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[明克胜：人口红利消失后中国面临的挑战](#)

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美国外交关系委员会刊物《外交事务》最近刊文，以明朝晚期的衰落为历史参照，警告人口危机、财政困境和社会矛盾可能相互叠加，最终演变为更深层的政治危机。不过，这一趋势也给美国敲响了警钟：如果美国同样陷入政治僵化、排斥移民和保护既得利益的困境，中国的衰退未必会成为美国的胜利。本文作者为明克胜（Carl Minzner），以下为该文的编译版。

在中国改革开放的繁荣时期，从 1978 年到 21 世纪初，充沛的劳动力是经济增长的重要动力。中国劳动年龄人口（15 至 64 岁）占总人口的比例，从 1978 年的 57% 上升至 2010 年接近 75% 的峰值。正是这批劳动者修建了公路、工厂和住宅，推动企业发展，支撑中国连续三十年实现接近 10% 的年均经济增长，经济规模扩大了约 20 倍。

然而，过去十年间，这一趋势发生逆转。中国的独生子女政策，加上整个东亚社会共同面临的低生育率问题，使中国的生育率连续三十年低于人口更替水平，曾经推动中国崛起的人口动力正在逐渐消退。中国总人口于 2021 年达到约 14 亿的峰值，此后开始下降，目前每年减少约 300 万至 400 万人，相当于每年失去一个洛杉矶市的人口。假如中国未来沿着东亚超低生育率的轨迹继续发展，到 2040 年代，人口每年可能减少约 1%，即约 1000 万人，超过纽约市的总人口。

与此同时，老龄化将显著加速。中国 65 岁及以上人口占比目前约为 15%，到 2040 年代可能升至 30% 左右，到 21 世纪末则可能超过 40%。相比之下，美国 65 岁及以上人口占比预计将从目前约 19% 逐步升至 2060 年的略高于 23%。

人口结构的变化，将像上个世纪的人口增长一样，深刻重塑中国的经济与政治。20 世纪中叶，医疗条件改善、婴儿死亡率下降，推动中国年轻人口迅速增长。毛泽东将这股人口力量引入革命和社会改造，打破传统等级秩序，推动社会自下而上的重塑。到 1978 年，中国拥有规模庞大的劳动年龄人口，邓小平通过务实的改革开放政策，将其有效融入全球经济，使中国成为“世界工厂”。

如今，随着中国人口迅速老龄化，政治体系却呈现出日益保守和僵化的趋势，过去引以为傲的技术官僚治理体系已不复当年。面对新问题，决策层越来越少进行灵活的政策调整，而是依赖压制和机械执行中央指令，即使由此产生明显风险也在所不惜。例如，尽管中国亟须提振国内消费、完善面向弱势群体的社会保障体系，决策层仍在继续推进习近平所偏好的出口导向型工业政策。

因此，21 世纪中国面临的挑战，不仅是人口衰退，更是人口衰退与政治失灵相互交织所带来的危机。随着社会老龄化加深，政治体系面临的压力只会越来越大。到 21 世纪中叶，中国可能越来越像 16 世纪的明朝：一个政治体系迟缓、僵化，社会、性别与代际裂痕不断加深的国家。

美国媒体人袁莉曾指出，美国人对中国存在某种羡慕情结。科技投资者赞叹中国最新的人工智能模型，能源专家惊叹于中国在电池和太阳能产业中的优势，记者和分析人士则常常对中国现代化的交通网络和工程能力赞不绝口。与此同时，中国不断扩张的海军、导弹试验以及领导人关于“中华民族伟大复兴”的讲话，常被放在一起解读，构成一个强大国家按照长期战略稳步崛起的形象。

与华盛顿的政治乱象和美国社会的普遍倦怠相比，中国表面上的繁荣与实力，容易令人得出两国发展前景正在此消彼长的结论。但深入观察便会发现，中国同样正经历深刻的政治侵蚀，只是其表现方式与美国不同。由于政治体系受到严密控制，中国向权力集中转变的过程，并不会像美国那样通过电视上的激烈争吵或领导人在社交媒体上的失控言论呈现出来，而是在相对平静的表象下悄然发生。

领导人年事已高、身边缺乏有效制衡，会增加政策误判的风险，中国和美国都面临这一问题。但两国存在一个重要区别：美国仍然可以通过中期选举、2028 年总统选举以及此后的定期选举改变政治方向，而中国的政治体系则日益停滞，而且目前也看不出谁会成为下一个领导人。

更严重的问题在于，目前政治氛围正在削弱中国解决新问题的能力。上世纪 70 年代和 80 年代，邓小平领导下的中国能够通过农村改革，突破毛泽东时代的经济教条，开启高速增长。参与相关改革的中共官员赵树凯曾指出，这一过程有赖于政治结构和意识形态领域保持一定程度的开放。此后的领导人也曾大胆推动改革。1994 年，时任中共中央总书记江泽民让朱镕基主导税制改革，以改善中央财政状况，便是一个例子。

如今，这种灵活性正被僵化的政策教条取代。官员们越来越需要不计后果地执行既定政策。北京的政治僵化也并非完全由于个人原因所致。苏联解体后一些国家发生“颜色革命”，以及 2010 年开始的阿拉伯之春，都使北京领导层更加担忧社会动荡。此后，中国政府不断加强对媒体、法律界和公民社会的控制，压缩公众讨论社会问题和推动政治改革的空间。党内也越少有人愿意考虑触及既得利益集团的改革。

相比之下，上世纪 90 年代，朱镕基曾大刀阔斧地重组国有企业，为中国 2001 年加入世界贸易组织铺路。这场改革导致数千万人失业，并引发大规模劳工抗议，但当时的决策者仍愿意承受短期社会代价，以换取长期经济收益。如今，北京已很少表现出同样的改革决心。

养老金问题就是一个典型例子。长期以来，中国的退休年龄在全球范围内都偏低：男性 60 岁，女性白领 55 岁，女性蓝领 50 岁。研究人员曾预测，覆盖约 5 亿城镇职工、退休人员和干部的主要城镇养老金基金可能在 2030 年代中期耗尽。提高退休年龄因此早已被列入改革议程，但决策层迟迟未能采取有力行动。直到 2024 年，中国才宣布逐步提高退休年龄，而且要到 2040 年才能全面实施。届时，男性退休年龄将提高至 63 岁，女性白领为 58 岁，女性蓝领为 55 岁，仍处于全球较低水平。

城乡社会保障待遇的巨大差距，同样长期得不到有效解决。“共同富裕”政策，并未显著缩小贫富差距，也没有消除养老金和医疗保障方面的城乡鸿沟。2022 年，约 1.38 亿城镇退休人员平均每年领取 6080 美元养老金，而 1.75 亿农村和农民工退休人员平均每年仅领取 345 美元，前者约为后者的 18 倍。

中国学者和官员经常呼吁提高农村居民的保障待遇，以刺激国内需求，但真正的再分配改革始终难以推进。原因在于，决策层更担心损害现有制度受益者的利益，包括公务员、国有企业职工和与党有直接联系的城市中产阶级，而农村居民和流动人口组织和动员能力较弱，其利益更容易被忽视。

一个日益老化、权力高度集中的政治体系，加上对可能引发社会动荡的改革不断退缩，正在侵蚀中国的治理能力。中国即将面对人口结构的重大转折，却似乎难以为未来几十年的社会挑战做好准备。这个国家可以修建高铁和航空母舰，却似乎难以为迅速老龄化的农村人口建立可持续的社会保障网络。

与此同时，北京还在推动一种向传统保守价值回归的社会转向，这可能进一步加剧人口困境，而非帮助中国摆脱危机。

北京不断警告外国文化渗透，要求将马克思主义与儒家规范相结合，弘扬所谓“中华优秀传统文化”，并强调女性应发挥“贤妻良母”的特殊作用。这些主张共同推动了一场强调本土文化、复兴传统价值的浪潮，同时重新强化父权制性别规范。

当代中国的这种转向，与明朝时期的历史轨迹颇为相似。明朝（1368—1644 年）在经历蒙古统治后，曾于 15 世纪初通过著名的郑和船队短暂走向海外，随后却逐渐转向封闭和保守。由于蒙古统治被视为一段屈辱的历史，明朝统治者对外来影响心存戒备，试图恢复他们认定的正统中华文明。

类似的倾向如今也出现在中国。明朝曾压制蒙古统治时期兴盛的摩尼教等外来信仰；自 2010 年以来，中国政府也逐渐背离改革开放时期相对宽松的宗教政策，加强对基督教和伊斯兰教的“中国化”要求。明朝还曾推动少数民族通婚和同化，而中国 2026 年通过的《民族团结进步促进法》，则将当下有关民族融合的政策进一步制度化。

明朝时期，新儒学对女性家庭角色的限制也得到强化。如今，类似观念同样出现在中国官方妇女组织的政策要求中。全国妇联被要求做好家庭工作，发挥女性在弘扬中华民族家庭美德、树立良好家风方面的“独特作用”。作者认为，这种复古式社会治理不仅忽视了现代女性的个人意愿，也与中国迫切需要提高生育率的目标相矛盾。

东亚地区婚姻率和生育率持续下降，反映出女性个人发展愿望与僵化社会性别规范之间的深层冲突。2013年至2024年，中国结婚登记数量下降约55%，越来越多的男女选择不婚或推迟组建家庭。然而，中国最高决策机构政治局清一色由男性组成，其政策思路似乎仍将低生育率视为单纯的激励不足问题，试图通过经济补贴和行政措施鼓励生育。

2021年，中国推出一系列鼓励生育的举措，包括生育补贴和育儿假，同时收紧离婚、堕胎和输精管结扎的相关限制，并通过邮票、教科书和公共艺术宣传多子女家庭的理想形象。这些措施不仅收效甚微，其保守的政策取向和说教式语言还可能进一步恶化性别关系。

移民本可以成为应对人口老龄化的另一种方式。世界上许多老龄化国家都在引进外国劳动力，以填补劳动力萎缩造成的岗位空缺，并照顾不断增长的老年人口。曾经相对封闭的韩国，也开始接纳更多外籍劳工。目前，外国居民约占韩国人口的5%，而20世纪90年代初这一比例几乎为零。

但中国日益高涨的民族主义和排外倾向，使这一选择变得困难。2010年和2020年人口普查数据显示，外国居民仅占中国总人口的约0.1%，与1990年的韩国和台湾地区相近。然而，韩国和台湾地区此后逐渐扩大对外开放，中国却在朝着更强调民族同质性的方向发展。过去十年，中国政府加强了对外国文化产品的限制，并将每年4月15日设为全民国家安全教育日，通过宣传横幅、校园活动和电视节目提醒公众警惕外国间谍。

这种宣传不仅会使中国未来更难吸引养老护理等行业所需的外籍劳动者，也可能让公众对外国移民产生更强烈的抵触情绪。

2025年8月，中国政府宣布推出面向年轻、高技能外国人的新签证，重点吸引科学、技术、工程和数学（STEM）领域人才。这符合北京希望推动中国成为制造业和科技强国、与发达国家争夺全球人才的目标，却立即引发网络舆论强烈反弹。当时，中国青年失业率达到18.9%。许多年轻人指责政府为了外国人才而牺牲本国青年的就业利益，相关帖子在短短几天内获得数千万次浏览。一些支持政府政策的评论者被骂作“种族叛徒”，还有人担心印度科技工作者大量涌入中国，与本国争夺工作甚至婚恋机会。此后一年多，没有相关签证实际发放的报道。

由此可见，中国面临的不只是人口老龄化，而是社会裂痕可能不断加深。到2049年中华人民共和国成立一百周年时，性别、城乡以及中国与外国人之间的矛盾，都可能在长期治理停滞和价值观保守化的影响下进一步激化。到本世纪中叶，中国可能严重缺乏劳动力，同时陷入新一轮民粹主义不满。

对美国部分政策制定者而言，中国人口和经济前景恶化所带来的最大风险，是北京可能因担心国力相对衰退而发动战争。约翰·霍普金斯教授哈尔·布兰兹和迈克尔·贝克利在2022年出版的《危险地带：与中国即将到来的冲突》中警告，一个正在走向实力峰值的中国，可能会在社会压力和经济约束全面显现之前孤注一掷，试图夺取台湾。

这种担忧并非毫无道理，但更值得警惕的，可能不是中国经过理性计算后主动冒险，而是一个年迈、孤立的领导人出现严重误判。正如俄罗斯总统普京在 2022 年入侵乌克兰前，以及美国总统特朗普在 2026 年对伊朗发动战争前可能出现的情况，年长的习近平也可能逐渐与现实脱节，周围尽是不敢提出异议的下属，最终将国家带入灾难。

不过，中国更深层的风险仍然来自内部。如果现有趋势持续，未来一段时期中国很可能陷入政治停滞，不会认真解决农村地区的困境，也难以削减特权群体享有的利益。年轻一代将面临低迷的经济增长和比父辈更差的就业前景，同时生活在对女性日益不友好的政治环境中。这些因素可能进一步降低年轻人结婚生育的意愿。

随着不满情绪积累，中国政府可能越来越依赖全面监控和“网格化管理”来维持稳定。这些治理工具原本曾被用于管控新疆少数民族以及各地上访者，如今则可能被扩大到应对更广泛的社会问题。

2023 年，中国成立中央社会工作部，负责监测被认为具有潜在社会风险的群体，包括所谓存在“四失”或“五失”情形的人。“四失”指没有配偶或子女、没有工作或稳定收入、缺乏正常社会交往、没有房屋或汽车等资产；“五失”则包括投资失败、事业或人生受挫、情绪失衡、精神疾病或人际关系破裂。北京将这些人视为可能发动大规模袭击的潜在安全威胁。2024 年 11 月，一名 62 岁男子因不满离婚后的财产分配，驾车冲撞人群，造成数十人死亡，这类事件进一步强化了政府对社会风险的担忧。

作者预计，未来几十年，中国政府将越来越倾向于把人口变化引发的各种社会问题转化为国家安全问题。到了 2030 年代，身居中南海的老年领导人或许仍会看到表面上的社会稳定，中国科技富豪也可能认为自己不会受到普通民众困境的影响。然而，强化压制和监控并不能从根本上解决问题，统治精英实际上是在为自己埋下隐患。

明朝晚期的衰落提供了一个值得警惕的参照。16 世纪后期，曾经强盛的明朝开始严重衰退。长期财政挥霍，加上在朝鲜半岛与日本作战的巨额开支，耗尽了国库。改革派官员张居正试图扩大税基，让士绅和地主阶层承担更多财政负担，却遭到既得利益集团强烈反抗。1582 年张居正去世后，相关改革被逐步推翻，他本人也遭到身后清算，以此警告其他可能触动权贵利益的人。帝国的财政压力最终更多落到了普通农民身上。

与此同时，明朝政治陷入僵局。万历皇帝在位期间，曾因继承人问题与官僚体系长期对峙，持续数十年。最高权力中心逐渐脱离日常治理，官员奏章积压，无人处理，重要职位长期空缺，官僚体系则陷入激烈的派系斗争。

中国可能重演类似轨迹，即官僚体系的治理能力式微和随后可能出现的政权交替的危机。随着高速增长时代远去，中国的财政压力已经显现。地方政府出现赤字，一些地方甚至难以按时支付教师和公务员的工资及福利。负担再次落到了社会弱势群体身上。过去二十年间，农村和农民工参加的居民医保保费年均上涨约 20%，近年来约有 8300 万人因无力承担费用而退出医保。

单独来看，这些问题未必会导致灾难，但如果长期叠加，就可能在本世纪中叶形成更严峻的局面：各种社会矛盾在数十年政策作用下不断扩大，领导层动荡和国家治理能力衰退又与潜在的社会不满相互作用，最终引发系统性危机。

17 世纪 20 年代，明朝削减财政支出，一名被裁撤的驿站工作人员李自成因此走上反叛道路，后来成为起义军领袖，并于 1644 年推翻明朝。未来，如果中国政府削减养老金或其他国家工作人员的福利，也可能引发类似的不满。17 世纪 30 年代，旱灾和饥荒迫使大量农民加入李自成的队伍；到了 2030 年代或 2040 年代，气候变化加剧下的华北水资源短缺，或农村和流动人口无法为自己及年迈父母获得足够的医疗保障，也可能成为激化社会矛盾的导火索。

今天繁华的中国或许让人难以想象这样的未来。但大国走向衰败的内部因素，往往只有在真正爆发时才会显露其破坏性。历史上的许多重大转折，在危机发生前二十年，同样难以预见。

对于华盛顿而言，中国的某些具体政策确实构成现实挑战，包括对台湾日益加大的军事压力，以及国家补贴推动的产能过剩对全球市场造成的冲击。美国需要针对这些问题作出回应，但不应将中美竞争描绘成一场决定文明存亡的斗争，更不应将阻止“中国世纪”作为一项压倒性的战略使命。原因很简单：中国的未来正在受到自身政策选择的削弱。随着国内不满加剧，中国领导层可能试图将矛盾归咎于美国，宣称美国拒绝接受中国崛起。如果华盛顿也接受这种叙事，反而是在帮助北京转移国内矛盾、寻找替罪羊。这种对抗性叙事也会损害美国自身的社会结构。20 世纪 50 年代的第二次“红色恐慌”曾导致杰出科学家钱学森离开美国返回中国，后来他成为中国导弹和航天事业的重要奠基者。类似的问题如今再次出现：美国对中国的猜疑不断加深，签证政策日益收紧，数十个州通过限制中国公民拥有土地的法律，导致华裔科学家离开美国实验室，国际学生入学人数也大幅下降，2025 年下降了 17%。

美国长期将自己视为一个年轻而充满活力的国家，认为移民持续流入使其人口发展轨迹不同于欧洲、日本以及如今的中国。但美国自身同样面临人口挑战。美国生育率自 2008 年跌破人口更替水平后持续下降，而移民近年来一直是美国人口增长的主要来源。随着现任政府加大打击移民的力度，预计 2027 年公布的数据甚至可能显示，美国人口有史以来首次出现下降。华盛顿必须避免通过损害自身人口前景的政策，加重本国面临的困境。政治制度方面，美国与中国仍有重要区别，但美国也出现了明显的政治僵化迹象。美国国会议员的平均年龄处于历史第三高水平，联邦政府自 20 世纪 90 年代末以来便未能持续做到按时完成拨款，政府停摆也已成为美国政治的常见现象。

与此同时，美国的财富和收入不平等程度与中国相近，这同样使触动既得利益集团的改革难以推进。例如，分区规划和土地使用规定保护了年长房主的房产价值，却增加了年轻人购房、建立事业和组建家庭的难度。

这一切都表明，美国可能很快也要面对中国今天正在经历的某些问题。但人口危机并非不可改变的命运，而是长期政策选择累积的结果：政府究竟是支持家庭，还是试图支配家庭；是欢迎移民，还是将他们拒之门外；是扶持年轻一代，还是继续保护既得利益。目前，中国可供选择的政策空间正在缩小，正朝着一个更加封闭、缺乏活力的方向前进，这将进一步加剧其人口衰退。美国则仍有机会作出不同选择。

China's Long Twilight

Demographic Decline, Political Paralysis, and the Fate of Great Powers

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During the boom years of the reform era, from 1978 to the early 2000s, China was a country of productive workers. The working-age population (those aged 15 to 64) rose from 57 percent of the population in 1978 to a peak of nearly 75 percent in 2010. They built the roads, factories, apartment complexes, and firms that powered three decades of close to ten percent annual growth—a 20-fold economic expansion.

But over the past decade, this tide has turned. Beijing's one-child policy, plus the same social forces that have dragged East Asian fertility to historic lows, have produced below-replacement birth rates for three decades in [China](#)—draining the fuel that powered China's rise. China's total population peaked at 1.4 billion in 2021 and is now falling by three to four million people per year—roughly equivalent to losing one Los Angeles each year. By the 2040s, if China continues to follow East Asia's descent to ultralow fertility rates, it will shed around one percent of its population annually—roughly ten million people, more than the population of New York City. At the same time, the proportion of China's population aged 65 and older will surge, doubling from 15 percent today to around 30 percent in the 2040s, and then rising to well over 40 percent by the late twenty-first century. The size of that cohort in the United States, by contrast, is projected to rise far more gradually, from around 19 percent of the population today to just over 23 percent in 2060.

Put simply, China is entering a century of demographic decline. This change will remake the country's economy and politics just as dramatically as the last century's demographic boom did. Back in the mid-twentieth century, improvements in health and falling infant mortality rates led to a burgeoning youth population, which Mao Zedong channeled into revolutionary social change, overturning entrenched hierarchies and remaking society from the bottom up. By 1978, China had a swelling population of working-age adults, and Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping's pragmatic policies of “reform and opening up” astutely plugged them into the global economy, allowing China to emerge as the world's factory.

Today, as the population rapidly grays, China's political system is becoming increasingly regressive and rigid. As the Chinese Communist Party pivots back toward one-man rule, its vaunted institutions of technocratic rule are not what they once were. Instead of creatively addressing emerging challenges, the CCP is relying on repression and reflexively following central mandates—no matter the risks. Economically, for instance, policymakers continue to pursue Chinese leader Xi Jinping's preferred export-driven industrial policy despite the obvious need to boost domestic consumption and strengthen the social security net for the poor.

The story of twenty-first-century China, then, is not just one of demographic decline but also one of political paralysis—and what happens when those two intersect. It is this combination that makes China's future especially bleak. As China ages, the social pressures bearing down on its political system will only intensify. Mid-twenty-first-century China could end up looking a lot like the sixteenth-century Ming dynasty, a sclerotic political regime rendered increasingly brittle by worsening social, gender, and generational divides. Lest observers in Washington gloat about

this fate, however, China's trajectory is ultimately a warning: demographic decline and political erosion can hollow out any great power—including the United States.

The Politics of Paralysis

As the journalist Li Yuan has observed, the [United States](#) suffers from China envy. Tech investors fawn over its latest AI models. Energy specialists are awestruck by its industrial dominance in batteries and solar power. And journalists and analysts often return from visits offering rosy-eyed panegyrics about China's gleaming transit systems and engineering capacity. Politicians and pundits, meanwhile, often fuse China's expanding navy and missile tests with Xi's speeches on "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" to form a single image: a strong state successfully executing a grand strategy for its twenty-first-century rise.

Compared with the political circus in Washington and the malaise in the rest of America, such surface-level manifestations of China's wealth and power often lead to sweeping conclusions about relative national trajectories. But on closer inspection, Beijing is also undergoing profound political erosion—it just doesn't look like the process playing out in Washington. Because China's system is tightly controlled, its descent into personalistic one-man rule does not play out in divisive confrontations on television or erratic social media rants by the top leader. Beijing's transformation is instead happening quietly but just as consequentially. Over the past two decades, the CCP has come to revolve ever more tightly around a single man. Xi successfully lifted the constitutional term limits on his rule as state president in 2018 and swept clean the top ranks of the party itself at the 20th Party Congress, in 2022, packing them with his own supporters and yes men. Similar purges have regularly rocked the top ranks of China's military, culminating in 2026, with the removal of Zhang Youxia, Xi's own handpicked top general, leaving Xi virtually alone at the helm of China's armed services.

Xi is now set to assume a fourth five-year term as party general secretary in 2027 and has given no sign as to who might take his place in 2032, when he will be 79 years old. An aged, isolated leader increases the risks of policy missteps in China, just as it does in the United States. But China's slide from an efficient technocratic state into lifetime rule under an aging autocrat underscores a fundamental reality about the two countries' trajectories: unlike China, the United States can still choose differently—in the midterm elections, in 2028, and every few years thereafter. China's politics, by contrast, are far more stagnant.

Most critically, the stifling political atmosphere Xi has created is draining Beijing's ability to respond to emerging problems as earlier generations once did. Back in the 1970s and 1980s, Chinese leaders under Deng were able to kickstart China's era of rapid growth through rural reforms that completely reworked Maoist economic orthodoxy. As Zhao Shukai, a key party official involved in those reforms, has noted, Beijing's ability to do so depended on a degree of "openness in the political structure, both in top-level power relations and in the ideological sphere." That same era of flexibility saw party leaders empower competent and efficient officials to boldly address other pressing economic challenges, such as when General Secretary Jiang Zemin charged Premier Zhu Rongji with overhauling the tax system in 1994 to put China's central finances on a firmer footing.

As Chinese politics regress, such flexible problem solving is giving way to rigid orthodoxy. Cadres now find themselves pressed to dogmatically pursue Xi's signature policies regardless of the consequences. Back in 2022, for instance, Shanghai officials under Li Qiang, then municipal party secretary, abandoned their tentative efforts at a lighter, targeted approach to handling the spreading Omicron variant of COVID-19 when it became clear that such a policy would conflict with the "zero COVID" policies on which Xi had staked his personal legitimacy. The result was a brutal, two-month lockdown of Shanghai that left many without reliable access to food and medicine, and which became the template for lockdowns throughout China later that year. Rather than being censured for the debacle, however, Li was elevated by Xi to the top ranks of the Politburo Standing Committee in 2022 and made state premier in 2023. He now loyally leads Chinese officials on Xi's push for industrial manufacturing and an export-driven growth strategy, despite concerns from economists about deflation, mounting overcapacity, and declining consumption.

Xi is not solely responsible for the stultifying inertia that is spreading in China's society and state. Ever since the "color revolutions" of the early 2000s in post-Soviet states and the Arab Spring in 2010, party elites have grown more fearful of social unrest. Chinese authorities have tightened their grip on the media, the legal profession, and civil society, limiting the space for Chinese citizens to discuss mounting social woes and extinguishing emerging calls for deeper political reform. Space within the ranks of the CCP itself has similarly constricted, with few now willing to consider reforms that might seriously affect the vested interests of entrenched social groups. Back in the 1990s, by contrast, Zhu pushed through the wrenching restructuring of state-owned enterprises to secure China's 2001 entry into the World Trade Organization—even though it threw tens of millions out of work and fueled massive labor protests. Accepting such short-term pain in pursuit of long-term gain was once considered one of China's defining advantages, but Beijing today shows little comparable appetite for such measures.

Consider the party's hesitancy in addressing the financial ramifications of China's demographic decline. For decades, China's retirement ages were among the lowest in the world: 60 years old for men, 55 for white-collar women, and 50 for blue-collar women. Unsurprisingly, Chinese researchers have predicted that the main urban pension fund covering some 500 million urban workers, retirees, and cadres will be exhausted by the mid-2030s. Raising the retirement age has thus been on Beijing's to-do list for well over a decade. Yet authorities have moved extraordinarily slowly and timidly. Even though a phased increase was finally announced in 2024, it will not be fully implemented until 2040 and will still leave China with among the lowest retirement ages in the world: 63 for men, 58 for white-collar women, and 55 for blue-collar women.

Similarly, the CCP has put off addressing the stark inequality in benefits between urban and rural residents. Xi's much-touted "common prosperity" campaign did little to narrow the gap between China's rich and poor, nor did it address the wide discrepancies in state pension and health-care systems. In 2022, some 138 million urban retirees drew an average pension of \$6,080 per year, roughly 18 times more than the meager \$345 received by China's 175 million rural and migrant retirees. Chinese scholars and officials regularly call for improving the benefits provided to rural

residents as a means to stimulate domestic demand. But the reason genuinely redistributive measures have not been implemented is simple: party officials fear alienating the urban beneficiaries of the current system—civil servants, state employees, and middle-class urbanites, many with direct ties to the party itself—far more than the marginalized rural and migrant communities, which have limited capacity to mobilize.

These twin trends—an aging Leninist system sliding toward one-man rule and mounting political inertia in the face of anything that might trigger social unrest—have eroded China’s governance capacity. Even as the country heads toward a demographic cliff, Beijing seems incapable of preparing for the social challenges it will face in the decades ahead. China can build new high-speed rail lines or aircraft carriers but not, it seems, a sustainable social safety net for its rapidly graying countryside.

GO FORTH AND MULTIPLY

Political paralysis is only part of the story. Beijing is also actively steering China toward a reactionary version of itself that will worsen its demographic woes rather than help address them. With Xi’s dire warnings of foreign cultural infiltration, his demands that officials look to China’s “excellent traditional culture” in fusing Marxism with Confucian norms, and his praise for “women’s special role” as “virtuous wives and good mothers,” Beijing is stoking a nativist, neotraditionalist revival and reasserting patriarchal gender norms.

Beijing’s emerging worldview echoes that of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644). After a century of Mongol rule, the Ming dynasty began with a brief excursion into the outside world in the form of the famed treasure fleets of the early fifteenth century. But then the Ming pivoted toward an insular and reflexively conservative vision of China. Mongol rule had been deeply humiliating, and Ming leaders grew suspicious of foreign influence. They worked to restore what they saw as authentic Chinese civilization.

The parallels with today aren’t hard to find. In the Ming era, for instance, foreign beliefs such as Manichaeism, a Persian faith that had flourished under Mongol rule, were suppressed. Similarly, since 2010, Beijing has steadily departed from the more relaxed policies of the reform era and pursued the Sinicization of faiths such as Christianity and Islam. And ethnic minorities during the Ming dynasty were pressured into intermarriage, just as the 2026 Law on Promoting Ethnic Unity and Progress codifies Beijing’s new policies on forcible ethnic assimilation.

The Ming dynasty also saw a pivot back toward neo-Confucianism and its restrictive views of women’s roles in the family—views similar to the talking points currently being handed down by central authorities to the official All-China Women’s Federation: “Do a good job in family work and give full play to the unique role of women in promoting the family virtues of the Chinese nation and establishing good family customs, which is an important task assigned to the Women’s Federation by the Party Central Committee in the new era.”

This Ming dynasty redux will exacerbate China’s demographic problems. Plunging marriage and fertility rates across East Asia reflect deep tensions between women’s aspirations and society’s calcified gender norms. Between 2013 and 2024, new marriages in China fell by roughly 55

percent, as women and men alike backed away from family formation. Yet the all-male Politburo, one of China's top party institutions, seems to think that addressing this trend is merely a question of finding the right incentives to push citizens toward marriage and children. In 2021, it launched a new slate of pro-natalist initiatives including baby bonuses and parental leave policies while restricting access to divorce, abortion, and vasectomies. It also reworked stamps, textbooks, and public art to showcase multichild families as ideal. Unsurprisingly, the tone-deaf and regressive nature of Beijing's policies and language not only has had little impact but is also worsening China's gender relations.

If Beijing can't persuade its own citizens to have children, it might use a lever that other graying societies have used to address the challenges posed by rapid aging: immigration. Throughout the world, rapidly aging countries have resorted to foreign labor to fill jobs left vacant by shrinking workforces and to care for surging elderly populations. Even once insular South Korea is welcoming more migrant workers to make up for its low birthrate. Foreign residents now make up roughly five percent of its population, up from near zero in the early 1990s.

The CCP's embrace of nativism, however, makes this option difficult. Census results in both 2010 and 2020 revealed that foreign residents made up 0.1 percent of China's total population—roughly the same percentage as Taiwan or South Korea in 1990. But whereas those two societies turned toward greater openness in the following decades, China is heading down an increasingly ethnocentric path. Over the past decade, Chinese authorities have cracked down on foreign cultural products such as films, and since 2016 they have designated April 15 as National Security Day, which is marked by propaganda banners, school activities, and TV programs warning citizens to be on the watch for foreign spies. This messaging will not only make it harder to attract the foreign workers that China needs in the years ahead, such as eldercare workers. It is also priming the Chinese population to resist them.

In August 2025, authorities announced a new visa aimed at attracting young, talented foreigners working in STEM fields. This was consistent with Xi's stated goals of making China a world leader in manufacturing and technology and competing with developed countries for global talent. But the popular backlash was immediate and furious. China's youth unemployment rate stood at 18.9 percent that same month, and young people took to social media to rail against the government for selling out their interests. Posts on the topic racked up tens of millions of views in mere days. Some commentators who defended the government were called "race traitors." Others speculated that Indian tech workers might surge into China and compete for jobs or marriage partners. More than a year later, there have been no reports of any such visa having been issued.

Domestic resentment toward "outsiders" presents yet another dangerous divide emerging in twenty-first-century China. China is not simply aging; it is likely to approach the centennial of its founding in 2049 with core social cleavages—between men and women, Chinese people and foreigners, urban and rural residents—deepened and embittered by decades of stagnant governance and backward-looking values. By midcentury, Beijing will be chronically short of the workers it needs, and it will likely end up on the wrong side of a new kind of populist discontent.

THE TIME BOMB

For some American policymakers, the top risk of these trends is war. In their 2022 book *Danger Zone: The Coming Conflict With China*, Hal Brands and Michael Beckley warn that demographic decline could push a “peaking China” to roll the dice and try to seize Taiwan before rising social pressures and economic constraints begin to bite in earnest. Such a fear is not absurd. A more apt framing, however, is not a rational, calculated gamble, but a severe miscalculation by an aging, isolated leader. As with Russian President Vladimir Putin before he decided to invade Ukraine in 2022, or with U.S. President Donald Trump before he launched a war with Iran in 2026, an elderly Xi could very well find himself insulated from reality, surrounded by cowed subordinates, and stumbling into catastrophe.

But the deeper risk for China is internal. In the near term, as current trend lines continue, China is poised for political stasis. It will likely make no serious efforts to address the woes of rural areas or to cut the benefits of privileged groups. A generation of youth will experience anemic economic growth and weaker job prospects compared with those of their parents, amid a stagnant political climate that is increasingly hostile to women in particular, all of which will result in people further opting out of marriage and family formation. As China ages, such trends will produce rising discontent, and China’s state apparatus will be steadily drawn into using comprehensive surveillance and “grid management” techniques—methods developed to contain ethnic minorities in Xinjiang and disgruntled petitioners throughout China—to handle it.

Indeed, Chinese authorities have already begun refashioning the tools of their security state in response. In 2023, Beijing created the Central Social Work Department and charged it with monitoring those suffering from any of the “four lacks” (no spouse or children, no job or stable income, no normal social interactions, or no financial assets, such as a house or car) or any of the “five losses” (failed investments, career or life setbacks, emotional imbalances, mental illness, or failed personal relationships). Beijing views such individuals as potential security threats capable of mass attacks, such as the November 2024 rampage in which a 62-year-old man, dissatisfied with the property settlement after his divorce, drove his car into a crowd and killed dozens.

The coming decades will see Beijing steadily “securitize” all the social problems arising from China’s demographic shifts. In the 2030s, aging party leaders living in rarefied Zhongnanhai compounds may look out and see superficial stability. Chinese tech billionaires may convince themselves that they, too, are immune from the concerns of the rabble. But increased repression and surveillance are not a long-term solution. These privileged few will be sitting on a time bomb of their own making, similar to that faced by political and economic elites during the waning years of the Ming dynasty.

By the late 1500s, the once vigorous Ming was severely eroding. Decades of fiscal profligacy, including the costs of an extended conflict with Japan in Korea, had drained the imperial treasury. Reformist officials such as Zhang Juzheng attempted to plug the hole in state finances, pushing through a series of reforms in an effort to broaden the tax base and force the gentry and landed elites to shoulder a larger share of the mounting fiscal burden. But the gentry fought back. After Zhang’s death, in 1582, they successfully unwound his reforms, posthumously disgracing

him as a warning to others who might seek to target their privileges and wealth. The financial burden of an empire in distress fell instead on ordinary peasants.

Simultaneously, the Ming court slid into political paralysis. The Wanli emperor (1572–1620) spent two decades of his reign locked in an extended standoff with his own bureaucracy over the question of who would succeed him. The result: a political vacuum at the top. With the throne disengaged from governance, petitions and reports from officials piled up unread, crucial state posts went unfilled, and the imperial bureaucracy splintered amid poisonous factional infighting.

On its current trajectory, China risks repeating this arc. Beijing will likely suffer from a lengthy period of political inertia under Xi, coupled with a hollowing out of bureaucratic capacity—and then see a succession crisis in the 2030s or 2040s. With its boom years in the rearview mirror, signs already abound that China is facing financial constraints, as well. Local governments are running deficits, with many struggling to pay teachers and civil servants their salaries and benefits on time. The burden is falling, once again, on society's weakest. Rural and migrant residents enrolled in the state health-care program have seen their insurance premiums soar—20 percent annually over the past two decades. Unable to keep up with the costs, some 83 million have simply decided to drop their coverage in recent years.

Taken in isolation, none of these developments spell disaster. But together, they point to a midcentury China in which every major social fault line will have been widened by decades of state policy. Leadership turmoil and a weakened state, as seen with the enfeebled late Ming, could well fuse with latent social tensions to produce an existential crisis. In the 1620s, a wave of Ming budget cuts drove Li Zicheng, a cashiered postal clerk, into banditry before he rose to lead the rebellion that brought down the dynasty in 1644. Cuts to pensions or benefits of China's own state employees in the coming years might produce a modern equivalent. In the 1630s, it was an influx of drought- and famine-stricken peasants that resulted in the expansion of Li's ragtag forces to challenge the imperial throne. Perhaps water scarcity across northern China in the 2030s or 2040s—made worse by climate change—or a rural and migrant population left without adequate health care for themselves or their aging parents, might supply the same combustible material that the starving Shaanxi peasantry did four centuries earlier.

All this may be hard to imagine in the gleaming China of today. But the internal, incendiary forces that burn great powers rarely appear dangerous until the moment they ignite. Twenty years before their respective nations hit their own crisis points, it would have been equally hard to identify the kindling that would bring an obscure Austrian painter, an unremarkable Soviet KGB officer, or a brash American real estate developer to the center of world events.

America's Choice

For Washington, there is still a very real need to respond to the threats China poses with its specific policies—its escalating military pressure on Taiwan, for instance, or its state-subsidized industrial overcapacity now flooding global markets. But some U.S. policymakers may be tempted to frame this response in the sweeping language of existential struggle, as a “generational challenge” to prevent a “Chinese century.” Washington should not hand Beijing this gift. The reality is that Beijing's own choices are undermining China's future. As internal

discontent mounts, Chinese leaders will look to deflect it, framing the root cause as America's civilizational rejection of China's rise. Embracing that framing does Beijing's scapegoating work for it.

Moreover, this framing feeds the kind of internal overreaction that tears apart the U.S. social fabric. Such narratives fuel panics like the Second Red Scare in the 1950s, which drove the brilliant scientist Qian Xuesen back to China, where he emerged as the father of China's rocket program. A similar dynamic is unfolding today: a hardening climate of suspicion in the United States, marked by ever-tightening visa policies and dozens of state laws barring Chinese citizens from owning land, is pushing ethnic Chinese scientists out of American labs and contributing to a huge drop in international student enrollment (down 17 percent in 2025).

Americans have long thought of themselves as belonging to a young, vibrant country, regularly refreshed by immigrant flows that put it on an utterly different demographic trajectory from an aging Europe, Japan, and now, China. But the United States is facing its own challenges. Its fertility rate fell below replacement level in 2008 and has been sinking since. Meanwhile, the country is turning against immigration, which has accounted for the vast majority of population growth in the United States in recent years. Thanks to the current administration's crackdown on immigration, data due out in 2027 could well reveal a U.S. population that is now declining for the first time in its history.

Washington must avoid worsening its own demographic problems through the kind of self-defeating policies that are deepening China's struggle. Politically, the United States is still very different from China. But it, too, is showing unmistakable signs of political sclerosis. Congress, whose members are collectively the third-oldest on record by average age, has not funded the federal government on time since the late 1990s. Government shutdowns, meanwhile, have become routine in American governance. The United States also suffers from wealth and income inequality that is comparable to China's—a gap that likewise makes it difficult to undertake reforms that threaten entrenched elites. Zoning regulations, for example, protect the property values of homes owned by aging residents while hampering young people as they try to buy homes, build careers, and start families.

All this points to a United States that will soon experience the same kind of reckoning that China is undergoing today. But demographic crisis is not destiny. It is the accumulation of choices—whether to support families or dictate to them, welcome immigrants or wall them out, lift up the young or protect entrenched privilege. Under Xi's rule, China no longer has the luxury of choice: it is walking into a dead-end, closed version of itself that will worsen its demographic decline. The United States, however, can still choose differently.