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Demographics: China's Achilles' heel?

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Demographics: China's Achilles' heel?

Source: Population & Avenir, No. 690, Nov.-Dec. 2008, www.population-demographie.org/revue03.htm ; www.cairn.info/revue-population-et-avenir.htm www.cairn-int.info/journal-population-et-avenir.htm)

China seems to be moving from strength to strength¹: economic changes, successful organisation of the Olympic games in August 2008, becoming the world's third Space power, in September 2008, with the launching of three taikonauts welcomed triumphantly on their return... But, in the long run, its Achilles' heel could well be demographics: in the course of this century, the Middle Kingdom will be faced with difficult problems.

By Gérard-François Dumont



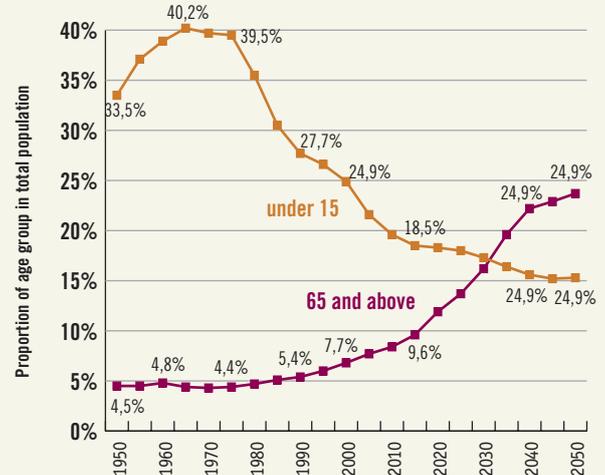
Professor at the University of Paris IV-Sorbonne ; President of the journal *Population & Avenir*.

Indeed, China's population trends and prospects are characterised by major challenges which the country will need to tackle.

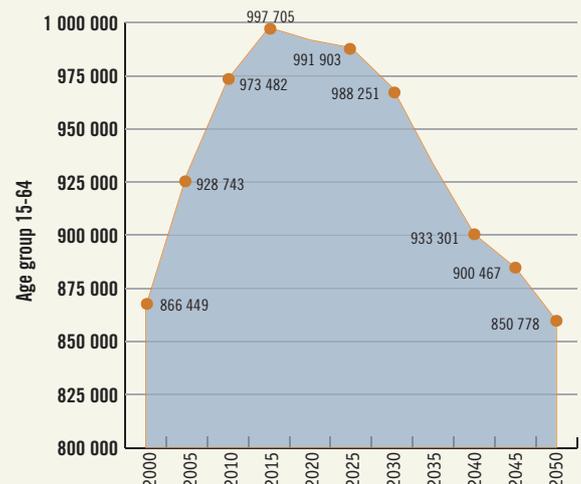
- ◆ The first one concerns the degree and speed of ageing in the population. The proportion of young people fell markedly between the 1970s and the 2000s. It could continue to decline into the 2010s and after, even if this trend might decelerate in the future. Meanwhile, the proportion of older people started to rise in the 1980s. After being multiplied by three between 1985 and 2028, this proportion could overtake that of young people by the beginning of the 2030s. Such developments would mean that the number of people aged 65 and above would rise from 100 million in 2005 to 333 million in 2050, requiring extensive old age policies.
- ◆ The general ageing of the Chinese population is coupled with both an ageing and a reduction of the workforce. Taking age group 15-64 as the potential work force, its size could decrease as from 2015. Even if China has some margin, through such actions as improving agricultural productivity or training workers from the countryside, the quantitative effect could still come into play.
- ◆ More generally, the trends observed in China could induce a decrease in its population, in other words a depopulation, either after 2035, under intermediate assumptions, or already in 2025, in a worst-case scenario. As a consequence, China could end up with a lower population than India², which could then argue that being the largest population in the world would justify a better place in the geopolitical concert³, for example within the UN leading bodies.
- ◆ The trends observed so far are explained, in particular, by an increasing disequilibrium in the relative numbers of men and women. It has always been the case, for biological

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1. AGEING IN CHINA



2. CHINA'S POTENTIAL WORKFORCE



reasons, that the sex ratio at birth is normally of 105 boys for 100 girls. In China, however, the population policy, characterised by the so-called one-child policy, disrupted this universal principle by introducing a sex bias in parents' preferences, through abortion or infanticide. As a result, the deficit in girls⁴ is sizeable, with significant consequences.

- ◆ A further challenge lies in other imbalances, whether among provinces, in terms of settlements or standards of living, or with respect to the attitude of the authorities towards ethnic minority groups⁵, such as the Uyghur, the Manchus, the Mongols or the Tibetans.

As Alain Peyrefitte foresaw⁶, China has woken up. Which does not mean that the future will be smooth, plain sailing, either for itself or for all those nations in the world which aspire to live in peace with this great country. ☺

(Translation: Sylvie Vanston)

1. However, media echoed less favourable developments during 2008, such as problems of food safety, like the scandal of adulterated milk in Sichuan, or reports of people buried after a dam burst in an iron ore storage pond.

2. Dumont, Gérard-François, « L'Inde, le nouveau milliardaire », *Population & Avenir*, n° 677, March-April 2006.

3. Dumont, Gérard-François, *Démographie politique. Les lois de la géopolitique des populations*, Paris, Ellipses, 2007.

4. Sullerot, Evelyne, « La Chine, géographie ethnique et mutations démographiques », *Population & Avenir*, n° 671, Jan-Feb 2005.

5. Representing about 8 % of the population, compared with 92 % for the Han.

6. *Quand la Chine s'éveillera... le monde tremblera*, Le livre de poche, Paris, 1980.