



## China's Drop in Population Has Implications for the World

*The Wired Word for the Week of January 29, 2022*

### In the News

For the first time in six decades, China's population failed to grow in 2022. In fact, it dropped by about 850,000 people according to that country's National Bureau of Statistics.

This makes it likely that China is now no longer the most populous country in the world and that India now holds that distinction. With a reported population of 1.41175 billion in 2022, China likely trails behind India's estimated 1.412 billion in 2022.

The "likely" is because of differences in when the two countries conduct their census. China's is from last year whereas India, which normally counts its population every 10 years, did not do so in 2021, due to the pandemic, and still has not conducted it.

But the fall in China's population, the first such drop since 1961, the last year of China's great famine, is expected to have negative repercussions in that country, especially given that population researchers now expect China's population to shrink by 109 million by 2050, more than triple the decline projected in 2019.

Thus, some of China's own demographers worry that "China will get old before it gets rich" due to soaring health and welfare costs, a shrinking in the labor force and a resulting downturn in productivity. All of this could yield higher prices and inflation in the United States and Europe, experts say.

India, in contrast, has seen its worker-population-ratio (WPR) in 2020-21 increase to 52.6% over 46.8% in 2017-18, reflecting higher engagement of people in productive activities. For comparison, the U.S. [employment-population ratio](#) is 60.1%, down from a high of 63.4% in December 2006.

The head of China's national statistics bureau dismissed the concerns about that country's WPR, saying "overall labor supply still exceeds demand," but if true, it's unclear whether that will continue to be the case.

Contributing to China's population decline is the country's falling birth rate -- just 6.77 births per 1,000 people last year, down from 7.52 births per 1,000 people in 2021. The 2022 rate is the lowest birth rate on

record in China. The country's death rate has also risen. For reference, the current [U.S. birth rate](#) is 12.023 per 1,000 people.

Some of the fall in birth rate can be attributed to the country's one-child policy, which was in place from 1980 to 2015. That, coupled with a traditional preference for boys, has created an imbalance in sexes, with latest data showing 722 males and 690 females. In contrast, birth rates are up in India.

Some economists estimate that China's high GDP growth rate between 2000 and 2021 will now slow to between 2% and 5%

China's repeated crackdowns on the private sector and strict zero-Covid lockdowns have also wreaked mayhem on supply chains, as has its oppression (some call it genocide) of its Uighur Muslim population. Oppression of Christians and other religious groups also does not encourage population growth.

China's years of high GDP growth meant that its economy ballooned more than tenfold between the turn of the century and 2021, from \$1.2 trillion to nearly \$18 trillion, according to World Bank data. By contrast, the GDP of the United States, the world's largest economy, is a little more than double its size in 2000.

Economist Michael Pettis, a Beijing-based senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace told *Al Jazeera* that focusing on GDP numbers risks missing the forest for the trees, because such figures only give an incomplete, time-delayed picture of the Chinese economy. "The high-growth era seems to be ending now as per the numbers, but actually, in terms of productive investment, it ended around 10 to 15 years ago," Pettis said.

More on this story can be found at these links:

[China's First Population Drop in Six Decades Sounds Alarm on Demographic Crisis. Reuters](#)

[India's Worker-Population-Ratio Rises to 52.6% in FY21. Fortune India](#)

[Is China's High-Growth Era Over -- Forever? Al Jazeera](#)

[UN Members Condemn China Over Abuse of Uighurs in Xinjiang. Al Jazeera](#)

### **Applying the News Story**

While there are lots of political and economic concerns raised by the population decline in China, this news gives us a chance to explore the idea, promoted strongly by Christianity, that every human being is a precious child of God. That idea is what political scientist Glenn Tinder, in his book, *The Political Meaning of Christianity*, says is the moral center of Western politics. But it's so easy to lose sight of that preciousness when we count people by the millions. This lesson gives us a chance to refresh that belief.

### **The Big Questions**

1. How does the belief in human worth help in cases where lives must be considered on both sides of the equation? In other words, when taking one life might prevent the loss of another life? What examples of life against life can you think of?
2. Why do we count the death of a human being as a greater loss than the death of an individual member of any other species on earth? Why do we often consider the deaths of the young as greater tragedies than the deaths of persons in old age?
3. Who or what establishes the ultimate worth of all human beings?
4. Are all humans of equal worth in your eyes? Why or why not?
5. Are all humans of equal worth in God's eyes? Why or why not?

### **Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope**

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

### **Matthew 10:29-31**

*Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.* (For context, read [Matthew 10:5-31](#).)

The context for this remark from Jesus starts with verse 5, where Jesus began his instructions to the Twelve prior to sending them out on a preaching and healing mission to the cities of Israel. Jesus knew it was going to be a difficult task, and Jesus told them to expect not only trouble but even persecution. In that light, Jesus told them not to fear those who can kill the body, but to press on doing God's will so as to gain eternity.

In making his point, Jesus commented about sparrows, which had so little value that two were sold for a penny. But not even these insignificant creatures could fall to the ground, said Jesus, without God's knowledge. And then he adds the words of the verse quoted above: "... you are of more value than many sparrows."

**Questions:** Jesus' statement is a comparative one and does not explicitly say "you are of more value than all the rest of creation." So is it an unreasonable jump to understand it as meaning that humans are of great worth? Why or why not?

### **Genesis 1:26-28**

*Then God said, "Let us make humans in our image, according to our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over the cattle and over all the wild animals of the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." So God created humans in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth."* (No context needed.)

This verse from the creation story summarizes God's creative act in making humankind. But he made them -- us -- "in the image of God." Some theological interpretations of that phrase suggest that the "image of God" means a certain quality or character granted to humans -- in short, the soul. Others argue that it means a role or task assigned to humanity. But still others see it as a definition of humankind that refers to the sanctity and inherent worth of every human being as a whole person. In other words, the value of the person is not just because of his or her soul, but because God has stamped his image in some way on the person's entire being.

Whatever the interpretation of the phrase, note that the passage containing this description of the creation of humanity ends with these words: "God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good."

**Questions:** Which of the suggested interpretations of "the image of God" makes the most sense to you? Why?

### **Psalms 8:4-5**

*... what are humans that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God and crowned them with glory and honor.* (For context, read [Psalm 8:1-9](#).)

This psalm contains the clearest statement in scripture about the worth of human beings -- mortals, as they are called here. They -- we -- are made just "a little lower than God." It should be noted, however, that the psalm is not in praise of humankind, but in sweeping praise of God. The psalmist observes that humans have a high place in the creation, so much so that they have been given "dominion of the works of [God's] hands" (v. 6).

Yet compared to the divine majesty of the Creator, "what are humans ...?" The psalmist has an appropriate sense of the ranking of humankind -- of great worth when compared to the rest of creation -- but far less than God. Though he says mortals are only "a little lower than God" that "little lower" is a huge and unbridgeable gap. We, the created, have great worth because he, the Creator, wants it that way.

**Questions:** In what kinds of actions do we show that we are only "a little lower than God"? What is the challenge for us in this psalm?

## **Psalm 139:14**

*I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.* (For context, read [Psalm 139:13-18](#).)

The imagery in verses 13-18 provides a picture of God the Giver of Life, forming and shaping the psalmist himself while in his mother's womb, leading the psalmist to exclaim, "I am fearfully and wonderfully made." (By "fearfully" the psalmist means that the contemplation of God's life-giving act has filled the psalmist with awe.) This verse presents the biblical view that human life is not merely the result of biology, but the result of God's intentional will and work. By inference then, human life is of great worth to God.

**Questions:** How is the worth God has assigned you expressed in your everyday life? What is the implication of this passage for how you treat others?

## **For Further Discussion**

1. Is the population decline in China a matter that should concern you? Why or why not?
2. Respond to this, from TWW team member Mary Sells: "My take on [the China population story] can be akin to the loss of practicing Christians. What happens to the effectiveness and power of the church when it loses its audience? Presumably China could have challenges holding its grip on 'manufactory to the world' when it has fewer people to fill its businesses, which also affects its financial strength in the world economy.  
"I have observed and experienced the shuttering of Catholic churches and 'job sharing' where priests are serving multiple parishes since there are also fewer priests. Fewer priests, fewer churches, less money to put into parishes and good works (hospitals, education, charitable efforts, etc.). Are we reacting to the issue as well as creating part of the spiral?"
3. Discuss this, from a reader's review of [The Political Meaning of Christianity](#), by Glenn Tinder: "The heart of Tinder's book is his claim that the Christian tradition, properly understood, makes it obligatory upon believers to recognize two fundamental, and tension-filled, claims. First, that as God calls upon us to emulate his love, and to treat all human beings as the exalted individuals they are, it is incumbent that we strive to fully respect human liberty, and to establish societies wherein real communities of love may exist. Second, that as fallen creatures we are not only too sinful to ever will such communities into existence, but we will be too limited in our ability to see beyond ourselves so to avoid doing harm to others -- treating them instrumentally, as a means, rather than as the God-graced ends each and every individual most fully is -- when we go about the whole business of establishing societies."
4. What economic and/or political policies ought the United States pursue toward China in light of its population drop?
5. Consider this: [One report on immigration and China](#) notes, "For immigrants and returning migrants, there has been a narrow focus on migration's economic benefits, while broader questions of integration and societal diversity remain unaddressed. Pathways for permanent residence remain extremely limited. Despite China's looming demographic crisis, there is also little long-term planning for future immigration that might be needed to offset consequences of population aging."  
TWW team member Frank Ramirez comments, "One of the interesting factors, in my mind, in China's decline, is its ethnically homogenous population, alongside its disdain for ethnic diversity. Consider the persecution of certain minorities. Birth rates go down with a rise in education and prosperity as a matter of course, but in a healthy country immigrants not only take jobs that the more established population disdains, but they also have lots of children. As controversial as immigration is in our society, it's essential for growth economically. And we need all the children to pay into the social safety net for the benefit of an aging population that does not have as many children as their elders."

## **Responding to the News**

Some time this week, communicate with someone you know in a way that makes it clear that you believe he or she is of inestimable value and precious in God's sight.

## **Prayer**

Help us, O Lord, to value each person as you do. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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