

DESPITE GOVERNMENT'S EFFORTS

China's population declines for third straight year

BY ALEXANDRA STEVENSON AND ZIXU WANG

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HONG KONG>> To get its citizens to have more children and stop its population from shrinking, China has tried it all, even declaring having babies an act of patriotism. And yet, for the third year in a row, its population got smaller.

Not even a surprise uptick in the number of babies born, a first in seven years, could reverse the course of an aging and declining population.

China is staring down a longer-term baby bust that is rippling through the economy. Hospitals are shutting their obstetrics units, and companies that sold baby formula are idling factories. Thousands of kindergartens have closed, and more than 170,000 preschool teachers lost their jobs in 2023.

The country's birth rate, as one former kindergarten in the southern city of Chongqing put it, "is falling off a cliff." Enrollments in China's kindergartens plummeted by more than 5 million in 2023, according to the most recently available data.

On Friday, the National Bureau of Statistics reported that 9.54 million babies were born last year, up slightly from 9.02 million in 2023. Taken together with the number of people who died over 2024 — 10.93 million — China's population shrank for a third consecutive year.

The small bump in newborns, in part because it was the auspicious Year of the Dragon in the Chinese zodiac, didn't change the broader trajectory, experts said. China's childbearing population is declining, and young people are reluctant to have children.

"In the medium and long term, the annual number of births in my country will continue to decline," said Ren Yuan, a professor at Fudan University's Institute of Population Studies.

For three decades, China's government had worked to contain its population growth by ruthlessly enforcing a one-child policy. Now, its leaders have made it a priority to reverse a stubbornly falling birth rate, a task that experts said few countries have succeeded at. Xi Jinping, China's top leader, has called on officials to promote a "marriage and childbearing culture."

The lack of babies is adding to China's economic challenges. A shrinking working-age population is straining an underfunded pension system, and an aging society is leaning on a creaking health care system.