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China: a sustainable model ?

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Abstract

Since the overthrow of its policy, initiated by Beijing as of 1979, China, as announced by Alain Peyrefitte, woke up. And it all happened since the turn of the century, as if unfolding is a "sinomania". But 2016 could be the year of the realization that the Chinese model is not sustainable because it is based primarily on three demographic parameters that are not themselves.

Keywords

China ; population ; aging ; population policy ; "one-child"; Population Geography ; Population Dynamics ; Fertility ; Population Ageing

Résumé

Depuis le bouleversement de sa politique, engagé par Pékin à compter de 1979, la Chine, comme l'avait annoncé Alain Peyrefitte, s'est réveillée. Et tout s'est passé, depuis le début du XXI^e siècle, comme si se déployait une « sinomania ». Mais 2016 pourrait être l'année de la prise de conscience que le modèle chinois n'est pas durable car il repose notamment sur trois paramètres démographiques qui ne le sont pas eux-mêmes.

Mots-clés

Chine ; peuplement ; vieillissement ; politique démographique ; enfant unique

Since the upheaval of its policies, initiated by Beijing from 1979 onwards, China has “woken up”, as anticipated by Alain Peyrefitte¹. More precisely, after several decades of autarkic policies, it decided to open up to the rest of the world and push its weight around, representing today, as it did before, a fifth of the world population. The success of this new policy led the French daily paper *Le Monde* to entitle an October 2011 special issue “The Chinese century”, as a statement rather a question. And so, since the beginning of the 21st century, it is as though the world had turned “Sinomaniac”. However, 2016 could well be the year of a realisation that the Chinese model is not sustainable, as it mainly rests on three demographic parameters which themselves are not sustainable.

The first parameter is the result of an authoritarian population policy which favoured the availability of economically active people

Indeed, even though its declared objective was only quantitative, China's so-called one-child policy greatly reduced the family obligations of parents. The economy was able to employ them all the more easily in that many of these children were raised by their grandparents.

China's coercive population policy is not sustainable: it creates social dissatisfaction linked to the gender disequilibrium²; as a consequence, the population has aged at a rate and with an intensity unprecedented throughout the world³; it could result in a reduction of China's population by the 2030s. In other words, it provokes unbalances in the age pyramid, which could have noxious structural effects.

¹ *Quand la Chine s'éveillera... le monde tremblera*, Le livre de poche, Paris, 1980.

² Dumont, Gérard-François, « Le déficit des filles en Chine : vers un nouvel enlèvement des Sabines ? », *Monde chinois*, n° 15, Autumn 2008.

² Dumont, Gérard-François, « Les six enjeux de la démographie chinoise », *Géostratégiques*, n° 33, 4th quarter 2011.

³ Dumont, Gérard-François, « Les six enjeux de la démographie chinoise », *Géostratégiques*, n° 33, 4th quarter 2011.

A second parameter of the Chinese population policy is linked to the regulations respecting internal migrations⁴.

In 1958 the system of a residential booklet (hukou) was put in place: it is a kind of domestic passport which authorises only those internal migrations accepted by the Administration. And since the 1980s the hukou has turned out to be one of the main elements underlying China's competitiveness, the possibility for the country to be a kind of assembly line for the rest of the world, thanks to a very low cost of labour. Indeed the economic reforms triggered a massive rural emigration resulting in what is often called a "floating population", i.e. those people who, according to their residence booklet, should still be living in a rural area but who in fact live in town, having left the countryside. At the time of the sixth census, in 2010, this population was estimated at 300 million, i.e. nearly one Chinese in five. Because of its illegal presence in towns, the floating population has to accept lower pay and nearly no social protection. However, this economic exploitation of the floating population is unsustainable, as rising dissatisfaction is unavoidable, especially once China starts to record a decrease in its active population.

A third parameter of China's population policy is the insufficient awareness of the public health consequences of an unsustainable economic model.

In this respect, what is happening is a reminder that China has a communist regime. Indeed in the second half of the 20th century the most polluted European territories were undeniably located in communist countries. It is one of the reasons why life expectancy in Eastern Europe was much lower than in Western Europe⁵. The inadequacy of the preventive public health policies in the USSR even led to a significant lowering of life expectancy in the 1980s. Today China is in its turn confronted to this risk. The Chinese economic model was associated with a brutal urbanisation policy - in fact the opposite of the policy in place before 1979 - as the floating populations were needed in order to keep down production costs. The combination of an economy hardly respectful of the environment and of ruthless urbanisation led, in most large towns as in Beijing, to a deterioration in general health levels, with a multiplication of respiratory diseases and related hospitalisations. Another consequence is the growing number of international managers, whom China needs, who refuse to go and work there.

⁴ Dumont, Gérard-François, Yiliminuer, Tuerxun, « Les migrations internes accentuent l'inégalité historique du peuplement de la Chine », *Informations sociales*, n° 185, September-October 2014.

⁵ Grzelak-Kostulska, Elzbieta ; Holowiecka, Beata ; Michniewicz-Ankiersztajn, Hanna, « Europe : de grands écarts dans l'espérance de vie », *Population & Avenir*, n° 706, January-February 2012 ; « La santé en Europe : les raisons des différences d'espérance de vie », *Population & Avenir*, n° 707, March-April 2012.

It is true that the Chinese government seems aware of the unsustainable character of its model, recalling the following quotation from Confucius: "He who does not care about the distant future condemns himself to immediate troubles." In 2015 China softened its one-child policy, but probably too late in view of the demographic logic. It promised to suppress the *hukou*, but only a part of the inequalities this system generates was to be suppressed at 1st January 2016. It signed the final text of the Cop21 and announced a change of direction in terms of CO₂ emissions by 2030, rather late in the day. As for the rest of the world, which has praised so highly the Chinese take-off, it will need to realise that it is resting on an unsustainable model.

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Translation: Sylvie Vanston

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