

# The Low Fertility Rate and Response of Population Policy in China

Jing Jin<sup>1</sup>, Yanmin Wang<sup>2, \*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> School of Accountancy, Anhui University of Finance and Economics, Bengbu, 233030, China

<sup>2</sup> School of Statistics and Applied Mathematics, Anhui University of Finance and Economics, Bengbu, 233030, China

\*Corresponding Author: Yanmin Wang (Email: [120081541@aufe.edu.cn](mailto:120081541@aufe.edu.cn))

## ABSTRACT

Over the past decades China has experienced a steep fertility decline to 1.3 per woman in 2020. Politicians claimed that family planning policy played a key role and Sociologists attribute this to the conservative/liberal welfare system. In response to low fertility, since the early 2010, government has gradually relaxed and even abandoned family planning policy. The effect of selective two-child policy on fertility may be not desirable. Considering the very low fertility rates in Confucian societies, the future prosperity is dependent on rural areas having large population with friendly attitudes towards fertility.

## KEYWORDS

China; Low Fertility rate; One-child Policy; Family Planning Policy.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The economic rise of China over the last four decades is well-documented, with its share of world GDP rising from less than 2% in 1979 to almost 17.48% in 2020, alongside its share of world trade in the export of goods increasing from 0.8% in 1979 to 13% in 2020 (WTO, 2021). China has achieved a historic transformation from a low-income country to an upper-middle-income country, with per capita GDP rising from less than \$100 in 1952 to over 10,000 dollars in 2020. Recently, however, much attention has been paid to China's demographic travails. In 2010, the government reports a total fertility rate (TFR) of 1.18, and in 2020, a TFR of 1.3, which is lower than that of Japan.

The government attribute the low fertility rate to China's unique family planning policy. In the 1970s, China adopted an antenatal population policy that encourage young women to postpone marriage and childbirth and have fewer children. A decade later, a more stringent measure, one-child policy that Chinese families should only have one child, was introduced. According to the government's estimate, 400 million births were averted due to the family planning policy (Xinhua, 2006). Some scholars have suggested that economic development played a non-negligible role after the 1980s in further depressing fertility to sub-replacement levels (Cai, 2010). Other sociologists believe that Confucian traditions also play an important role. In East Asia, a gendered division of labour has persisted, even as women's levels of education and labour market participation have increased sharply. The arrival of a new-born in a family substantially increases the woman's domestic workload, while it affects the man's share of the domestic tasks. Despite their rising socio-economic status in recent decades, women have continued to shoulder the bulk of domestic chores in China. In 2016, married women were, on average, still performing above two-thirds of all domestic chores (Cheng, 2020).

This paper first describes China's low fertility, and the family policy changes, then gives some thoughts on China's future fertility trends. China is a representative of the new industrialized countries and a typical country in the Confucian cultural cluster. China's countermeasures to fertility travails have important significance for other countries in managing low fertility.

## 2. CHINA'S DEMOGRAPHIC TRAVAILS

Prior to the founding of New China, China experienced a long period of suffering associated with social chaos, economic disruption, and enemy invasion. In the 1950s, the TFR was as high as 6.0; after 1970, China began to fully implement the "Later, Longer, Fewer" policy that encouraged couples to marry later, and have fewer children with longer intervals between them. After 1980, a strict one-child policy was introduced. Subsequently, China experienced two major fertility transitions. One was the fertility rate dropped below replacement level (TFR= 2.1) in the 1990s. The other is the fertility rate fell to 1.5 children per women after 2000. Both the fifth and sixth censuses confirm this result. China may be caught in a low-fertility trap. As a result, the population in the Chinese mainland recorded negative growth for the first time in 61 years, decreasing by 850,000 in 2022.

China's first fertility transition was largely attributed to the decline in the number of children born to married couples, while the second fertility transition was due to delayed marriage and childbearing, even childlessness. The former is reflected in the change in the age specific fertility pattern, and the increase in the mean age at child bearing. Delayed marriage contributes 0.42 during 1990–2000 and 0.17 during 2000–2010 to the decline in TFR (Yang et al., 2022). Universal marriage and childbearing are the traditional norm for Chinese women, but this social pattern is changing. The childlessness proportion increased markedly from 2010 to 2020, reaching 5.16% for women aged 49 (Jiang et al., 2023). Historical data in Europe show that the rising proportion of childless women played a significant role in further declining the already low fertility. In East Asia, particularly Japan, the sharp rise in the proportion of childless women in the cohort born in the 1950s and 1960s resulted in the TFR decline (Frejka et al., 2010). So the proportion of childlessness will have an important impact on the decline of future fertility in China.

Fertility decline is universal in upper-middle-income societies. Unlike other societies, China's fertility has declined very rapidly. It took less than two decades for China to switch from a replacement level (2.1) to a very low fertility level (1.5). In contrast, the average fertility of OECD member countries has remained above 1.5 since 1983, when their fertility rate reached 2.1. Another feature is that over the long term, China's fertility has declined almost monotonically, even the selective two-child policies are introduced. The EU-27 rebounded in 2006 after a decade of hovering at a low level and recovered to above 1.5. China's fertility rate has a very slightly rise since 2010, then significantly drop after 2017.

## 3. THE CHANGES OF FAMILY PLANNING POLICY

The family planning policy can be divided into three stages: stage one is from 1970 to 1980, "Later, Longer, Fewer" policy. Stage two is from 1980 to 2013, diversified family planning policy. Stage three is from 2014 to date, the birth control policy is gradually abandoned.

**Stage one: "Later, Longer, Fewer" policy.** The birth control policy was first initiated in the 1950s, but not strictly enforced until the early 1970s. During the early 1970s, the fertility rate is close to 6.0. Concerned about the social and economic consequences of continued rapid population growth, China launched a nationwide family planning program offering birth control methods and family planning services in 1973. Contraceptive and abortion services were extended into the rural areas, and there was extensive promotion of later marriage, longer intervals between births and smaller families.

**Stage two: diversified family planning policy.** In the fall of 1980, one couple was allowed only one child, except ethnic minorities. This radical restriction has, however, encountered strong resistance in rural areas. In 1984, the policy is relaxed and the couples in some rural areas were permitted to have two children if the first child is girl. The policy is named “one child and a half” policy. Meanwhile, both the couples who are only child were also permitted to have two children. However, this policy is not effective in national level. Its implementation has varied from one location to another. In the 1990s, 438.83 million people, roughly 35.4% of the total population, were subject to the one-child policy; 666.44 million, approximately 53.6%, were subject to the “one child and a half” policy; and another 11% could have two or more children (Gu, Wang, Guo, & Zhang, 2007).

**Stage three, relaxed birth control policy.** In 2013, China relaxed the strict birth control policy by permitting couples where one spouse is an only child to have a second child. However, the effect on fertility and births is far below what was expected, which has led to further criticism of China’s birth control policy.

At the end of 2015, the universally two-child policy is passed. This change indicates the end of stringent birth control, although not a complete cancellation of this policy. The Population and Family Planning Law was amended in December 2015 to adopt the “two-child” policy.

On August 20, 2021, the newly amended Population and Family Planning Law has been published. The new law allows married couples in the country to have three children, as well as abolishes the expensive fine (known as the “social upbringing fee” or “social maintenance fee”) and other sanctions for couples who exceeded the birth limit under the previous law.

#### **4. THE FUTURE OF CHINA’S FAMILY POLICY**

How to increase China's fertility rate? Undoubtedly, generous and universal family policies that could affect women's fertility decision are needed. However, is the increase the level of expenditure for family policy enough? The answer is uncertain. The causes of low fertility in China are much more complex than in European countries. On one hand, the reasons for low fertility rate in upper middle- and high-income countries are similar, such as the expansion of high education, the increase of economic uncertainty, the full coverage of contraception method, the increase in women's labour force participation and the change in family structure. Key among of these is marriage and childbearing postponement (Sobotka, 2004). The above problems are not unique to China and exist in the Confucian cultural cluster, such as Korea, Japan, Singapore, Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan. However, the government in China has more policy levers available than is the case in many other societies. Because other economies have reached the level of developed countries with plenty of financial resources to implement generous family policies. Research in western countries shows that active family policy could increase fertility (Gauthier 2007). On the other hand, the empirical research implies that there is a clear distinction between city and countryside in China, such as culture and economy, so do fertility attitude. The decrease in the proportion of currently married women in China can account for 40% of the fertility decline between 1990 and 2000 (Yang et al., 2022). The childlessness proportion for women as a whole is highest for city women, followed by township women, and is lowest among village women, at 6.29%, 5.50% and 3.72 % for women aged 49, respectively. That is, official birth control policies were instrumental in curbing China’s population growth because changes in rural fertility behaviour accounted for most of the decline in the national TFR between 1982 and 2008 (Guo et al., 2012). As a result, the universal two-child policy and three-child policy could have better effect on the fertility in countryside than in cities.

More importantly, even the goal of constructing universal family policy will be difficult to achieve. Recently, the social-economic situation in China was extremely unfavourable. The Chinese economy has entered a “new normal” phase that is different from the high-speed growth pattern exhibited in the past. As a result, it is difficult to collect a large amount of financial resource. Over the last 30

years, rapid economic development has occurred in China, however many of workers is in part-time or temporary. In addition, the aging process in China is gradually accelerating, and shrinking population cannot afford welfare spending. That is to say, China is lack of the prerequisites to establish a welfare state, such as high-speed development, full employment, and a relatively young population; on the contrary, it has to cope with the challenges of economic stagnation, polarization of the labour market, low fertility and rapidly aging population, etc.

## 5. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Since the 1980s, China has experienced a decline in fertility and reached a very low level. In response, the government has gradually relaxed or even abandoned its family planning policy. From two-child policy for both couples are only child, two-children policy for either couple are only child, the universally two-child policy, and the universally three-child policy, the impact of mandatory constraints on the fertility decision disappears. However, there is no obvious rebound increase in fertility as expected. At present, many provinces have introduced family policies from Western countries, such as cash benefit, tax exemption or parental leave. Because of the large gap between China and developed countries in terms of economic level, it is not possible for China's family policy to follow the path of the Western welfare states, and it is only possible to choose more directed policy instruments and targeted population, for example, family policy biased to rural population. In the foreseeable future, China will step-by-step construct comprehensive family policies with more China-style policy instruments. However, there is no perfect policy, and just family policy cannot solve all problems. How to reconcile work and family may be a permanent problem. When will childbearing no longer affect work? We think that this will involve in-depth research across a selection of countries to provide key insights into the problem of reconciling work and family life.

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