID-19 crisis continues to unfold.

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## Beijing's Appointment of Xia Baolong Signals a Harder Line on Hong Kong

By Willy Lam



*Image: Xia Baolong, the Vice-Chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), speaks at a provincial CPPCC conference in Inner Mongolia, May 2018. Xia was given a concurrent appointment on February 13 as Director of the PRC State Council Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office. The appointment of Xia, who is known both as an ally of Xi Jinping and as a hardliner on issues of CCP social control, signals that Beijing intends to implement a tougher line on Hong Kong. (Image source: [CPPCC](#))*

### Introduction

Beijing has signaled a much tougher policy toward the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR) with the announcement on February 13 that Xia Baolong (夏宝龙), the Vice-Chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), would take up a concurrent appointment as Director of the State Council's Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office (HKMAO). In the official pecking order of the People's Republic of China (PRC), a CPPCC vice-chairman is reckoned as a "state leader"—and therefore, this move portends the raising of the status of the HKMAO and the overall importance of Hong Kong affairs in national policy. Also significant is the fact that from 2002 to 2007, when Chinese Communist Party (CCP) General Secretary Xi Jinping was party secretary of the coastal Zhejiang Province, Xia was deputy party secretary. The fact that Xia, who began his career in the Tianjian municipality, is an important Xi protégé is well-known among China analysts ([Ming Pao \[Hong Kong\]](#), February 14; [HK01.com](#), February 13).

The HKMAO is usually headed by a ministerial-level official. Zhang Xiaoming (张晓明), a veteran of the HKMAO whom Xia replaced, is a ministerial-level cadre. After being demoted, Zhang remains the Executive Vice-Director of the HKMAO with the title of minister. However, it seems clear that his job will be to execute policies as directed by Xia—and above Xia, Xi Jinping. With the appointment of a key associate as head of the HKMAO, Xi also indirectly takes over the position of the highest arbiter of Hong Kong and Macau affairs. This is despite the fact that according to division of labor, the Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC) member in

charge of Hong Kong—the Head of the Central Coordination Group on Hong Kong and Macau Affairs (CCGHKMA)—is PBSC member and Vice-Premier Han Zheng (韩正). In the past few years, Han has focused on infrastructure programs such as the Belt and Road Initiative and the Greater Bay Area Project, leaving Hong Kong-related political issues to Xi as the “lifelong core” of the party ([BBC Chinese Service](#), February 13; [ITN.com \[Taipei\]](#), December 3, 2019; [PRC State Council](#), March 1, 2019).

### **Xia Baolong’s Tenure in Zhejiang Province—and What It Portends for the Future**

Given the long Chinese tradition of the rule of men, instead of the rule of law, it is important to understand the traits and policy orientation of Xia (born 1952). After steadily rising through the ranks in Tianjin from 1970 to 2003, Xia was appointed CCP Deputy Secretary of Zhejiang from 2003 to 2007. During this time, he doubled as a member of the Zhejiang Standing Committee for Political-Legal Affairs. It was his orthodox stance on CCP social control, and his intolerance of dissident voices and the growth of civil society, which endeared Xia to Xi. Xia was made Governor of Zhejiang in 2012, and Party Secretary one year later.

In his first months upon arrival in Zhejiang, Xia visited various Zhejiang cities such as prosperous Wenzhou, which has a sizeable Christian community. Xia reportedly told his subordinates that he wondered whether the church or the CCP was running the show in swathes of Zhejiang. Then in 2014, Xia opened the first salvo in a nationwide crackdown on underground Protestant and Catholic churches by forcibly destroying the crosses on church buildings—and sometimes the whole churches themselves—in different Zhejiang cities. Xia’s goal is to “Sinicize” Christianity, or to inject Confucian and other Chinese values into the Western creed, through the arbitrary change of Church dogma ([RTHK.hk](#), February 13; [Christianitytoday.com](#), March 20, 2019; [Chinaaid.net](#), October 16, 2017; [Zhejiang News](#), June 26, 2015).

While Xia seemed to enjoy Xi’s full support, Xi also seemed—if only for a brief period—to realize the international image problems produced by this harshest prosecution of religion in China since the end of the Cultural Revolution. At a Central Meeting on National Religious Affairs held in Beijing in 2016, provinces such as Guangdong, Jiangsu and Hebei were cited for their effective religious work; Zhejiang, however, was strangely missing. Despite speculation that Xia would gain a Politburo-level slot at the 19th Party Congress in 2017, he was instead given the prestigious pre-retirement job at the CPPCC. At the same time, Li Qiang (李强), Governor of Zhejiang and another Xi protégé, was promoted Party Secretary of Shanghai; he also won a seat on the ruling Politburo ([Huanqiu Shibao](#), May 5, 2017; [Xinhua](#), April 23, 2016).

According to Ying Fuk-tsang, Dean of the Divinity School of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, Xi Jinping might have thought for several months that Xia had gone overboard in suppression of the Christian church—but Xia never lost Xi’s trust. In 2018, the destruction of churches and crosses resumed in Henan Province and other jurisdictions. “Xi has a high estimation of the fact that Xia takes the party’s interests first and that he is a ruthless enforcer,” Ying said. “That is why Xia has been brought back to the frontline now that cracking down on ‘anti-China’ forces has become top priority in Beijing’s policy toward the SAR.” [1]



*Image: Wang Yang (second from right), Chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), meets with CPPCC members from Hong Kong in October 2018. Xia Baolong (center, background) stands just behind Wang Yang. Xia's role in managing Beijing's policies towards Hong Kong has now significantly expanded with his appointment as Director of the Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office.*

*(Image source: [Xinhua](#))*

### **Changes in Beijing's Policy Apparatus for Hong Kong**

Xia's appointment is not an isolated event: the entire structure of Beijing's Hong Kong policy establishment has been changed. Luo Huining (骆惠宁), the newly appointed Director of the Hong Kong-based Liaison Office of the Central People's Government in the Hong Kong SAR (HKCLO)—which serves as Beijing's mission in the SAR—was made concurrently a Vice-Director of the HKMAO. (Fu Ziyang, director of the Liaison Office of the Central People's Government in the Macao Special Administrative Region, was also concurrently appointed as a deputy director of the HKMAO.) Prior to this development, the ministerial-level posts of the heads of the HKMAO and the HKCLO were held by different cadres and they did not report to each other. Now Luo, a former party secretary of Qinghai and Shanxi (who, like Xia himself, was given a pre-retirement job at the National People's Congress just late last year), has to report to Xia—and through Xia, to supreme leader Xi ([DWnews.com](#), February 15; [Caixin.com](#), February 13).

Luo is not known as a member of the Xi Jinping faction, but he is considered acceptable to Xi as a compromise candidate for the Hong Kong post. Luo served in top positions in the Qinghai Autonomous Region from 2003 to 2016, prior to his appointment as party boss of the larger province of Shanxi. Given that the remote northwestern region of Qinghai has a sizeable minority of Tibetans, Luo, like Xia, has ample experience implementing harsh policies in regions with restive populations. Luo is also much more senior in experience than his predecessor Wang Zhimin; and Wang, like Zhang Xiaoming, served a significant portion of his career

in the Hong Kong and Macau policy establishments ([BBC Chinese Service](#), January 6; [South China Morning Post](#), January 4).

### **Conclusion: What Xia's Appointment Means for Hong Kong**

What will the new appointment of Xia portend for Beijing's Hong Kong policy? Most politicians and commentators from the pro-democracy camp are worried that Xia will enforce tighter control—and further press the “one country two systems” framework—through streamlining of the Hong Kong policy establishment and appointing top protégés to head Hong Kong affairs. Wu Chi-Wai, the Chairman of the Hong Kong Democratic Party, has told local media that cadres such as Xia and Luo are “hardliners” faithful to Xi. “They will implement a policy that stresses that priority will be given to the national interest,” he said. “They will tightly implement Beijing's control over Hong Kong policy” ([Singtao Daily \[Hong Kong\]](#), February 14).

Foremost on Xia's agenda could be the promulgation of some form of national security legislation, such as the much-feared draft “Article 23” legislation—which would punish SAR residents found guilty of sedition, secession, leaking of state secrets, and other anti-Beijing activities ([China Brief](#), November 19, 2019). The Fourth Plenum of the Communist Party in late 2019 emphasized that Hong Kong must “build up an effective legal system and execution mechanism for the SAR to safeguard national security” (建立健全特區維護國家安全的法律制度和執行機制, *jianli jianquan tequ weihu guojia anquan de falu zhidu he zhixing jizhi*). This point has been emphasized by senior cadres including Zhang Xiaoming and Luo Huining. Upon assuming office as Director of the HKCLO, Luo repeated this point verbatim, saying that without concrete measures to ensure the nation's security and stability, both Hong Kong and the motherland risked being “infiltrated and damaged” by hostile foreign forces ([News.now.com \[Hong Kong\]](#), January 20; [Radio French International](#), November 1, 2019).

Over the longer term, the CCP will likely work behind the scenes to see that more force is used to tackle the demonstrations that grew out of the anti-Extradition Bill movement in mid-2019 ([China Brief](#), June 26, 2019). Beijing will also take steps to further promote “patriotic education,” and textbooks will be gradually changed to emphasize the glorious achievements of the PRC—as well as the duty of every SAR citizen to be loyal to the state, and to foil “plots” that threaten national security ([China Brief](#), December 10, 2019). The CCP will also try to stifle the SAR's civil society, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs)—particularly religious-oriented NGOs, and those originating from the U.S. and other Western countries—could be put under more scrutiny. Notably, Article 23 forbids Hong Kong's political organizations from making some forms of association with counterparts in foreign countries ([Christian Times \[Hong Kong\]](#), February 14; [Apple Daily \[Hong Kong\]](#), January 2; [Ming Pao](#), November 14, 2019).

Since Xia reports directly to Xi, the means and mechanisms that Beijing will adopt to materialize “comprehensive rule” in the Hong Kong SAR could become swifter and more efficacious than before. It is conceivable that in the long run, at least a modicum of the mentality behind Beijing's treatment of Uighurs and Tibetans might be applied to the citizens of Hong Kong. After all, it was Xia's suppression of underground Christians beginning in 2014 that set the tone for the internment camps in Xinjiang, whose goal is the

“Sinicization” of the Uighur minorities. Xia’s comeback to power in a position of prominence is emblematic of Xi’s desire to tighten Beijing’s grip over politics, economics, and civil society in the Hong Kong SAR.

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**Notes**

[1] Author’s interview with Professor Ying Fuk-tsang, February 2020.

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## **Fair-Weather Friends: The Impact of the Coronavirus on the Strategic Partnership Between Russia and China**

*By Johan van de Ven*

### **Introduction**

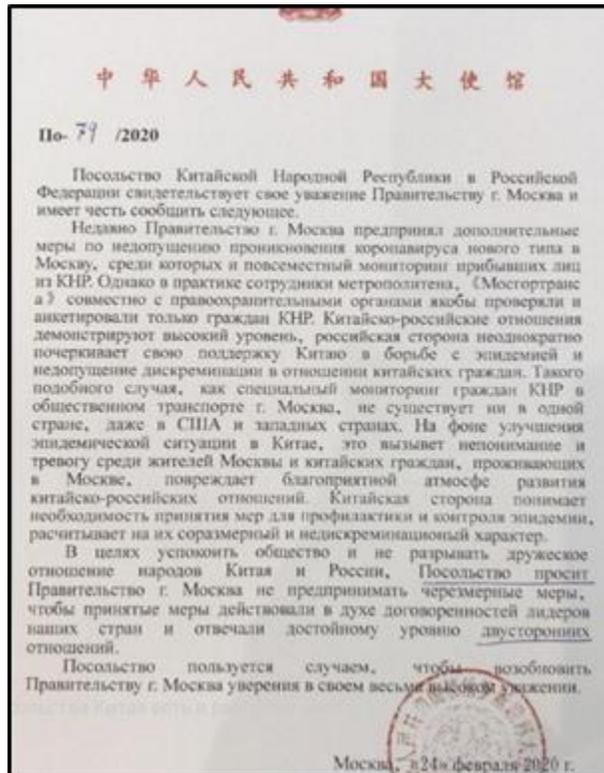
In June 2019, during a visit to the Kremlin by Chinese Communist Party (CCP) General Secretary Xi Jinping, the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Russian Federation announced that they had “agreed...to upgrade their relations to a comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination for a new era” ([Xinhua](#), June 6, 2019). This continued the warming of bilateral relations nurtured by Xi and Russian President Vladimir Putin, who have met at least 30 times during their respective tenures. The strengthening of ties has seen unusually relaxed encounters between the pair, such as when they made *blini* (traditional Russian pancakes) together in Vladivostok in September 2018 ([People's Daily](#), September 12, 2018). In more substantive terms, support from Chinese state-linked financial institutions has played a critical role in the construction of a new wave of Russian energy infrastructure, ranging from the Yamal Liquefied Natural Gas Project to the “Power of Siberia” gas pipeline.

However, the ongoing COVID-19 coronavirus outbreak has opened a stress fracture in the bilateral Sino-Russian relationship. After weeks of gradually escalating restrictions, reports emerged in late February that Moscow public transit drivers had been instructed to call police if they witnessed Chinese passengers using the transit system ([Wangyi Keji](#), February 25). The PRC Embassy in Russia warned that such actions “will harm the good atmosphere for developing Chinese-Russian relations” ([Novaya Gazeta](#), February 25). While China was initially restrained in its public criticism of Russian measures taken in the course of the COVID-19 epidemic, the decision of the PRC Embassy in Moscow to highlight the discrimination being faced by Chinese citizens in Moscow is a reminder of just how quickly tensions can arise between the two countries, even in the age of “comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination for a new era.”

### **Russia Raises the Drawbridge**

The World Health Organization declared COVID-19 to be a “public health emergency of international concern” on January 30, 2020 ([WHO](#), February 27). Two days prior to this, the Khabarovsk regional government had announced the closure of all border crossings connecting Khabarovsk Krai with China ([Today KHV](#), January 28). Following the WHO declaration, the closure was extended across all checkpoints in the Far Eastern Federal District, which covers much of Russia's border region with China ([Moscow Times](#), January 30). Authorities announced the suspension of e-visa issuances to Chinese nationals, and also prepared an evacuation of Russian nationals from Wuhan. A further evacuation operation took place in Heilongjiang Province, utilizing the newly-constructed bridge between Heihe and Blagoveshchensk, which had been portrayed as a symbol of greater economic integration between the two countries.

While these measures are all grounded in public health logic, other countries that have close political ties with China—and which have benefited substantially from Chinese financing—were much more reluctant in their initial response to COVID-19. Among others, Ethiopian Airlines has continued to operate flights to China throughout the crisis ([Xinhua](#), February 27), while Pakistani authorities have not facilitated the evacuation of its citizens from Wuhan, despite domestic public pressure to do so ([DW](#), February 20). Russia’s response was a reminder that strategic cooperation between Russia and China is highly contingent on overlapping interests.



*Image: A February 25 letter from the PRC Embassy in Moscow, protesting instructions allegedly given to Russian transit workers to contact the police if Chinese citizens were observed using public transportation. (Source: [Novaya Gazeta](#), February 25)*

### Trying to Get Along

In the aftermath of the border closure, authorities from both China and Russia appeared to be intent on containing the impact of the crisis on bilateral relations. Chinese state tabloid *Global Times* said that while the closure is “a bit of an overreaction”, it was “understandable for Moscow to make the hard decision for the health of its own people” ([Global Times](#), February 19). Russian authorities attempted to mollify China by arranging a donation of 23 tons of medical supplies, although there was some consternation that Russia was not among the first 20 countries to do so ([South China Morning Post](#), February 16). On February 4, the Kremlin shared samples of Russian H5N1 drug Triazavirin with Chinese counterparts to assess its effectiveness in treating COVID-19, and also dispatched a team of five experts from the Ministry of Health and the Federal Service for the Oversight of Consumer Protection and Welfare to provide support ([Jiemian](#), February 4). In the background,

however, cross-border connectivity continued to worsen: all flights from points of origin in China to airports in Russia other than Moscow's Sheremetyevo International Airport were cancelled. On February 18, Russian flag carrier *Aeroflot* announced that it would pare down its China service to just two daily flights, one each to Beijing and Shanghai ([Duowei](#), February 18).



*Image: A Russian health worker examines the temperatures of passengers on a flight arriving in Moscow (undated, February 2020). (Source: [Moscow Times](#))*

### **The Economic Impacts Hit Home**

On February 20, all Chinese nationals on tourist, private, student, or work visa were blocked from entering Russian territory. In a bid to minimize damage wrought by COVID-19 on economic ties, Russian authorities established a carve-out so that Chinese citizens holding business or official visas would still be permitted to enter ([South China Morning Post](#), February 20). Some companies implemented pragmatic work-arounds, as illustrated by the decision of Gazprom and China National Petroleum Corporation to convene their scheduled meetings via teleconference ([TASS](#), February 13). However, the economic impact has been readily apparent. According to Russian Finance Minister Anton Siluanov, bilateral trade volume in February 20 was down as much as 50% year-on-year ([National Post](#), February 20)—a considerable setback to previous Russian ambitions for bilateral trade to reach \$200 billion by 2024 ([Xinhua](#), September 18). The volume of Alipay and UnionPay payments processed in Russia fell by approximately 70% year-on-year in the first week of February, while one consultancy estimated that in St. Petersburg alone, hotels were facing a revenue shortfall of around \$8 million per month ([The Art Newspaper](#), February 26).

### **A Pre-Existing Condition?**

Russia's border closure is not the first time that one party in the bilateral relationship has placed pragmatic self-interest above economic integration. During his November 2018 visit to Beijing, it was widely expected that then-Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev would, along with Chinese Premier Li Keqiang, announce the formation of a joint program to facilitate the payment of cross-border trade in the yuan and ruble, in order to

reduce reliance on the U.S. dollar ([RT](#), November 23). However, the Chinese side rejected a proposed agreement, due to concern among Chinese banks that any contractual linkages with Russian counterparts would leave the banks vulnerable to accusations of sanction violations. In June 2019, Russia's Ministry of Economic Development announced that Siluanov and People's Bank of Governor Yi Gang had signed an intergovernmental agreement under which both sides committed to raising the proportion of cross-border trade settled in national currencies to 50 percent ([Ministry of Economic Development of the Russian Federation](#), June 28, 2019).

However, Chinese government outlets did not release a corresponding announcement. During the Russia Calling Investment Forum in November 2019, Putin conceded that the volume of bilateral trade settled in national currencies remains small. Although he said that he “hopes to see more” trade settlement, he did not make any reference to the June 2019 agreement. The reticence of Chinese negotiators to pursue deeper currency integration is further testament to the importance of overlapping interests in the strategic partnership between Russia and China—in this case, there was a clear mismatch between the need of Russian businesses to minimize exposure to sanctions, and the desire of Chinese banks to maintain access to the international financial system.

### **Conclusion: The Unsteady Underbelly of Strategic Relations between Russia and China**

As recently as September 2019, President Xi described President Putin as his “best friend” ([Xinhua](#), June 6). However, the diplomatic tensions resulting from Russia's COVID-19 restrictions serve as a reminder that the Sino-Russian bilateral strategic partnership is premised on maintaining overlapping interests. When that overlap diminishes, memories can quickly return to periods of historical enmity. [1] While the current predicament is benign in comparison to historical periods of hostility, the tensions show that a strategic partnership between the two countries does not necessarily rest on a bed of strategic trust. As such, despite the vaguely-defined “comprehensive strategic partnership,” Putin and Xi have refrained from describing the Sino-Russian bilateral relationship as an alliance. Furthermore, PRC state media has also declined to use the term “all-weather friendship” (which it uses to characterize ties with Pakistan) to describe relations with Russia. The restrictions imposed by Russian authorities over the COVID-19 outbreak, culminating in alleged discrimination against Chinese users of Moscow's public transit system, show that positive leader-level relations have not produced strategic trust between the two countries. Instead, strong bilateral ties are reliant on overlapping interests. While the retort from the Chinese Embassy is unlikely to produce a fundamental shift, it nonetheless offers a warning not to overestimate the ability of Moscow and Beijing to construct an enduring alliance.

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**Notes**

[1] Relations between the two countries were hostile from the late 1950s through the 1980s, including armed border clashes and a war scare in the late 1960s. In 1969, the Chinese leadership evacuated its compound at Zhongnanhai, fearing a Soviet nuclear attack. See: Nicholas Khoo, *Collateral Damage: Sino-Soviet Rivalry and the Termination of the Sino-Vietnamese Alliance* (Columbia Univ. Press, 2011).

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## The PRC's Cautious Stance on the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy

By Yamazaki Amane

### Introduction: Japan and the United States Promote an “Indo-Pacific Strategy”

In June 2019, the U.S. Department of Defense issued a major new policy document, the *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report*, which asserted that “Inter-state strategic competition, defined by geopolitical rivalry between free and repressive world order visions, is the primary concern for U.S. national security.” The document was clear as to which country it identified as the greatest source of strategic concern: “In particular, the People’s Republic of China, under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, seeks to reorder the region to its advantage by leveraging military modernization, influence operations, and predatory economics to coerce other nations.” [1]

This was followed by the U.S. State Department document *A Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision*, issued in November 2019. This document stated that “Authoritarian revisionist powers seek to advance their parochial interests at others’ expense,” and that therefore “the United States is strengthening and deepening partnerships with countries that share our values.” [2]

In using such language, the United States is not alone. Japanese Prime Minister (PM) Abe Shinzo has advocated Japan’s own “Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy,” which he has discussed since 2016. This concept emphasizes economic development assistance and infrastructure construction, promotion of the rule of law, and freedom of trade. It particularly emphasizes maritime security and freedom of navigation—which connect directly to the territorial disputes that are a key point of ongoing contention between Japan and China. [3]

The U.S. and its allies have advanced their cooperation on this new “Indo-Pacific Strategy” quietly but steadily: in one notable example, on February 4, 2020 the U.S. Department of the Treasury and its Japanese counterpart signed the “Memorandum of Cooperation [MOC] on Strengthening Energy and Infrastructure Finance and Market Building.” Brent McIntosh, Under Secretary for International Affairs in the U.S. Department of the Treasury, noted that the MOC is “a testament to our shared commitment to advancing a free and open Indo-Pacific” ([U.S. Department of the Treasury](#), February 4, 2020).

Given that several regional governments—including the United States, Japan, Australia, and India (the so-called “QUAD” group), as well as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)—have incorporated the term “Indo-Pacific” as a part of their official strategy or policy, the significance of this broad concept will continue to increase in the foreseeable future. Meanwhile, China’s reaction to the Indo-Pacific Strategy has been restrained so far, although it is certain that Beijing is closely monitoring it. This article considers the narrative on Indo-Pacific-related affairs in the People’s Republic of China (PRC), by focusing primarily on how officials of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) have dealt with the concept, as well as how cooperation among regional states has developed since the latter part of 2017.

### **MFA's Watchful Attitude Towards the Indo-Pacific Concept**

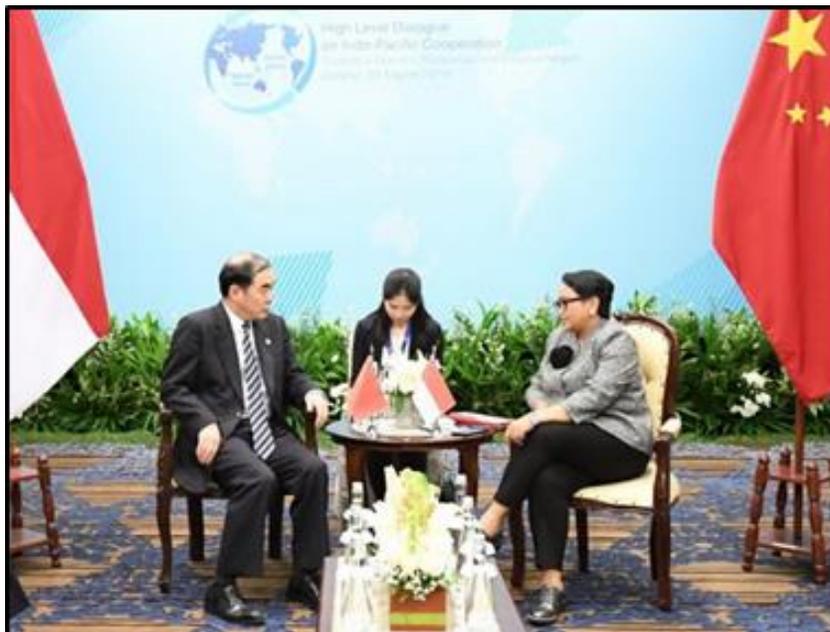
Although the Indo-Pacific Strategy still faces problems of ambiguity as a regional concept and geographical scope, it has become a significant keyword in an evolving and dynamic series of geopolitical developments. These include the U.S.-China, Japan-China, or India-China power struggles; Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI); and geostrategic competition among regional countries in land, maritime, and other new domains such as space or cyber technology. The heightened momentum for the Indo-Pacific concept from the latter part of 2017 has evoked a reaction from the Chinese government—albeit a restrained one, as Beijing deliberates as to how best to respond in diplomatic terms.

As the Trump Administration was set to publish its new version of the *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* in late 2017—and both Washington and Tokyo had just begun to stress the Indo-Pacific Strategy in collaborative terms—MFA spokesperson Geng Shuang (耿爽) answered four questions on issues related to the Indo-Pacific at a routine press conference in November 2017. Geng's response to a query as to how China perceived the Indo-Pacific Strategy, as proposed by the United States and Japan, did not appear negative at first glance. He referred to a principle that every relevant party is responsible for contributing to “stability and prosperity in the Asia-Pacific.” Additionally, he answered a recurrent question from the media, reiterating that regional vision and cooperation should be based on openness and inclusiveness, while “politicized and exclusionary ones should be avoided.” When asked whether China believes that it is excluded from the new regional framework, Geng said that relations among regional countries “would not target a third party.” In response to another question on the difference and contradictions between the Indo-Pacific and Asia-Pacific concepts, Geng stated that, “be it the Asia-Pacific or others,” regional development or cooperation should be achieved in accordance with appropriate trends ([MFA](#), November 13, 2017).

While Geng's comments imply that China has no intention of rejecting the Indo-Pacific concept totally, it represents the PRC government's cautious stance toward it. In particular, Beijing seems to have potential concerns about being excluded or targeted by the United States or Japan. Simultaneously, from the Chinese perspective, the “Asia-Pacific” is preferable to the “Indo-Pacific” as a regional concept. Geng did not refer to the Indo-Pacific: this wary attitude can be attributed to the origin of the term, which was neither coined nor promoted by Beijing, but rather advocated by its strategic rivals Washington and Tokyo.

As with the case of Geng's statement, it appears that Chinese officials are vigilant against using the Indo-Pacific Strategy as a regional concept at any open dialogue, particularly in the presence of foreign audiences. For example, the Indonesian government hosted officials from regional countries, including China, for a “High-Level Dialogue on Indo-Pacific Cooperation” in March 2019. PRC Vice Foreign Minister Kong Xuanyou (孔铨佑) participated in the conference and addressed the participants. Despite the fact that the central theme of

the dialogue was the “Indo-Pacific” concept, Kong refrained from referring to the term directly ([MFA](#), March 21, 2019).



*Image: PRC Deputy Foreign Minister Kong Xuanyou (left) speaks with Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi (right) during the “High-Level Dialogue on Indo-Pacific Cooperation” held in Jakarta in March 2019. As with other recent public appearances by PRC representatives, Kong was cautious in offering comments about “Indo-Pacific” affairs as a broader strategic concept. (Image source: [PRC Foreign Ministry](#))*

### **Wang Yi’s Remarks on the Indo-Pacific Strategy**

Notwithstanding the cautious approach to the Indo-Pacific concept, the PRC has begun to disclose how it considers the idea, and the implications for regional cooperation among countries involved. Specifically, two remarks made on the Indo-Pacific concept by Wang Yi (王毅)—holding the dual posts of PRC State Councilor and Foreign Minister—are remarkable, considering his influence in the government. At a press conference on the sidelines of the First Session of the Thirteenth National People’s Congress in March 2018, in response to a question on the Indo-Pacific and the QUAD, Wang said:

*It seems there is never a shortage of headline-grabbing ideas. They are like the sea foam in the Pacific or Indian Ocean. They may get some attention, but soon will dissipate. Contrary to the claim made by some academics and media outlets that the “Indo-Pacific Strategy” aims to contain China, the four countries’ official position is that it targets no one. I hope they mean what they say, and that their actions will match their rhetoric. Nowadays, stoking a new Cold War is out of sync with the times and inciting block confrontation will find no market ([Xinhua](#), March 8, 2018).*

Wang made further related comments when visiting Thailand to participate in the China-ASEAN Foreign Ministers’ meeting in July 2019. Responding to a question about his views on the Indo-Pacific concept, he said

that ASEAN, which released its own *Outlook on the Indo-Pacific* document the previous month, played a central role as the core of regional activities. Listing the principles that regional countries should respect, he said: “First, focus on East Asia and Asia, without affecting the existing cooperation mechanisms and achievements in the region; second, focus on cooperation and consensus, without engaging in geographic confrontation and games; third, focus on openness and inclusiveness, without forming factions or seeking small cliques.” He added that principles and ideas of ASEAN’s vision for regional cooperation are consistent with those of China ([MFA](#), July 31, 2019). The discourse by Wang highlights two features of Chinese thinking: first, it should be alert on the Indo-Pacific Strategy amid concerns of being excluded or treated as a target by the United States and its partners; and second (and conversely), the collective initiative likely lacks the clarity and impetus necessary to become an enduring concept.



*Image: Speaking at the National People’s Congress in March 2018, PRC Foreign Minister Wang Yi implied that unnamed countries were “stoking a new Cold War,” but avoided clear commentary about a broader regional “Indo-Pacific Strategy.” (Image source: [Xinhua](#))*

### **Beijing’s Cautious Pessimism About the Indo-Pacific Strategy**

The first feature is Beijing’s suspicion of the potential risk the Indo-Pacific Strategy would contain. In China, the Indo-Pacific Strategy advanced proactively by the U.S. and its allies is viewed principally as a countermeasure to undermine the BRI, and to weaken China’s growing influence. Vice-Foreign Minister Le Yucheng (乐玉成) has stated that China welcomes regional initiatives, but also added that “What we are firmly against is attempts to use the Indo-Pacific strategy as a tool to counter the BRI or even contain China” ([MFA](#), September 26, 2018). In addition, during an interview with the French media, PRC Ambassador to France Lu Shaye (卢沙野) expressed concerns regarding the Indo-Pacific Strategy on grounds that the initiative was originally proposed by Washington in order to compete with Beijing ([MFA](#), December 12, 2019).

Beijing also views the Indo-Pacific Strategy as an example of Washington's power politics, which are intended to impede Beijing's relationship with neighboring countries. In response to comments by U.S. Secretary of Defense Mark Esper that China is disturbing the Indo-Pacific region by its own deeds, MFA spokesperson Hua Chunying (华春莹) refuted the allegation, and further maintained that "For a long time the U.S. has been grossly interfering in the affairs of regional countries in the Asia Pacific. Politically, it has tried to drive a wedge between them by promoting the so-called 'Indo-Pacific strategy'" ([MFA](#), August 5, 2019).

Retired diplomat Wu Zhenglong (吴正龙), former ambassador to Croatia, believes that the objective of Washington's Indo-Pacific Strategy is to contain China's rise and offset its influence by consolidating the status of U.S. hegemony. He also asserts that solidarity among QUAD members is not strong enough for going ahead with the Indo-Pacific Strategy in concert ([Huanqiu](#), July 20, 2018). The *PLA Daily* shares a similar viewpoint: just after the U.S. Department of Defense issued the *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report* in June 2019, the newspaper stated that the United States would find it difficult to advance the strategy, as regional countries, including U.S. allies, are not sure of Washington's intentions; furthermore, they are concerned that the new strategy could bring regional instability in its aftermath. Thus, these countries are likely to be hesitant to follow the U.S. lead, and to work with each other ([PLA Daily](#), June 13, 2019).

A report on the Indo-Pacific Strategy published by a Chinese think-tank, the Institute for China-America Studies, echoes these views. It claims that the Indo-Pacific Strategy, aimed at containing China, will face tough challenges: not only because domestic burdens in Washington will impact the Indo-Pacific Strategy, but also because the United States and its allies will not function well together, pursuing individual interests rather than collective gains. This analysis concludes that the impact of the Indo-Pacific Strategy will be limited, to the extent that China can smoothly proceed with the BRI and develop its diplomatic ties with regional countries ([The Institute for China-America Studies](#), October 2019). From the Chinese point of view, the Indo-Pacific Strategy is not a sustainable concept in the long term.

### **Conclusion**

The Indo-Pacific Strategy as a regional concept has become widespread among many countries, and PRC diplomats have clearly noticed the narrative. Might China also decide to officially adopt such a regional idea? While it seems unlikely in the short-term, Beijing may discover that the Indo-Pacific as a regional concept prevails more widely and deeply among regional countries than the terms "Asia-Pacific" or "East Asia," which Beijing prefers to use. If the Indo-Pacific concept supported by the United States and Japan gains further traction, it will be necessary for China to address the Indo-Pacific concept more seriously in the future.

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### **Notes**

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[1] U.S. Department of Defense, *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region* (July 1, 2019), introductory preamble by Acting U.S. Secretary of Defense Patrick Shanahan. <https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jul/01/2002152311/-1/-1/1/DEPARTMENT-OF-DEFENSE-INDO-PACIFIC-STRATEGY-REPORT-2019.PDF>.

[2] U.S. State Department, *A Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision* (November 2019), pp. 5-6. <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Free-and-Open-Indo-Pacific-4Nov2019.pdf>.

[3] Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Towards Free and Open Indo-Pacific* (November 2019). <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000407643.pdf>.

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## China's Declining Birthrate and Changes in CCP Population Policies

By Linda Zhang

### Introduction

Demography may not be destiny, but China has always been conscious of rearing the next generation. One of the three unfilial acts, according to the ancient Chinese philosopher Mencius, is the failure to bear a son. The Chinese have traditionally viewed offspring as a form of wealth, and have placed immense value on fecundity. [1] Despite such traditional beliefs, in the years after the Cultural Revolution senior officials of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) feared that overpopulation would exhaust the country's scarce resources. In 1980, the CCP formally implemented the One Child Policy (独生子女政策, *Dusheng Zi Nu Zhengce*), or OCP, a national family planning policy that limited parents to only one child ([Xinhua](#), November 16, 2015).

However, after over three decades of efforts to reduce population growth, People's Republic of China (PRC) officials are now concerned about a shrinking workforce and an aging population. The CCP leadership repealed OCP in 2015, but the fertility rate in China is nowhere near pre-OCP levels. Furthermore, the PRC has seen a significant decline in birth rate in recent years (*see discussion below*). The true extent of the decline is impossible to verify, but the downward trend in birth numbers is worrisome. This article examines both official PRC statistics on total birth numbers for recent years, as well as discussions among Chinese netizens using unconfirmed statistics, to analyze the deep uncertainties surrounding China's demographic and political future.

### Discrepancies Between Official and Unofficial Sources Regarding China's Birth Rate

#### *Official PRC Sources and Foreign Academic Research*

Official PRC government statistics on birth rate are available from the PRC National Health Commission's *Yearbook of Health Statistics* (中国卫生健康统计年鉴, *Zhongguo Weisheng Jiankang Tongji Nianjian*), which reported that the number of live births in Chinese hospitals in 2018 was between 13.62 and 15.21 million ([China Yearbook Health Statistics Committee](#), August 2019). (The Health Commission has stated that the data discrepancy for 2018 was due to a change in the accounting for migrant populations.) In January 2020 the PRC National Bureau of Statistics reported an official 2019 total birth number of 14.65 million ([National Bureau of Statistics of China](#), January 17). These numbers, if true, indicate a plausible decline in numbers of births for the years 2018 and 2019.

A far starker assessment comes from the research of Dr. Yi Fu-xian, an obstetrician at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Dr. Yi, a known pessimist on Chinese population growth, has estimated that China saw 10 million births in 2018 (based on extrapolations of data sources such as the number of childbearing women and school enrollment figures). Yi's research was publicly cited in autumn 2019, but with the caveat that it would be impossible to assess a reliable count of the number of births before one or two additional census rounds in the PRC ([Wall Street Journal](#), October 31, 2019).



Image: Screenshots of web postings made by “Fuli Dao Ke” [复利刀客], a popular (although unofficial) online commentator on population issues, whose research went viral in postings made on the Chinese-language internet in late 2019. “Fuli Dao Ke” and other widely-read bloggers present figures that show a significant decline in the PRC birthrate between the years 2017-2019. (Source: [Weibo](#))

Unofficial Discussions on the Chinese-Language Internet

In December 2019 a thread went viral on the micro-blogging platforms Twitter and Weibo, which claimed that there were 10.16 million births in the PRC between January and November 2019—and concluded that the total number of annual births in the PRC would not exceed 11 million (Caixin, December 3, 2019). This number, if accurate, would represent the second-lowest number of births per year since the founding of the PRC in 1949. [2] The unsourced statistic implies an implausible decline of 4 million births from official 2018 numbers; it is also 3 million less than the official 2019 number of 14.65 million released by the PRC National Bureau of Statistics in January (National Bureau of Statistics of China, January 17).

A frequently shared post on Twitter and Weibo gives an unsourced list of the number of births in China from 1949 to 2019. The poster, who uses the pseudonym of Fuli Dao Ke [复利刀客] and has over half a million followers, claims to be the Chief Health Analyst with an organization called Cheng Hong Research. [3] (See accompanying graphic above.) The last entry of the Weibo chart concludes: “As of November 17, 2019, [the number of total births] is 10.16 million. Based on this year’s monthly birth rate, predictions for the number of

newborn infants next month will not exceed 1 million. Thus the 2019 birth population is about 11 million. The population has steeply declined” ([Weibo](#), undated).

The underlying source for the 11 million number is unclear. One possible source is research conducted by Dr. Ren Zeping (任泽平), Chief Economist and Director of the Evergrande Think Tank (恒大研究院, *Hengda Yanjiuyuan*). Dr. Ren argued in October 2019 that the number of women of peak childbearing age (20-35) will decrease by 41 percent between 2018 and 2030. He predicted that under these demographic conditions, the number of births in 2030 will be 11 million ([Finance World](#), October 4, 2019).

The statistics taken from the posting listed above, while unsourced, are plausible. According to the Weibo figures, there were 17.23 million total births in 2017—the first year that the “Open Two Child Policy” (开放二胎政策, *Kaifang Er Hai Zhengce*) saw its full effect—and 15.23 million total births in 2018. Calculations made by the author of this article, based on numbers from the official 2019 *China Health Statistics Yearbook*, yielded comparable results where data was available: 17.28 million total births in 2017 and 15.27 million total births in 2018. (The Yearbook lacks data for the year 2019, as well as many previous years.) China’s National Bureau of Statistics collects data on a yearly basis for its annual handbook; other government ministries such as the National Health Service collect data for a variety of other demographic indicators on a monthly basis, but official sources are rarely pegged to a specific date. Therefore, it is worth noting that the “November 17” timestamp makes this already-odd Weibo dataset even stranger.

*Whatever the Estimate, China’s Birth Numbers are Declining*

Regardless of the source—and despite the fact that the lowest range of estimates (10-11 million births) is questionable—both official sources and unconfirmed online discussions indicate that China’s birth rate is declining over time. This has occurred despite government intervention efforts: the Chinese state has tried to incentivize births by establishing a pilot marriage consumption subsidy fund, and cancelling the late marriage leave policy (almost all Chinese births occur within marriage) ([SCMP](#), August 24, 2019). Demographers have hung their hopes on government policies, traditional family planning wisdoms, and even zodiac superstition to increase birth numbers. [4]



*Image: A couple in Liaoning Province holds their newborn second child, in this photo from an article in state media promoting the benefits of the new “Open Two Child Policy” introduced in 2016. (Source: [China Daily](#))*

Despite government policies encouraging childbirth since the repeal of the OCP in 2015, PRC citizens have shown themselves to be resistant to having more children ([Caixin](#), December 20, 2018). The fertility rate in China remained virtually unchanged in 2016 and 2017 even though families were allowed to have two children those years ([World Bank](#), July 6, 2018). Three primary explanations exist for this phenomenon, as discussed further below.

### **Three Reasons for China’s Declining Birth Rate**

The high cost of raising a child in China is the most notable explanation for this decline. An analyst from the CCP Central Party School has stated that almost 80 percent of Chinese couples want two children, but only 3 percent follow through ([East Asia Forum](#), April 19, 2017). The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences estimated in 2005 that the average cost of raising a child from birth until 16 years old was approximately \$75,200. In the same year, the PRC’s annual per capita disposable income was about \$3,070, which explains why many Chinese households consider child-raising an unaffordable financial burden ([China Daily](#), July 15, 2016).

As China’s economy has slowed, average wages stagnated while the cost of living rose drastically. We can extrapolate that the budgeting difficulties of procreation are even more severe today than in 2005. Parents fret about giving a child the tools to be successful in the competitive Chinese economy, which may include expensive after school classes in math, foreign languages, and extracurricular activities, as well as other child-associated costs including healthcare, real estate, and dowries. The meager subsidies that local governments provide (such as free or subsidized infant formula) do not come close to covering these expenses ([Xinhua](#), January 19, 2019). Parents rely on grandparents to provide childcare (if the grandparents are available to do so), but even so, they must scrimp and save to support one child.

The second major reason is the outcome of a predictable demographic trend. Following the implementation of OCP in 1980, China's national birth rate declined substantially throughout the 1980s and 1990s. [5] Hence, the number of women at peak childbearing age today were themselves born during a period of demographic contraction. Even if birth rates were to increase slightly from year to year, the total number of births per year in China is still on a downward trend because of the decline in women of childbearing age. In addition, there was an observable "pile-on effect" in the two years immediately after the repeal of the One Child Policy; this means that women who were older and were not originally planning to give birth again took the opportunity to have a second child ([Sixth Tone](#), February 14, 2019). This "pile-on" represents a one-time statistical aberration, and its impact will decline as couples adjust their family planning according to the new family planning policy changes.

The third factor is China's ongoing problems of sexism and misandry, which exacerbate the decline in the number of births. Workplace discrimination towards women is illegal in theory, but common in practice. [6] Women are traditionally seen as childcare providers, and companies perceive women as less dedicated to their jobs after childbirth. Companies also balk at paying the high financial and time costs of maternity leave ([Xinhua](#), July 4, 2019). As the most educated generation of Chinese women enter the workforce ([Journal of Development Economics](#), 2013), they must decide to either leave their jobs to raise a family, or else delay childbirth in order to focus on their careers. It would require a large cultural shift to create a society where women can raise children and still be successful at work.

### **Addendum—The Implications of Birth Rate Decline in Xinjiang**

The birth number decline in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region is worthy of discussion even though it only accounts for a small percentage of the total decline in number of births ([Chyxx.com](#), archived July 9, 2019). The number of births in Xinjiang decreased dramatically from 388,000 in 2017 to 261,000 in 2018. This decrease is almost certainly linked to the mass imprisonment of Uighurs in the province, and is concentrated in areas with a high Turkic minority population: cities such as Altay and Changji saw a larger decline as compared to areas with a larger Han population such as Kashgar and Hotan. (Urumqi even saw a slight increase in births.) This decline is even more notable because the net population growth in Hotan and Kashgar was higher by approximately 8 percent in the years before the crackdown, although some of this growth is due to Han migration into Xinjiang as a part of the government's "Go West" campaign ([Journal of Political Risk](#), November 2019). PRC repressive policy measures directed against minority groups also risk stunting population growth in the poorer inland provinces.

### **Conclusion**

Online discussions regarding falling birth rates provide a jarring reminder of the rapid shift of China's demographic situation in recent years. Furthermore, the gap between official and unofficial birth numbers may reflect a broader lack of confidence in government statistics among Chinese netizens. This demographic

mystery may not be satisfactorily resolved until after the next PRC census in 2020, and after the Chinese government publishes school enrollment numbers in the next decade (when the most recent population data will be available, and can be compared to school enrollment numbers). China's implementation of the One Child Policy was an unprecedented case of state-led family planning, and seemed effective in the short run. In the long run, however, China is continuing to struggle with the ramifications of its population management efforts, and its citizens are taking note.

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### **Notes**

[1] See Khan, Sulmann Wasif, *Haunted by Chaos: China's Grand Strategy from Mao Zedong to Xi Jinping*, Harvard University Press, 2018, pp. 138.

[2] The lowest number of births per year (11.87 million) was recorded in 1961, the last year of China's great famine. See: "China's Birth Rate Falls to Near 60-Year Low, with 2019 Producing Fewest Babies Since 1961," Sidney Leung, *South China Morning Post*, January 17, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/economy/china-economy/article/3046481/chinas-birth-rate-falls-near-60-year-low-2019-producing>.

[3] As of the time of publishing, 'Fuli Dao Ke' was a verified 'Big V' account, with over 1 million posts and over half a million followers on Weibo. The viral post has since been taken down. Preliminary searches by the author were unable to yield additional information on the organization "Cheng Hong Research Center."

[4] 2019, the Year of the Pig, was an auspicious year for births, because "pig babies" are thought to be energetic, hard-working, and successful in life. See: "Will a Boom in Lucky 'Pig' Babies Reverse China's Fertility Slump?" Teng Jing Xuan, *South China Morning Post*, December 20, 2018, <https://www.caixinglobal.com/2018-12-20/will-a-boom-in-lucky-pig-babies-reverse-chinas-fertility-slump-101361611.html>. Despite widespread superstition about the relative auspiciousness of different zodiac years, Ma Yan from the Institute of Sociology at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences did not find a correlation between birth rates and zodiac signs in his analysis of birthrate data between 1949 and 2008. See: "For China's Birthrate, This May Be a Bad Sign," Julie Makinen, *Los Angeles Times*, January 19, 2015, <https://www.latimes.com/world/asia/la-fg-china-zodiac-babies-20150119-story.html>.

[5] For more information on the socio-cultural impact of the OCP, see discussion surrounding the 2019 documentary "One Child Nation," by filmographer Wang Nan-fu, which gives a comprehensive summary of the OCP and China's gender disparity issues: "'One Child Nation' Finds Victims on All Sides of China's Restrictive Policy," Steve Dollar, November 11, 2019, *Los Angeles Times*, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/movies/story/2019-11-07/one-child-nation-finds-victims-on-all-sides-of-chinas-restrictive-policy>.

[6] China's recent 'Me Too' (or 米兔, *mitu*) movement has revealed systemic problems with sexism. For details, see: Jiayang Fan, "China's #MeToo Moment," *The New Yorker*, February 1, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/chinas-me-too-moment>.

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