An ever larger population is "a good thing," Chairman Mao announced in 1965 when China's birth rate was 37 per 1000 and population totalled 540 million. At Mao's death in 1976, numbers reached 852 million. During the 1970s, when it became evident that population growth was consuming more than half of the annual increase in the country's gross domestic product, China introduced a well-publicized campaign advocating the "two-child family" and providing services, including abortions, supporting that program. In response, China's growth rate dropped to 15.7 per 1000.

"One couple, one child" became the slogan of a new and more vigorous population control drive launched in 1979, backed by both incentives and penalties to assure its success in China's tightly controlled society. Late marriages were encouraged; free contraceptives, cash awards, abortions, and sterilizations were provided to families limited to a single child. Penalties, including steep fines, were levied for second births. At the campaign's height in 1983, the government ordered the sterilization of either husband or wife for couples with more than one child. Tragically, infanticide—particularly the exposure or murder of female babies—was a reported means both of conforming to a one-child limit and of increasing the chances that the one child would be male. By 1986, China's growth rate had fallen to 1%, far below the 2.4% then registered among the rest of the world's less developed countries. (The comparable mid-1990s figures were 1.1% and 2.2%).

Concerned with their own growing numbers, many developing countries have introduced less-extreme programs of family planning stressing access to contraception and sterilization. International agencies have encouraged these programs, buoyed by such presumed success as the 21% fall in fertility rates in Bangladesh from 1970 to 1990 as the proportion of married women of reproductive age using contraceptives rose from 3% to 40% under intensive family planning encouragement and frequent adviser visits. The costs per birth averted, however, were reckoned at an unsupportable $180 in 1987, about 120% of the country's per capita gross domestic product.

Research suggests, however, that fertility falls because women decide they want smaller families, not because they have unmet needs for contraceptive advice and devices. Nineteenth-century northern Europeans without the aid of science, it is observed, had lower fertility rates than their counterparts today in middle-income countries. With some convincing evidence, improved women's education has been proposed as a surer way to reduce fertility than either encouraged contraception or China's coercive efforts. Studies from individual countries indicate that one year of female schooling can reduce the fertility rate by between 5% and 10%. Yet the fertility rate of uneducated Thai women is only two-thirds that of Ugandan women with secondary education. Obviously, the demand for babies is not solely a function of ignorance.

Instead, that demand seems closely tied to the use value placed on children by poor families in some parts of the developing world. Where those families share in such communal resources as firewood, animal fodder, grazing land, fish, and the like, the more of those collective resources that can be converted to private family property and use, the better off is the family. Indeed, the more communal resources that are available for "capture," the greater are the incentives for a household to have more children to appropriate them. Some population economists conclude that only when population numbers increase to the point of total conversion of communal resources to private property—and children have to be supported and educated rather than employed—will poor families in developing countries want fewer children. If so, coercion, contraception, and education may be less effective as checks on fertility than the economic consequence of population increase itself.

root across the country in the last 18 months, with at least the tacit support of the commission.

"There has been a big change in approach and these kinds of changes have been expanding rapidly," said Tu Ping, a professor at Beijing University, who has urged change. This is the first time this system's leaders have sanctioned relaxing the core controls, although some women have long skirted regulations by having unapproved children and some local officials have tolerated it.

But it is a relatively small experiment in a variegated country of 1.26 billion, and many obstacles remain, from dissent among high officials to the ingrained habits of local family planning officials accustomed to strong-arm techniques, to the deep suspicion of women toward a system whose methods they have long regarded as brutish and capricious -- even as they have supported population control, its ultimate aim.

A 29-year-old Communist Party member and hospital administrator from southern **China**, who spoke on condition that she be identified only by her surname, Zhang, said that less than two years ago family planning officials at her work site stripped her of her job, stopped her paychecks and held her down for a pelvic exam to check her fetus' age when they asserted that she had become pregnant before obtaining her permit to have her one and only child. She said a shift in approach would be welcome.

"I think that if these policies can be implemented it would be better for all of us," she said. "It would be a big improvement for Chinese women."

In recent years, the Family Planning Program has increasingly seemed to be an anachronism. High-powered couples who choose jobs and buy homes and travel the world are thrown back into a Mao-era time warp when they want to have a child, which in most places still requires gaining permits from the local government and a woman's employer before pregnancy occurs.

Women can be turned down if their company or neighborhood has exceeded its quota of births for the year. And couples who dare to have a child without permits, or -- worse -- an illegal second child, can face heavy financial penalties, job loss or, in some cases, police detention.

In areas with the new family planning programs, there has been change. In Shanghai and the wealthy seaboard region of northern Zhejiang Province, women no longer need approval to have their first child. Some districts in Beijing are experimenting with this system and Ms. Cong said the whole city would probably adopt the change.

At the same time, a number of family-planning clinics are undergoing makeovers so that dreary offices whose primary function used to be inserting IUD's and performing tubal ligations or abortions now are offering an expanded range of services from wide-ranging contraceptive counseling to support for breast-feeding mothers.

Also in these zones, officials emphasize that people who are technically allowed

accomplishing our goals."

"**China** has made a great effort to change to a client centered program -- and that is a very welcome thing," said Dr. Ardash Misra, an official of Partners in Population and Development, an organization devoted to promoting voluntary population control in third-world nations, which accepted **China** as a member late last year.

But foreign experts say that **China** will also have to reshape the family-planning hierarchy, in which promotion has depended on enforcing a low birth rate. "They'll really have to redefine what is a good family planning cadre," said a Western health expert based in Beijing. "Otherwise there will be no chance for change."

The new programs have taken root in various ways. The State Family Planning Commission is financing official experiments in more than a dozen locations. Private foundations, like Ford and Rockefeller, have added money and expertise to the mix. The United Nations Population Fund has helped the commission put together similar programs in 32 counties -- an act that has prompted Congress to withhold financing for the agency, saying it did not want American money spent in a country that performs so many abortions.

But there has been bottom-up support as well. When a private group organized a training seminar for workers from official test counties, officials from dozens of other cities turned up as well.

"Reproductive choice" retains a carefully circumscribed meaning in **China**. The general policy is that only certain families may have more than one child: those who belong to ethnic minorities, rural families whose first child is a daughter, families where both parents are themselves only children, and families in which the first child is handicapped.

Others who want an additional child pay stiff fees. In Shanghai, the fee is three times the combined annual salary of the parents. In Zhejiang, it is 20 percent of the parents' combined salaries for five years. In Qinghai Province, the government has added a carrot to the stick, offering smaller families special low-interest business loans.

Planned Parenthood this is not, but Chinese seem alternately dubious and hopeful about the promise of change, particularly if the program better monitors its workers. Although officials insist that abuse is rare, it seems that almost everyone in **China** knows someone whose life has been turned into a hellish nightmare by zealous family planning officials, who sometimes mete out punishments that far exceed those stipulated in government guidelines.

"We realize there existed problems and we have started to manage them," said Li Honggui, commission vice minister.

A move away from a rigid family-planning system based on IUD's and sterilization was perhaps inevitable in a country where women now have many choices in their personal lives and can read about sex, condoms and birth control