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## THE WIDER WORLD

### Demographic Crises and Global Conflict

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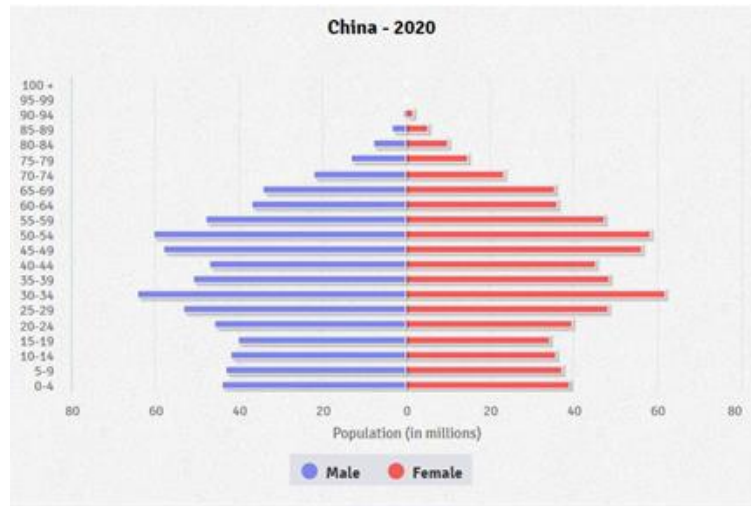
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Some things in the world seem relatively easy to understand at first glance. The example of China's long-held "One Child" policy seems straightforward. To prevent the continued exponential rise in its enormous population, the authoritarian communist government enacted a policy in 1980 prohibiting couples from having more than one child. It was possible to do so in China because autocracies can rule by fiat and do not need the consent of the governed, as democracies do. This policy ended in 2016, although by 1982 China's population had already reached one billion.

As with many major policy decisions, this one had unintended consequences, or in U.S. defense lingo, "third-order effects." When policy decisions are made, they are intended to address the immediate problem, but often cause new or even bigger problems down the road. As Chinese culture is paternalistic and masculine-oriented, baby boys were considered a *big* blessing over baby girls, who are just a *small* blessing.

There were many reasons for this including boys carrying on the family name and in rural areas, boys were needed as agricultural labor. Girls were often given up for adoption in the best cases, terminated or killed soon after birth in the worst. This would free up a couple to try again for a boy. This simple policy has left



China with too many males unable to find wives, as illustrated by the graphic.<sup>[1]</sup>

It is often said in sociology that the most dangerous thing in the world is human males aged 15 to 25. This is the point when they begin to desire mates and if there are none available, lots of bad things can happen in society. Harvard professor [Steven Pinker](#) discusses the “civilizing influence of women,” at length in his 2011 tome on violence in western history.

In our own modern culture, the derisive term “incel” is applied to men who are involuntarily celibate. These are the prototype of angry young men who develop misogynistic feelings and behaviors because women reject them. They tend to become antisocial loners or join in bands that can become violent, such as gangs or terrorist groups.

In most western societies, this issue is managed through a requirement to stay in school until at least age 16, with the intention of enticing them to complete high school and remain in education for another four years or learn a trade to earn an income that would support a stable lifestyle and make them attractive mates. Another option provided is military service, where strict discipline is instilled to ensure positive social behaviors.

In China, the preponderance of males under the age of 43 has created a demographic crisis. Chinese only-child males are often called “little emperors,” as they are so beloved and spoiled by their parents, especially in the affluent cities, that they can behave with impunity and often have too many resources at their disposal. The government has found a number of ways to deal with this crisis that have the added positive consequence of supporting China’s unique economic and military growth.

When a Chinese company expands its market abroad, it often provides loans to less-developed countries to purchase its telecommunications and transportation technology, or to exploit its energy sector. In addition to the technology, the country gets Chinese technicians who may stay for years to support the implementation, training, and maintenance of the new products and processes as well as providing marketing support that increases the country's dependence on and debt to China. This approach also enables China to export men.

In the 1990s, another demographic export approach was born, providing personnel to serve in United Nations peacekeeping missions. In those past 30 years, China has sent over 50,000 to over 20 missions.<sup>[iii]</sup> We could devote an entire piece to the peacekeeping industry, and might in the near future, but for now, be advised that this is a way for countries to exert "soft power" by supporting global security and stabilization. It is also a way to get troublemakers out of the country.

This excess number of unmated men has fueled a sex trade, resulting in tens of thousands of women being trafficked from North Korea who think they are escaping a brutal life at home and learn there is a far worse fate awaiting them. Most become prostitutes, but many others become brides mainly in poor rural areas, which has led to a rise in domestic violence.

Even without One Child policies, similar demographic crises are affecting many developing countries today. In very traditional societies, with large Muslim minorities for instance, again mainly in more rural areas, genders are kept separate in the community, in places of worship, in schools, and even in different areas of the home. These separations of men and women after the age at which the woman becomes able to bear children (sometimes as young as 11), permits few opportunities, even among siblings in some cases, for young men to meet women and get to know them enough to value them as people.

This circumstance coupled with lack of economic opportunity leaves a large number of men unable to afford to support a family and creates incels, who became even more misogynistic than their cultures would have engendered. Added to this, across Africa, bride prices often prohibited men from finding suitable wives. A bride price is similar to our arcane custom of dowry in which the groom's family pays a price set by the bride's family to fulfill the marriage contract. In Nigeria, for instance, this can include money, livestock, or even servants. The money is kept by the bride's family as a guarantee that she will be treated well or if not, she will have some compensation and her own assets if there is a divorce.

However, male members of a bride's family will often keep the assets and not make them available to her, forcing her to stay in an unhappy or even dangerous

marriage due to a lack of resources. Some grooms also see the price as a payment for property, which results in maltreatment and even rape. Inflation raises the bride price and lack of economic opportunity can impoverish men and their families to the point where they cannot afford any price for a bride. This is one of the drivers of conflict in Nigeria and other areas in Africa. Remember the 2014 kidnapping of 276 Chibok school girls?<sup>[iii]</sup> Many of them were forced to become brides of Boko Haram fighters, a perk of joining a violent extremist group.

This frustration makes incels prime targets for recruitment by violent Islamic extremist organizations who prefer a traditional culture with invisible women, one that existed a thousand years ago, when they believe the Middle East and North Africa were at their cultural zenith, before western interference. These groups often promise the recruit that his income (yes, terrorists get paid a salary) and enhanced status as a fighter will make him more attractive to women and their families. For the ultimate sacrifice, the reward is pleasing Allah and receiving 72 virgins in paradise. It should be noted that at least one scholar says this is a misinterpretation and that the correct translation is not virgins, but raisins.<sup>[iv]</sup>

The dilemma of the unmated male forced into celibacy is not restricted to the developing world. Even though we do not have bride price, or typically even dowry payments anymore, many men in the Western world are simply not eligible bachelors. Western women do have access to education and are permitted to work and earn their own incomes. They would prefer a mate who matches their education and earning capacity. This failure of young men to launch is often a factor driving the radicalization of white supremacists and “lone wolf” shooters, who are rarely actually “lone,” but have typically been encouraged by an online community of similarly situated others.<sup>[v]</sup>

While China is an example of the unintended consequences of government intervention in family planning, the resulting crisis is not singular. The other examples help explain the failure of the War on Terror, which viewed all violent Islamic extremist groups as part of a single phenomenon, when the root causes in each case tended to be more about resident grievances, such as poverty, poor governance, localized conflict, and perhaps widespread failed romance, that we were not culturally prepared to explore and understand.

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Diane Chido is an Erie native who spent her early career in Washington, D.C, returning to found DC Analytics, a research and analysis firm. She has taught Intelligence Studies at Mercyhurst University, Political Science at Gannon University, and Cultural Analysis at the US Army War College and has conducted research for numerous US defense agencies. She holds an MS in Applied Intelligence Analysis, an MA in Russian Language, and a BA in International Relations and Soviet Studies.



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