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China Population Decreases Despite Uptick in Births

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China's population continued to decline last year— though births edged up for the first time in eight years—falling for a third straight year as deaths outpaced births.

China had seen birth numbers plummet since 2017, the year after it ended the onechild policy, despite Beijing's encouragement of couples to have three children. At the same time, the number of deaths in China had been creeping up as the population ages.

The data for last year produced a brief reversal of the trend. Births rose to 9.54 million from 9.02 million in 2023, according to data released by the National Bureau of Statistics on Friday. That is still a far cry compared with the more than 16 million in 2015, the final year of the one-child policy.

Meanwhile, the number of deaths dropped to 10.93 million last year from 11.10 million in 2023, Friday's data showed. That brought China's total population to 1.408 billion last year from 2023's 1.410 billion.

Some demographers had expected birth numbers to see a small rebound in 2024, most of which fell in the Year of the Dragon, which is seen as an auspicious one for marriage and births in Chinese culture.

The uptick in births isn't expected to last. China's fertility rate—the number of children a woman has in her lifetime—is less than half of the replacement rate of 2.1, meaning that each generation will be less than half the size of the one before it.

Chinese couples who delayed marriages and births during the pandemic rushed to give births in the Year of Dragon, said He Yafu, a demographer based in Guangdong. But he said underlying factors, such as a shrinking number of women of childbearing age and young people's reluctance to start families, remain unchanged. "This year, births will be lower again," he said.

According to He, the longterm trend is also that deaths will gradually rise each year as the aging of the population speeds up. In 2010, only 13% of the population fell into the 60and-older age bracket. Now, that age group makes up over one-fifth of the population, or 22% last year, up from 21% in 2023.

In 2022, deaths overtook births for the first time. Before then, the only other year since the founding of the People's Republic when more people died than were born was 1960, when the country suffered mass starvation as a result of Mao Zedong's Great Leap Forward.

"As populations age, their crude death rates tend to increase," said Joseph Chamie, a former director of the United Nations Population Fund.

China's aging is happening fast. In the 2020 census, Chinese aged 80 or older were only 2.5% of the population, but based on U.N. estimates, they will be over 5% by the end of this year and 10% in 2050.