In the past few years, the coercive and inhumane nature of China's population control policy has become impossible to deny. The policy has met with widespread resistance in China, especially from peasant women, who, despite the threat of heavy
financial and other penalties, continue to bear more than the officially permitted one or two children, hoping to produce a son to carry on the family line and to provide security in old age. As a result of the regime’s draconian policy, girls (as well as handicapped infants) are increasingly “thrown away,” through sex-selective abortion, abandonment, and infanticide. By some estimates, the number of “missing girls” (reflected in the abnormally high ratio of male infants to female ones) has been growing by more than one million a year. In some regions of the country, Kay Johnson, a professor of Asian studies and politics at Hampshire College, Amherst, Mass., writes in Population and Development Review (Mar. 1996), “there is mounting evidence” that female infants are being abandoned by the tens of thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands, each year.

Originally, in 1979, China’s communist regime adopted a policy of limiting births to one per family. Unless couples obtained an official permit, they were not supposed to have a child, and a woman who became pregnant without a permit was obliged to have an abortion. Despite extensive efforts at enforcement, overall compliance with the policy was low. During the late 1980s, the regime slightly relaxed the formal policy, permitting rural couples whose first child was a girl to have a second child. At the same time, however, the regime stepped up enforcement.

In Hunan Province, in south-central China, Johnson says, the local cadres charged with implementing the unpopular decrees were caught between the strong desires of their fellow villagers and the stern demands of the authorities. The cadres often coped by turning a blind eye to abandonment of infant girls, and simply required that couples end up with no more than the authorized number of children.

Among the abandoned infants housed in state-run welfare centers, Johnson notes, death rates are high: more than 40 percent in some of the major orphanages and as high as 80 percent in some of the smaller, more remote, or more poorly equipped ones. But, she points out, “even a well-equipped and devoted orphanage staff would face a daunting task.” Many of the children “are in critical condition when they arrive, due to exposure, dehydration, malnutrition,” and other afflictions. “It is likely that many abandoned infants die before they are recovered or that they are not recovered at all.”

The “dying rooms” (as a 1995 British TV documentary termed the orphanages) are not “just a matter of bad institutional management, as some Western observers have asserted,” says John S. Aird, a former U.S. Census Bureau senior research specialist on China and author of Slaughter of the Innocents: Coercive Birth Control in China (1990). “The real problem,” he declares in the American Enterprise (Mar.–Apr. 1996), “is the Chinese government’s attitude toward the orphans. China’s leaders consider these children ‘surplus’ population. . . . To these authorities, the death of orphans is nothing to regret, because it furthers their objective of reduced population growth.”

The current birth control crackdown, launched in 1991, is regarded in Beijing as highly successful. Last October, it was announced that China’s population growth was actually below the state targets from 1991 through 1994 and could be as much as 15 million persons below target by the end of 1995. “Still,” Aird notes, “the authorities warn the local cadres not to relax their family planning enforcement.”

City in the Chips


During the British Raj, the south Indian city of Bangalore, located on a cool, lush plateau 3,000 feet above sea level, a haven from the torrid coastal cities, was a favorite retirement spot for senior colonial officers. Today, with a growing population of nearly five million and a booming computer software industry, the onetime “Pensioner’s Paradise” has become the subcontinent’s “Silicon City,” reports Stremlau, a staff adviser at the Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict.

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