At the Summer Olympics, China presented itself as a young and ambitious nation. The ongoing economic boom and growing success in science and technology add to the dynamic image. But China’s future looks different, too: amidst the race to catch up with the western industrialized nations, the country is undergoing a rapid aging process.

“The number of elderly will increase dramatically,” says demography researcher Zeng Yi. In 2020, our planet will be populated with more than a billion people over the age of 60. Nearly a quarter of those will be Chinese, and one in every five people on the planet over 80 years of age will live in China. By 2050, it is expected that 26 percent of all elderly persons worldwide will be Chinese – and will need to be cared for in China.

Zeng Yi, born in the Chinese province of Jiangxi, is the prototype of a global scientist. He sees China aging from outside and from within. In 1986, he was the first Chinese to earn a doctorate in demographic research in a Western country. After that, he moved from Brussels to Princeton for a post-doctoral research fellowship. Today, Zeng divides his time between three research facilities: when he’s not working on his studies at the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research in Rostock, the professor teaches and researches at Duke University in North Carolina, or at the University of Beijing.

“It’s the speed that makes the difference,” he stresses. What took centuries in Europe is happening in China within just a couple of decades. In 1970, China still had a population structure like that found in the western industrialized nations more than a hundred years ago. However, by the middle of the 21st century, the Middle Kingdom will also reach a level of population aging like that expected for most developed countries. According to Zeng’s calculations, the share of people over 65 could soar from nearly 7 percent in 2000 to nearly 17 percent by 2030, and to about 24 percent by 2050, when China will certainly be older than the United States.

BABY BOOMERS ARE AGING

For comparison: In Germany today, 19.7 percent of the population is 65 or older. Japan, Italy and Germany top the current UN list of countries with the highest share of elderly – apart from Japan, the top 20 on the list are all European countries. Among the 192 countries, China ranks just 64th.

Nevertheless, the aging of the Chinese population has begun and cannot be avoided. “Tomorrow’s elderly are already here,” says Zeng Yi, referring especially to the baby boomers – those who were born in the 1950s and 1960s. They are approaching their 50th and 60th birthdays, so soon we will be seeing numerous elderly tipping the scales against significantly fewer young people. This is the ongoing aging process that, within certain limits, can be predicted quite accurately.

Old people in China have a less-than-bright future to look forward to, especially in rural areas: They remain behind while their now-few children and grandchildren are drawn to the cities.

Demographic Changes and the Aging Challenge

China is aging. Nowhere is the number of elderly rising so rapidly as in the Middle Kingdom. The numerous baby boomers are aging, and the generations that followed them have been thinned out, a process that has been exacerbated by the government’s family planning policy. ZENG YI, Distinguished Research Scholar at the MAX PLANCK INSTITUTE FOR DEMOGRAPHIC RESEARCH in Rostock, is studying the impending changes that the billion-strong nation faces, and what will promote a long, healthy life in China.
The birth rate developments of the baby boom years reflect a part of the country's history. In 1950, the average number of children per woman was about 6. In the late 1950s to 1961, this number dropped to 3.3 – triggered by what was probably the largest famine in China’s history, under Mao’s “Great Leap Forward” plan. Then, between 1961 and 1963, the birth rate shot up again to a new high of 7.5, and remained at a high level of about 6 until the second half of the 1980s. It is particularly these large cohorts that will soon make up the numerous elderly. China’s baby boom occurred at about the same time as the baby boom in Germany – with the difference that Germany’s birth rate peak was just 2.5 children per woman.

It is what followed the baby-boom years in China that is driving the approaching surge in aging: the birth rate fell dramatically. And it was planned by the government. The family planning policy accelerated the continuous birth-rate decline between 1968 and 1980. Since 1980, most couples are permitted to have just one child – thus the popular name “one-child policy.” The continued low birth rates in the 1980s and 1990s are also associated with this policy. Today, the average number of children per woman is 1.7.

More Elderly Than in Any Other Country

The birth peak of the 1960s, the subsequent plunge in the birth rate and improved chances of living to an old age; all of these factors will drive up the share of elderly aged 80 and above – especially from 2040 on, when the baby boomers move into this age bracket. The absolute figures should draw our attention: Zeng estimates that, in 2050 – depending on how life expectancy develops – there will be as many as 148 million old people.

In 1950, the Chinese lived to an average age of 41. Since then, however, life expectancy has increased by a remarkable 30 years. If future life expectancy rises only gradually from today’s 71.4 years to 78.1 years in 2050, as the UN’s conservative forecast assumes, we can expect to see 114 million elderly Chinese. However, Zeng considers it likely that life expectancy will rise much faster: China’s economic boom, which will bring about better medical care, better education and improved living conditions, as well as the effect of the East-Asian lifestyle and cuisine, could have a positive impact on long, active lives.

The most optimistic scenario for 2050 thus assumes a life expectancy of 84.5 years, which would be just above the current figure for top-ranking Japan. This 13-year increase in life expectancy, a more realistic one in Zeng’s eyes, would raise the number of elderly to 148 million. That’s as much as the current population of France and Germany combined.

The fact that there are and will be so many aged people in China is what motivates Zeng to take a closer look. The demographic researcher asks himself, “How do people in China today grow old, and how can they remain healthy as they grow old?” The better we understand what determines a long, healthy life, the better the foundation on which we can develop strategies to counteract the negative effects of the accelerated aging process.

Ten years ago, Zeng and his colleagues launched a unique, large-scale longitudinal study of healthy longevity in China as a cooperative project between the University of Young, ambitious, dynamic and cosmopolitan: That is how China presented itself to the world at the Summer Olympic Games in Beijing, with a perfectly choreographed opening ceremony.

The researchers working with Zeng want to investigate how great an impact behavior, family life, sociability, environment and biology have on a long life.

To date, such studies have failed due to the low numbers of elderly, making meaningful analyses impossible. That is another reason why China is the perfect location for the study, as this country has more old people than any other. Ten years of research have produced results that not only offer particular insights into life in old age in China, but also reveal many general findings on longevity.

“Longevity alone is not the point,” explains Zeng, “what is even more important is finding out something about the health of the old people.”

There are, in fact, differences. For one, there are differences between the people who had access to medical care and education in their childhood, and those who had to do without. Even just one year of schooling – which can be taken as an indicator of the socioeconomic conditions of a child in the old China, drastically increases one’s chances of reaching old age – and of doing so in good health.

For another, there are clear differences between women and men. Women in China – as almost everywhere else, too – live longer than men. But men remain healthy longer. This phenomenon is not restricted to China, and is referred to in expert circles as the male-female paradox.

Women Fare Worse than Men

In the specific case of China, however, it becomes very clear how the disadvantages women face throughout their lives intensify this phenomenon. Women are far more likely to be illiterate. They are far more likely to be illiterate. They are far more likely to be economically dependent on their entire lives. They are far less able to rely on a pension, more frequently live with their children, and since they are more likely to be widowed, must be financially supported and cared for by them. And gener-
ally speaking, they are more likely to need care in the final years of their lives.

Old women fare much worse than men in managing the activities of daily living, as well as in terms of general physical and cognitive performance. It is difficult to say whether the difference in education, socioeconomic status and financial independence is responsible for this, or rather the tendency for elderly women to be less mentally and physically active with increasing age than men, and to participate less in social activities.

**Daughter-in-Law under Obligation**

The question then becomes whether China is prepared for the inevitable change in the population structure. How will the elderly of tomorrow be provided with social insurance, medical care, nursing care and housing? Filial piety, xiao, explains Zeng Yi, has been a cornerstone of Chinese society for thousands of years and obligates children to care for their aged parents. But how can the less educated Parents and grandparents as well. In the extreme case, four aged parents, this task, especially when modern society for thousands of years and Filial piety,

*a* (xiao) system with suitable non-family-oriented care, has already led to a shift in the family – the establishment of an old-age insurance system is intended more for the urban population. If this trend continues, then the phenomenon of “villages of elderly” and against old-age poverty will be too few.

Demographically speaking, China is not yet very old, and the population of working age is large. The elderly in need of care are not yet a great burden in terms of numbers. Therefore, this “golden age,” as Zeng calls it, will not last much longer.

**Too Few Wives**

Furthermore, this dangerous trend of gender imbalance would continue. If it was common in the past to have several sons, together with their wives and sisters, would be available to care for the parents, then what we see in the next 40 years will be very different: there will be far more elderly to care for – not just parents, but uncles and aunts, too. In many cases, it will fall to sons to care for them, possibly only sons, and perhaps without wives, of which there will be too few.

While the one-child policy is generally adhered to quite strictly in cities, couples in rural areas ignore the directive or voluntarily flout it.

China had a classic pyramidal age structure around 40 years ago: there were many young people and few elderly. In 2050, China will climb to more than 33 percent of over-65-year-olds in rural areas. But it is particularly hard hit by the problem of elderly in need of care are not yet a great burden in terms of numbers. Therefore, this “golden age,” as Zeng calls it, will not last much longer.

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Just two decades and it will be too late to address the social and economic problems created by population aging. By 2030, the window of opportunity will close, as tomorrow’s elderly will already have been born. Even relaxing the one-child policy could at most temper the aging of the population. More births are not a panacea, but they would have a certain impact. After all, the lower the birth rate, the more rapidly the country will age. Says Zeng: “The ratio between the number of elderly over the age of 65 to be cared for, and the people of average, productive age could improve.”

But the population, now at 1.32 billion Chinese, continues to grow – a process that government officials in China have so far considered to be the more urgent problem. Only when the forecast high of 1.45 billion is reached in 2030 will the population slowly begin to shrink. And so the strict birth control policy is retained – initially. The last baby boomers are slowly reaching the age at which they themselves are not having any more children.

Many demographers researchers, including Zeng Yi, think that it is time to gently transition to a two-child policy. However, many babies born in rapid succession would fuel a new boom. A gentle transition would be better understood as two children, but spaced several years apart.

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