China’s total fertility rate (TFR) has been well under the replacement rate of 2.1 births per mother since the 1990s. Currently it is about 1.4-1.5, in stark contrast to about 6 in 1970. Often people attribute most of this reduction to China’s mandatory one-child policy launched in 1980. Many believe that China’s population kept growing fast prior to 1980 because Chairman Mao viewed population as a strength, thus making it impossible to impose strict limits on fertility until after his death in 1976. Advocates of the one-child policy claim that it prevented at least 400 million births, and that China and the world benefited as a result. Professor Martin K. Whyte, professor of international studies and sociology at Harvard, calls these generalizations misleading or even dead wrong, and he sets out to correct them.

Mao’s attitude toward birth control changed back and forth over time. A statement he made in 1949 declared that an even larger population than China had then would be capable of feeding itself through increased production. But by 1957 Mao began to believe that mankind was completely incapable of managing its population, therefore planning was needed not only for factory production but also for human reproduction. Then in 1958 during the Great Leap Forward, when sheer will power was believed to be able to defy natural laws, Mao reverted to the proposition that a growing population was not a problem. But after 1960 in light of wide-spread famine, Mao changed his mind again and supported birth control. A government Birth Planning Commission was set up in 1964, and China developed its own birth control pill and distributed free contraceptives through national networks.

After 1970, the State Council mandated a sharp reduction of population growth rates and implemented a policy of "later, longer and fewer," which promoted marriage at a later age, longer spacing between births, and limits of 2 children for urban and 3 for rural families. Abusive coercion was used to enforce these limits during the 1970s, when Mao was still in charge. As a consequence, birth control procedures—-IUD insertions, sterilizations, and abortions—dramatically increased. China’s TFR went from 6 in 1970 to 2.7-2.8 by the end of the decade, constituting 70% of the total drop in fertility from 1970 to the present.

After the one-child policy was launched, sharp increases in coercive enforcement occurred, with the rate of abortions, IUD insertions, and sterilizations peaking in 1983. Nevertheless, for most of 1980s China’s fertility fluctuated but remained above replacement level. A revised marriage law in 1980 precipitated a drop of marriage ages by 2 full years, resulting in a temporary upswing in births. China’s birth rate only resumed
its decline at the end of the 1980s, but by then rapid economic development had become the main driver, not birth limits.

If the one-child policy was not responsible for most of the reduction of fertility in China and caused much so suffering, why was this policy launched in 1980? Deng Xiaoping and the people around him were eager to find ways to accelerate economic growth on a per capita basis, leading to a demand for even stricter birth limits—the one-child policy. Song Jian, a Chinese rocket scientist influenced by Western doomsday predictions of the mid-1970s, provided a scientific-sounding rationale for tighter limits. In his computer projections, a one-child policy was needed to enable China to reach its supposedly "optimal" population of 700 million in 2080 (even though China in 1980 already had close to 1 billion people).

The one-child policy also did not prevent 400 million births. This claim is based on a straight-line projection of the birth rates from 1950 to 1970 and beyond. This projection ignores the fact that most of China’s fertility reduction occurred before the one-child policy was launched, and that China’s dramatic post-1978 economic development would have rapidly reduced birth rates without the policy. All of China's East Asian neighbors attained their present, sub-replacement fertility levels through voluntary family planning programs and rapid economic growth, without the coercive abuses inflicted on the Chinese people.

Low fertility is now increasingly problematic for China. The "demographic dividend" that China enjoyed in the past - a reduced birth rate but an increasing labor force - has run out. China’s population is forecast to start shrinking before 2030. China is already confronting a rapidly aging population. With no state healthcare and retirement system yet established, the primary burden of supporting the elderly still resides with families, many of which have only one child. Furthermore, due to prenatal abortion of female fetuses, China has a distorted sex ratio, with male births almost 20% greater than female births in recent years. This distortion worsens many social problems, such as males who cannot marry and abductions of women. In addition, with a declining number of youths entering the labor market producing wage increases, China is losing its comparative advantage as a low-cost manufacturer. Given "demographic momentum," even a complete abandonment of the one-child policy would not turn these situations around anytime soon.

In sum, China's sharp reduction in fertility, conventionally seen as yielding multiple benefits, is now recognized as creating serious problems for the future. According to Whyte, China's misguided and coercive one-child policy was both unnecessary and immensely harmful to the Chinese people.