

The Fertility Intentions of Women of Childbearing Age in the Context of Low Fertility in China

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ABSTRACT

According to China's seventh population census, the total fertility rate has stepped into a very low level. Also, the statistics reveal a significant decline in working-age population but a growing trend of an ageing population. Compared with males, the aging of female working population is more prominent and the growth rate is slower, and the situation became more severe after the implementation of the three-child policy in 2021. This study examines the fertility intentions of women of childbearing age and its impact in the low fertility context based on data obtained from the seventh census in 2020.

INTRODUCTION

Since entering the 21st century, the population born in the 1950s and 1960s, accounting for a large proportion of China's population, has started to age. Thus, the structural problem of China's population has become increasingly prominent. After the implementation of two-child policy and three-child policy, the situation has been alleviated to some degree, but there were still problems to be addressed such as near ultra-low fertility level, population aging, demographic dividend disappearance and birth sex ratio imbalance. Academic experts and scholars believe that China's population policy, especially fertility policy, needs to be adjusted urgently under the background of low fertility rate. Currently, due to multiple factors including career and economic pressure, many females of childbearing age choose to defer their personal birth planning. Obviously, for most women who are willing to bear children but are deterred, a mere increase in the number of children allowed without corresponding supporting measures is not realistic. Therefore, based on the census data, this paper will analyze the causes of China's low fertility rate and the effects of fertility desires of women of reproductive age, and propose corresponding measures to further optimize China's fertility policy and population policy.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholars in China have studied the issue of fertility decline from different perspectives and with different research methods, and the research results are quite abundant. Mu Guangzong, Lin Jinlong et al. pointed out that the low fertility pattern of China's population has gradually changed from "policy low fertility" to "endogenous low fertility", which would give rise to a more severe trend of fewer children and aging population in China and a severer shortage of labor force. However, Hou Jiawei et al. compared the differences between the number of ideal children and the actual number of children by applying the cross-sectional historical meta-analysis method and investigated the changing trend of fertility willingness and fertility level of Chinese residents. Ma Zhiyue et al. found that there are many factors affecting the fertility of women of childbearing age, the fertility desires of women is higher than the actual level, and the same is true of the fertility number. Zhang Xingyue revealed that the effect of China's fertility policy has not reached expectations owing to numerous reasons, such as rising fertility costs, women's career development, the lack of public services, and the conversion of fertility attitudes. In conclusion, China is becoming a rapidly aging society in which many families have only one child or even no child, and most people have reached a consensus of having fewer children but better upbringing. In the future, the improvement of China's fertility policy should be more inclined to offer public support to cope with the quandary of our residents who want to bear children but have misgivings about it.

As women assume the responsibility of giving birth, a growing number of scholars studied the ideas and choices of women of reproductive age in China from the perspective of women's fertility intentions in recent years. Wang Guangzhou et. al argue that the higher the educational level of women, the less likely they choose to have more children, so the improvement of China's population policy needs to take into account the changes of women's educational structure in the future. Zheng Zhenzhen claimed that the settlement of "work-family" conflict is the key to pushing up the low fertility rate. Liao Jing Yi et. al suggested that women need to be given more opportunities and supportive measures to better balance family and work and mitigate the influence after analyzing the negative impact of childbirth on women's career development. Zhang Ting Pimei et. al held that a more equal and friendlier social environment should be created through serving women, improving women's status, helping women realize their value and rendering public services for childbirth and childcare, so as to ensure the steady growth of fertility rate. The aforementioned studies display the close correlation of women's fertility intentions with the availability of the balance between family and work and supportive measures to assist women in the process of raising their children after childbirth. Hence, the subsequent adjustment of China's fertility policy should also focus on this aspect.

The long-term family planning policy in China enables the traditional values of "more children lead to more happiness" and "bring up children to support parents in their old age" to be replaced by new ideas like "good childbearing and sound childrearing"

and "late marriage and late childbirth." Accordingly, more and more families pay more attention to the quality of child-rearing rather than the number of kids. Therefore, the study of the factors influencing women's fertility intentions in the context of low fertility rate has strong theoretical and practical meaning for improving the current situation of endogenous low fertility rate in China and proposing a population policy more suitable to our national conditions.

CHART ANALYSIS

According to the population size, average annual growth rate and age structure revealed by the latest census, China is entering an era of serious aging at a fast pace, and the growth rate of the birth population is greatly lower than that of the death population, resulting in substantial imbalance. The gender structure demonstrates a low proportion of women in the birth population, the population of childbearing age, the working population and even the total population. Hence, much attention should be paid to the development of China's population policy in the future. The priority is to promote gender equality, deal with the imbalance of sex ratio at birth, and provide effective fertility support measures to encourage women of childbearing age to balance work and family life and give birth. This paper will analyze some graphs made on the basis of the data from the previous population censuses published by the National Bureau of Statistics. The analysis is as follows:

National Population and Average Annual Growth Rate

The seventh census reveals that the total population is 1.41178 billion. Compared to the sixth census, the population increases by 72.06 million, with an average annual growth rate of 0.53%, which is 0.04 percentage points lower than the sixth census. Although the total population is on the rise, the growth rate has a clear downward trend. It indicates that the demographic dividend in China will diminish and even fade away in the future, which deserves wide attention from the whole society.

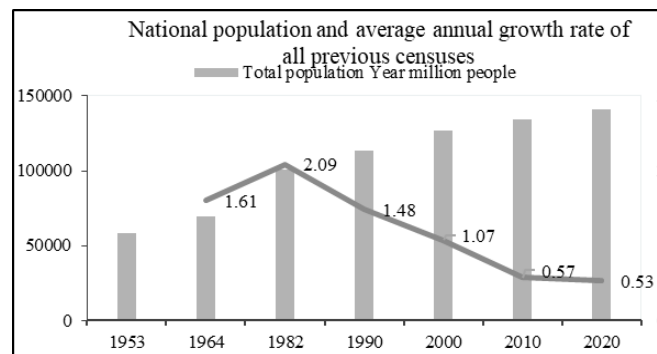


Figure 1. National population and average annual growth rate of all previous censuses.

National Age Structure

As shown in the figure, in the seventh census in 2020, the share of the population aged 0-14, 15-59 and 60 and above were 17.95%, 63.35% and 18.70%, respectively. Compared with the last census, the proportion increased by 1.35 percentage points, fell by 6.79 points and climbed by 5.44 points respectively. Given the decline in the population aged 15-59 (the established age range of the working population in China) and the increase in the senior citizens aged 60 and above (the world's recognized age range of the elderly), the gentle rising trend of the number of 0- to 14-year-olds cannot compensate for the loss of the working population and the surge of the aged population in China. All of these reflect that China has entered a serious aging society. According to National Health Commission, people aged 60 and above are projected to exceed 400 million in 2035, and China will enter a stage of heavy aging. Therefore, against the backdrop of population aging and low fertility rate, the major tasks for government agencies and scholars are to increase the birth rate and provide prenatal and post-natal support.

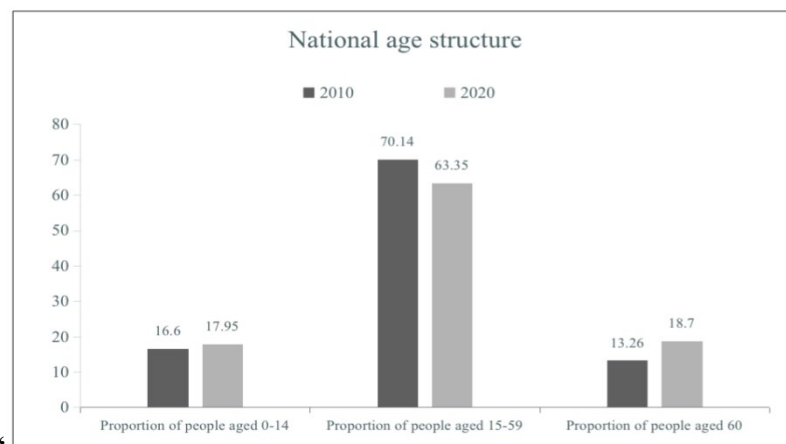


Figure 2. National age structure.

National Gender Structure

According to the latest statistics, the male population was 723.34 million, accounting for 51.24%; the female population was 688.44 million, accounting for 48.76%. The sex ratio of the total population was 105.07, which is basically the same as the data of the sixth census in 2010, with a slight decrease. The sex ratio at birth was 111.3, down 6.8 from ten years ago. The female population is 34.9 million less than the male population, which means there will be tens of millions of single men in China. Worse still, there have been 220 million single people in our country and hundreds of thousands of families choose to be dink or cannot have children for certain reasons. Thus, low fertility

rate in China is not temporary, but is very likely to continue in the next few decades, which may impinge on the birth rate and demographic dividend.

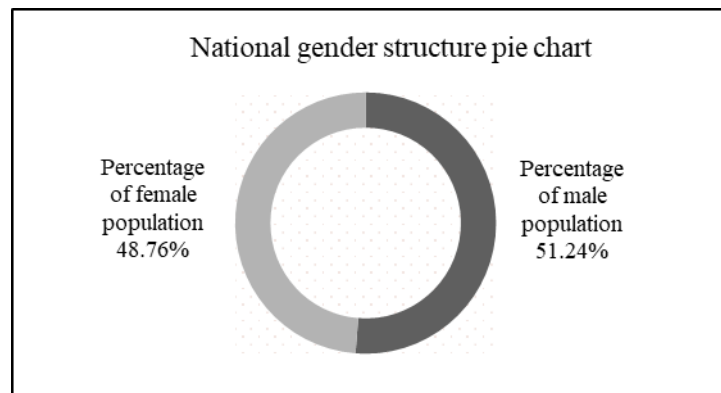


Figure 3. National gender structure pie chart in the seventh census.

From the fourth census to the seventh census, the sex ratio at birth in China has always been much higher than the maximum limit of 107 set by the United Nations, and even much higher than the sex ratio of the total population. The sex ratio at birth indicates the gender imbalance of the total population will be exacerbated and there will be more single men in the future, which is not helpful to improve China's low fertility rate.

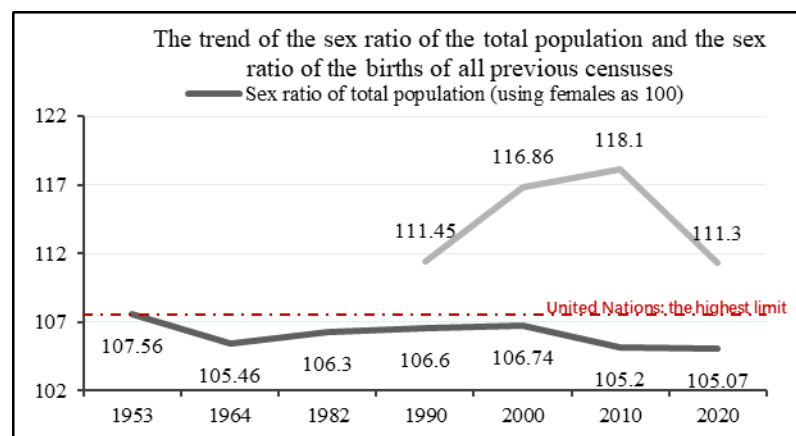


Figure 4. Line chart of sex ratio of all previous censuses.

As can be seen from the figure below, the sex ratio of the population declines with age, since the life expectancy of men is generally lower than that of women worldwide, which stem from the differences of physiological structures and living habits of the two sexes. In order to push up the fertility rate, more attention should be paid to women of childbearing age between 20 and 35. This group of women with good child-bearing

conditions have not yet given birth or only has one child and are more likely to expect a baby. However, these women does not account for a high proportion of the national population, and because of the change of attitudes toward child-bearing and desire for career promotion, most of them with higher education is unwilling to have more than one child. Admittedly, the situation is not optimistic.

Although women above 35 almost have secure jobs, due to the high costs of childbirth and poor childbirth conditions (Usually over 35 years old are medically considered as advanced maternal age), women who are willing to give birth to more children still account for a minority, and some women in this age group give birth to a second child after the implementation of the two-child policy, which contributes to the rising share of children aged 0-14 in the seventh population census than in the last one.

TABLE 1. CLASSIFICATION OF THE NATIONAL POPULATION BY "AGE-GENDER".

Age	Population			Proportion in total population			Sex ratio (Fermal=100)
	Total	Male	Fermal	Total	Male	Fermal	
0-15	268707162	142819574	125887588	19.06	10.14	8.93	113.91
16-59	877053344	451215334	425838010	62.21	31.99	30.21	106.89
16-30	224149923	118665613	105484310	15.91	8.41	7.49	112.98
30-59	652903421	332549721	320353700	46.3	23.58	22.72	103.84
60-100 and	264018218	127381486	136636732	18.75	9.04	9.69	75.99
Total	1409778724	721416394	688362330	100	51.17	48.83	104.8

National Newly Born Population

From the graph, we can see an obvious downward trend of the number of births in China since the 21st century, because the population in the 50s and 60s, who account for a larger proportion of our population, was at the optimal age for childbirth at the period of the fourth census, and thus bearing children prior to that time, but this advantage no longer exists after the fifth census. The data of the seven censuses show that the number of births in China in the last decade has reached a record, which is closely related to the rising costs of childbirth and education, soaring housing prices, women's career development needs, and a lack of effective support. The fact deserves attention.

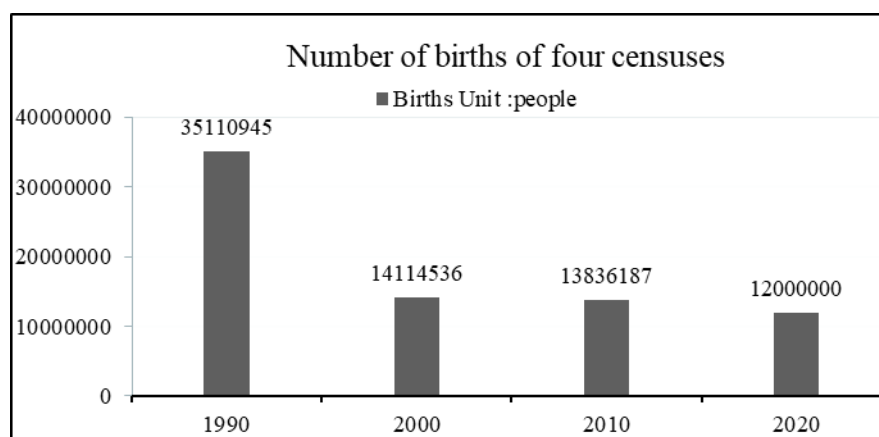


Figure 5. Number of births of four censuses

Classification of Women of Childbearing Age in China by "Birth Order-Age"

As shown from the graph, very few women under 20 and over 40 choose to have children, and most women choosing to bear children are in the age range of 20-40. Many women prefer to give birth to one and two children rather than three. Even if the situation improves after the stable implementation of the three-child policy, families choosing to have three children are not in great number yet due to the lack of supporting measures and the difficulty of balancing family and work after bearing three children.

TABLE 2. CLASSIFICATION OF WOMEN OF CHILDBEARING AGE BY "BIRTH ORDER-AGE".

Age	The average number of women of childbearing age	Births	Fertility rate	First child		Second child		Third child and	
				Births	Birth rate	Births	Birth rate	Births	Birth rate
Total	32555388	1213144	37.26	555206	17.05	522742	16.06	135196	4.15
15-19	3647362	22132	6.07	18061	4.95	3696	1.01	375	0.10
20-24	3546605	195859	55.22	129899	36.63	55884	15.76	10076	2.84
25-29	4490336	444455	98.98	241541	53.79	166879	37.16	36035	8.03
30-34	5925543	385477	65.05	127591	21.53	204198	34.46	53688	9.06
35-39	4728349	127235	26.91	28702	6.07	72250	15.28	26283	5.56
40-44	4559392	28902	6.34	6578	1.44	15538	3.41	6786	1.49
45-49	5657801	9084	1.61	2834	0.50	4297	0.76	1953	0.35

Classification of Females of Childbearing Age By "Birth Order-Education Level"

As can be seen from the figure, the more educated women are, the less likely they are to choose to bear more children. The force behind it is that women with higher education level are more likely to have a stronger sense of independence and be opt for the new attitudes towards childbirth and career instead of family. Consequently, as China's education is increasingly accessible, the odds of women of childbearing who are willing to have more than one child will shrink. In response to our demographic crunch, a string of supportive measures should be provided by the public sector to solve women's worries about balancing family and work.

TABLE 3. CLASSIFICATION OF WOMEN AGED 15-64 BY "BIRTH ORDER-EDUCATION LEVEL".

Education level	The number of women aged	No child	One child	Two children	Three children	Four children	Five children and
Total	46789337	11336803	15824874	15446775	3267980	698525	214380
Uneducated	926652	82309	155697	393405	194835	68018	32388
Pre-school education	31824	5347	6817	13004	4702	1391	563
Primary school	7958864	455549	1984766	3872410	1218314	317375	110450
Junior high school	18219818	2394155	6324123	7648535	1522126	267625	63254
Senior high school	8962313	3325518	3362552	1981582	250207	35633	6821
College degree	5362227	2290275	2115714	893259	56136	6125	718
Bachelor degree	4766962	2474901	1684595	584806	20295	2193	172
Master degree	507936	282301	170345	53913	1220	146	11
Doctoral degree	52741	26448	20265	5861	145	19	3

Integrative Analysis of "Low Fertility-Fertility Intention "

Rising education level of our population

With the demand for high-quality national economic development and the advent of the information era, the continuing development of our country facilitate the increase of the residents' education level. According to the data of the seventh national census, the education level of Chinese residents has improved enormously compared to the last one, with the number of people with university education per 100,000 people climbing from 8,930 to 15,467, the average number of years of education for people aged 15 and above rising from 9.08 to 9.91, and the illiteracy rate falling from 4.08% to 2.67%. The higher the education level, the longer the years of education will be. Also, the time of first marriage and childbirth will be delayed for most young people, and the expected and actual number of newborns will drop. It is projected that the trend will become more prominent in the future.

The "Employment-childbirth" Dilemma for Women

At present, although the sex ratio of China's total population is declining, it is still high, which is not conducive to improving the endogenous low fertility rate; likewise, women's difficulties in balancing work and childbirth will exacerbate the demographic predicament in China. Apparently, most of the families who have no kid or only have one child generally face the situation of "wanting to have children but not wanting to have children" or "wanting to have children but not daring to" because rising costs of living is propelling women in ordinary families to bear part of the family expenses. Therefore, most of the women who long to be promoted are affected by the "employment-childbirth" dilemma and delay or refrain from bearing children.

Lack of Supporting Measures for Childbirth

Today, China's childcare industry and maternal and childcare industry are still not sufficiently developed, with a large gap between supply and demand, and the current prices of such products are high and beyond the affordability of most families. Thus, the majority of ordinary dual-earner families will merely choose to have one child without the support of both parents. In the future, the government needs to introduce relevant policies to provide more diverse and friendly support to improve the current situation.

MEASURES

Improve Employment Security System to Protect Women's Rights and Interests

In order to mitigate women's pressure and concerns from career and childbearing, we should improve the relevant employment security system and laws to protect women's rights and interests. Aside from that, we need to refine laws and regulations related to gender inequality, increase subsidies in housing, education, childbearing and other related fields, regulate and restrict actions that do not protect women's rights about childbirth, intensify penalties to ensure women enjoy the equal status in the labor market, and encourage employers to develop more inclusive and friendly measures to protect women's rights. What's more, the government should also offer subsidies and tax cuts to employers with good performance and urge employers to assume corresponding social responsibilities, so as to eventually form a benign interactive cycle in which women can obtain more jobs with their skills.

Protect Women's Physical and Mental Health After Childbirth

Most women are prone to postpartum depression after childbirth due to the lack of attention and concern from their family members and society, which is extremely detrimental to themselves and their families as well as their subsequent employment.

Therefore, at the family level, husbands should be encouraged to shoulder more responsibilities, give more care and attention to women, and undertake the household chores during pregnancy, which is conducive to harmonious family relationships and reduction of the burden of wives in the early stage. At the same time, other family members are supposed to give more emotional support and respect to relieve the anxiety of a novice mother. From the social level, the public should present more tolerance and understanding to childbearing, avoid over-evaluation of pregnant mothers' figures, looks and status on the Internet, and show our care and concern as we can because, as is known to all, childbirth is not an easy task. Meanwhile, enterprises should actively assume social responsibility and show their tolerance. In terms of the national level, the psychological counseling platform, hotline or free open classes, should be provided to help women ease their psychological in confidence from a scientific point of view, so as to help more women overcome this difficulty.

Provide Public Supporting Measures

For the sake of protecting most families' desire to balance childbearing and spending, the government should provide public supporting measures. Firstly, the relevant departments should build more childcare centers for dual-income families or families with multiple children. At the same time, more teams of kindergarten teachers with better professional skills and overall quality should be trained to develop the brain power and potential of young children and provide more possibilities for their development in the early stage of growth. Secondly, we should focus on the advancement of educational equity and social mobility. At present, with education costs rising, many families refrain from bearing more than one baby because they cannot afford the high housing prices, tuition fees and other regular childcare expenses. Therefore, the government should introduce more robust policies to promote educational equity and lessen the burden on both children and parents. Ultimately, the government should offer more subsidies pertaining to childcare insurance and medical resources to lighten the burden of medical expenses for families and make it easier to gain access to medical care for children, so as to dispel the worries and anxiety of parents.

SUMMARY

China is entering the era of "endogenous low fertility" from the era of "policy low fertility", and many scholars are studying the overarching issue on how to alleviate the effects of population problems in the next few decades. China is a large populous country, and it is hard to increase the fertility rate. So, in addition to providing subsidies and creating an inclusive social environment to encourage women of childbearing age and their families to bear children, we also need to help handle some problems after childbirth such as high expenses and a lack of time for childcare by means of supporting measures. In conclusion, we should attach great importance to the demographic predicament reflected in the seventh population census and endeavor to explore the

causes, predict the future development trend, and implement robust policies to actively respond to the changes and growth of the population, thus promoting the long-term development of other areas such as gender equality, educational equity, and social security in China.

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