

negative population growth only in the 2060s. In short, although the PRC may realize negative growth of total population by the 2030s, the realization of negative population growth by all of its 30 provinces might not take place until the end of the 2060s. The time gap for the realization of negative population growth by the earliest and the latest provinces could be 70 years or longer.

As the influence of economic development on fertility attitudes is still in a stage of transition, the existence of big fertility-rate differences among various localities indicates that the present low national fertility rate is extremely unbalanced and unstable. The possibility for a rebound in the rate cannot be ruled out. Therefore, the key to maintaining the trend of low fertility rates is to consolidate the present economic achievements and further promote economic growth in relatively backward areas. At the National Conference on Family Planning held at the end of 1999, Wang Yuzhong, State Councillor and Secretary-General of the State Council, pointed out that, in a certain period to come, the most important population-control and family-planning task would be to stabilize by all means the present relatively low fertility rates. He emphasized that the core task in rural areas would be to reinforce family planning in coordination with help-the-poor programs and by promotion of economic growth—to bring about coordinated and sustained development between the population and social and economic progress through the development of Greater Western China.¹⁹

Considering the large population of the PRC, even

if fertility rates were already reduced to the replacement level, average annual population growth would still amount to over 13 million.²⁰ Moreover, the present low fertility rate of the PRC was achieved at the expense of a rational population structure. While the fertility rate is declining rapidly, aging of the population has become a new problem. With a very large population and with the problems associated with an aging population, the population policy that the PRC adopts is key to understanding the country's fertility trends after the year 2000.

Many PRC scholars have researched the size as well as the aging of the Chinese population. According to their studies, the fertility method relatively acceptable to the people is "late marriage, late childbearing, and the spacing of births".²¹ If the present policy of making "one child per couple" the universal guidance but allowing rural families to have a second child under special conditions is continued to be implemented, the total population of the PRC will peak at about 1.486 billion in 2031, after which it will gradually decline to about 1.1 billion by 2090. By contrast, if the policy of "late marriage, late childbearing, and the spacing of births" is adopted, the total population will peak to at 1.427 billion in 2024 before beginning to decline rapidly, and the figure will decrease to about 0.721 billion by 2090. Viewed from the perspective of the aging population, if the mortality rate remains the same, a low fertility level will result in a population consisting of a low ratio of young people but a high ratio of old people. Under the policy of "late marriage, late childbearing, and the spacing of births," in the

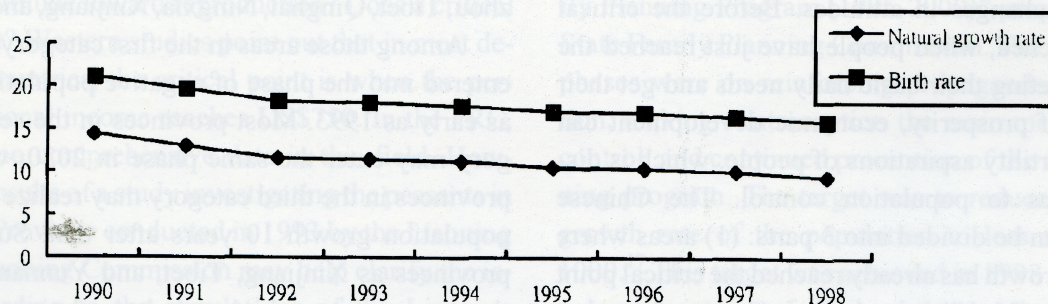


Fig. 3. The Trend of Fertility Changes in the 1990s