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By Wang Feng

Observers of China's rise, when assessing the implications for global peace and prosperity, have largely focused their attention on the country's economy, on its energy and resource needs, on the environmental consequences of its rapid expansion, and on the nation's military buildup and strategic ambitions. Yet, underlying all these dazzling changes and monumental concerns is a driving force that has been seriously underappreciated: China's changing demography.

With 1.33 billion people, China today remains the world's most populous country. In a little more than a decade, however, it will for the first time in its long history give up this title, to India. But, even more important, China's demographic landscape has in recent decades been thoroughly redrawn by unprecedented population changes. These changes will in the future drive the country's economic and social dynamics, and will redefine its position in the global economy and the society of nations. Taken together, the changes portend a gathering crisis.

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