

Optimizing China's Fertility Policies: Strategies Informed by International Practices

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Abstract: This paper mainly discusses how to solve the problem of declining fertility rate in China. On the basis of combing through the current fertility situation in China, it is found that there are problems such as insufficient fertility subsidies, inconsistent standards, employment discrimination for women of childbearing age, backward marriage and childbearing culture in some areas, and imperfect child care system. Some countermeasures were put forward, such as increasing fertility subsidies, unifying subsidy standards, formulating policies to eliminate discrimination against women in employment, building a civilized marriage and childbearing culture, and further improving the child-care system. It is hoped that the financial support and policy incentives provided by the state can reduce the burden of child-rearing.

Keywords: fertility policies; maternity allowance; nursery system

1. Introduction

According to a Reuters report on September 24, Vyacheslav Volodin, Chairman of the Russian State Duma, stated that the Russian parliament plans to enact a law prohibiting behaviors deemed by the government as “harmful propaganda of a childless lifestyle” and imposing heavy fines for such acts. This news highlights that encouraging and safeguarding national fertility has become a critical long-term policy for ensuring stable development in countries worldwide. To maintain stable population growth in China and continuously improve the fertility environment, coordinated efforts across economic, social, and cultural domains are essential.

In recent years, in response to the aging population and declining fertility, China began to implement the “universal two-child policy” in October 2015, and the “universal three-child policy” began to be implemented in May 2021 with the “Decision on Optimizing the Fertility Policy to Promote Long-term and Balanced Population Development”. However, according to the data of the National Bureau of Statistics, in 2022, China's population has experienced negative growth for the first time, reducing 850,000 people, and the total fertility rate has fallen below 1.1 (the international warning line is 1.5), and the population fertility issue has become a major proposition before the Party and the country. Further optimizing and improving the fertility system, cracking the “stuck points” and “stuck points” of the fertility policy, and continuously releasing the national fertility potential are of great significance for adapting to the new changes in the population situation and promoting high-quality development.

2. The Historical Evolution of Our Country Birth Policy

Since 1949, China's family policy has experienced from encouraging birth to birth control to strict family

planning and then to relax family planning and other stages, as follows.

2.1. The First Stage: 1949–1952, the Stage of Encouraging Fertility

In the early days of the founding of the People's Republic of China, the country's population and fertility rate both rose sharply as the country's leaders put forward the slogan "there is strength in numbers". In four years, the population grew from 540 million to 570 million.

2.2. The Second Stage: From 1953 to 1961, the Stage of Birth Control

According to the data of the first population census (1953.6–1954.11), China's total population reached 600 million, accounting for nearly a quarter of the world's total population. The population base is large and the growth momentum is fierce, which leads to the shortage of educational resources and the shortage of residents' housing. In this context, the orientation of the national fertility policy changed from "not opposed to birth control" to "in favor of appropriate birth control", which is the bud of the family planning policy. In nine years, the population grew by only 70 million from 580 million to 650 million.

2.3. The Third Stage: From 1962 to 1979, the Stage of Advocating Family Planning

In December 1962, the Directive on Conscientiously Promoting Family Planning was issued, proposing "to promote birth control in cities and densely populated rural areas, to properly control the natural growth rate of the population, so that the birth problem will gradually move from a state of no planning to a state of planning". This is a landmark document in the formulation of China's family planning policy, thus opening the era of family planning for half a century. In 18 years, the population has increased by only 300 million from 670 million to 970 million, and the family planning policy has had obvious effects.

2.4. The Fourth Stage: From 1980 to 2013, the Strict Family Planning Stage

In 1980, China issued the famous "Open Letter to All Communist Party Members and Communist Youth League Members on Controlling China's Population Growth", which marked the full implementation of the rigid family planning policy. On 9 February 1982, China's "Directives on Further Improving the Work of Family Planning" stated: "Government officials, workers and urban residents, except in special circumstances approved, each couple shall have only one child. It is generally advocated in rural areas that a couple should have only one child, and if some people really have difficulties in requesting a second child, they can make planned arrangements after examination and approval. No matter what the circumstances, can not have three children, "this is long known as the "current birth policy" "one child policy". In September 1982, it was determined that "the practice of family planning is a basic state policy of our country" and established the legal status of family planning, and China entered a period of strict family planning for more than 30 years. Zhang Yue and Chen Dan (2020) [1], and other scholars believe that the family planning policy of strictly carry out the policies of the showed great effect. According to census data, China's population grew by less than 400 million in 34 years from 980 million in 1980 to 1.36 billion in 2013. China's total fertility rate dropped sharply, from 3 before the implementation of the policy to below 2.1 in the 1990s, and then remained at a low level for a long time and continued to decline, reaching the lowest value of 1.49 in 1999, far below the internationally recognized replacement level of 2.1.

2.5. The Fifth Stage: Since 2014, the Birth Stage Has Been Conditionally Released

2.5.1. Implementation Phase of the "Two Children Alone" Policy (January 2013–December 2015)

On 30 December 2013, China issued the "Opinions on Adjusting and Improving the Birth Policy", which stipulates that couples can have two children if one of them is an only child, marking the official launch of China's birth policy adjustment. At the beginning of 2014, provinces across the country successively implemented the "two children alone" policy, and the new population in that year was 16.87 million, 470,000 more than in 2013, and the short-term effect of the policy was prominent [2].

2.5.2. Implementation Phase of Universal Two-Child Policy (January 2016–May 2021)

In October 2015, China decided to “fully implement the policy of allowing one couple to have two children and actively carry out actions to cope with the aging population”. This is the second adjustment to the birth policy after the “two-child” policy. The move signals an end to China’s more than three-decade-old one-child policy. In 2016, there were 17.86 million new births, 1.31 million more than in 2015. The universal two-child policy has a significant effect on population growth.

2.5.3. Implementation Phase of the “Universal Three-Child” Policy (May 2021–Present)

In order to continue to cope with the declining birth rate and increasing aging, on 31 May 2021, China reviewed the Decision on Optimizing the Fertility Policy to Promote Long-term and Balanced Population Development and began to implement the policy of allowing a couple to have three children and supporting measures. China has officially entered the “three-child era”, but the effect is not satisfactory. The birth rate in 2021 will be 10.62 million, more than 1.4 million fewer than the 12.02 million in 2020; In 2022, the birth rate was 9.56 million, again more than 1 million less than the previous year, and it fell below 10 million for the first time since the founding of the People’s Republic of China. In 2023, the birth rate is 9.02 million, that is, three years after the three-child policy was lifted, and the birth rate is declining every year, even the natural population growth rate has become -1.48% . This indicates that the fertility accumulation effect has basically ended and the policy stimulus is weak.

3. Current Shortcomings in China’s Fertility Policies

The shortcomings of China’s birth policy are mainly reflected in the following three dimensions:

Firstly, the formation process of the policy is not scientific. China’s family planning policy has its specific historical background, and the policy of “one child per couple” has not gone through in-depth scientific research and procedural demonstration. One of the motivations for this policy was to set population targets with economic goals, mistakenly believing that China’s population must be controlled within 1.2 billion at the end of the 20th century in order to achieve the economic goal of quadrupling per capita GNP. Population control targets are also uncertain and there is no consensus. In addition, the legal basis for implementing the strict one-child policy is insufficient. The Population and Family Planning Law “encourages” a couple to have one child, not “forces” it, which means that the strict one-child policy in cities and towns lacks the support of the upper level law.

Secondly, there is a lack of fairness in the implementation of policies. The core of the “current birth policy” that has been implemented in China for a long time is actually the one-child policy, but in the specific implementation process, it is divided into one child policy, one child and a half policy, two child policy and other types, among which, the “one child and a half policy” means that rural couples can have another child if the first child is a girl. To some extent, the policy reinforced son preference, inadvertently reinforced the idea of “son preference”, labeled those families with only daughters as “vulnerable”, and was artificially distorted into a policy of “letting farmers have sons”. In addition to gender inequality, this policy also reflects the unfairness of urban and rural fertility policies to a certain extent.

Thirdly, Policy adjustment is not timely enough. According to the research of Mu Guangzong (2016) [3], as early as the fifth national census conducted in 2000, the total fertility rate (TFR) of China fell to 1.22, which has fallen into the “ultra-low fertility trap”. However, in the document issued in the same year, it is still proposed to “do everything possible to stabilize the low fertility level” such as family planning inertia measures. China’s total fertility rate fell from about 6 before the 1970s to about 2 in 1990, then to about 1.5 after 2010, and only 1.15 in 2021, 1.09 in 2022, and 1.0 in 2023, less than half of the generation replacement level (2.1) and the lowest in the world. At present, China’s population crisis is in a severe form, but it has not attracted enough attention. It can be seen that the adjustment of China’s birth policy is not timely, and the rapid changes in the birth situation do not match, and there is a serious path dependence on the existing policy.

To be specific, China’s policy deficiencies are reflected in four aspects.

3.1. Inconsistent Local Fertility Subsidy Policies

Birth subsidy is an important means to reduce the cost of family birth. In recent years, in order to encourage fertility, many provinces and cities have introduced relevant policies to provide financial subsidies to childbearing families. However, due to the different financial status of different places, the lack of subsidies at the policy level and the non-uniform subsidy standards are prominent. For example, in April 2023, the “Notice of the Implementation Plan of Shenyang to issue three-child childcare Subsidies (Trial)” issued by Shenyang City stipulates that “for local household registration families where both husband and wife jointly bear three children according to law, the three-child childcare subsidy will be paid 500 yuan per month until the child is 3 years old”. The “Hefei Childcare Subsidy Implementation Plan” issued by Hefei City in 2024 stipulates that “the birth of the second child will be given a one-time subsidy of 2000 yuan; A one-time allowance of 5000 yuan is given for the birth of the third child.” It can be seen that the standards and quotas of local government maternity subsidy policies vary greatly.

3.2. Workplace Discrimination against Women of Childbearing Age

In our national family, women often have to bear the important responsibility of childbearing and rearing. In reality, many women have not yet married and had children at the age of marriage, and women have become a “soft spot” in employment when they enter the childbearing age. According to the survey report on the status of Chinese Women in the Workplace in 2023, 57 percent of women believe that the main reason for unfair treatment in the workplace is childbearing. Some cases of employment discrimination against women of childbearing age in the workplace may even rise into legal cases. According to a news released by the Chinese Court network, in 2019, Ms. Fan of Zhuhai entered a property company for less than two months, but was fired on the day she was pregnant. After several unsuccessful negotiations with the property company, Ms. Fan filed a lawsuit on the grounds of equal employment rights dispute. The Zhuhai Xiangzhou Court made a first-instance judgment on the case, finding that the property company had infringed on Ms. Fan’s right to equal employment, and ordered the property company to make a written apology and financial compensation to Ms. Fan. This case is the first judicial practice of “equal employment right dispute” for women of childbearing age in Guangdong Province.

3.3. Harmful Marriage and Fertility Practices

Good marriage and family culture is the “soil” to shape the correct marriage and family values of the people. However, in recent years, the high bride price, the trend of comparison, and the “non-marriage” emphasizing personal consumption are easy to produce wrong value guidance for the marriageable people. According to a related news report by the People’s Daily Online in 2024, in some counties of Shandong, Henan and Gansu, there are sayings such as “colorful red and green” and “motionless”, among which “colorful red and green” is a popular saying according to the color of RMB banknotes, including 10,000 5 yuan, 1000 100 yuan and some 50 yuan banknotes, and the face value of the banknotes is more than 150,000 yuan; “Move” refers to a car, “motionless” refers to a house in the city, the high price of these counties can be seen. The high price of dowry not only corrupts the social atmosphere, but also produces a large number of judicial disputes. In December 2023, at the press conference held by the Supreme People’s Court, the Ministry of Civil Affairs and the All-China Women’s Federation on “Promoting the change of customs and customs to control high bride price”, Chen Yifang, president of the First People’s Court of the Supreme People’s Court, said that the number of bride price disputes in recent years has been on the rise.

3.4. Inadequate Childcare Services

Infant care service is an important part of improving people’s livelihood and concerns thousands of families. Modern families often cannot provide enough care time due to work reasons, but the current social care service system is insufficient in effective supply, public institutions are in short supply, private institutions charge high and mixed, and infant care services lack of official guidance and industry norms, resulting in many families feel pressure in the care process. In 2020, a news report from Anhui Network reflected the current

problem of “it is easy to enroll and difficult to drop out” in some early education institutions. Ms. Chen, a citizen, spent more than 20,000 yuan for her children to attend a one-year course in an early education institution located in the economic development District. After the child took a day of class, she found through monitoring that the child’s class experience was poor, and thought that the teacher was not responsible enough, so she planned to withdraw from the class, but was repeatedly delayed by the early education agency. To this end, Ms. Chen complained about the early education agency to the Consumer Complaints Reporting Center of the Market Supervision Bureau.

4. International Experiences in Addressing Fertility Challenges

Compared with China, western developed countries such as Germany and France entered the aging and low fertility society earlier, and gained some policy experience for reference in solving the problem of national population fertility.

4.1. Linking Childcare Benefits to Parental Leave

France’s parental leave policy is more representative, according to the relevant provisions of the French Social Security Code amended in 2008, France sets a statutory 16 weeks of maternity leave, if the number of children or multiple births, maternity leave can be up to 46 weeks. All payments during maternity leave are made by the French Social Security Agency, and the employer is not responsible for wages. In addition, French parents can also enjoy a year of paid parental leave, which can be extended up to two times, and receive a basic subsidy of about 429 euros/month. As a high welfare state, Germany provides high maternity allowances for parents and infants to encourage fertility. In 2006, Germany introduced the Federal Parental Allowance and Parental Leave Act, which stipulates that birth parents can receive parental allowance and parental allowance within 14 months after the birth of their child. Parents who did not work before giving birth can receive a monthly allowance of 300 euros, and those who worked before can receive a maximum allowance of 1800 euros. In addition, Germany also provides subsidies for newborns to cover the cost of raising, all newborns before the age of 18 can receive a subsidy of 250 euros/month, about 37% of the cost of raising.

4.2. Legal Protections for Women’s Employment Rights

As early as 1983, France issued the “Labor Code” to protect the employment rights and interests of women of childbearing age, which stipulates that enterprises shall not specify the gender and marital status of recruitment candidates in recruitment advertisements, employers shall not refuse to recruit or transfer women because of pregnancy, and employers shall not ask about the pregnancy of candidates. In 2018, Germany’s revised Maternity Protection Law specifically protects the employment rights of pregnant women and new mothers, stipulating that from the beginning of pregnancy until four months after delivery, employers cannot dismiss pregnant women and new mothers, and this law also applies to pregnant women who have miscarried more than 12 weeks of pregnancy.

4.3. Promoting Pro-Family Values via Media

Another major measure to solve the fertility problem in developed countries is to publicize the importance of fertility and family through TV, social media and public advertisements, and actively shape the mainstream values of marriage and childbearing in society. For example, in June 2024, the German government opened a special column on the most-watched “Recent News” program to provide positive guidance for the blind psychology of many people who believe that over the age of 30, they miss the best childbearing age and therefore give up their family planning. The feature argues that women over 30 accumulate more social resources and invest more time and money in raising children, and that children born to women over 30 have higher grades and better emotional and social behavior.

5. Recommendations for Optimizing Fertility Policies

In order to cope with the changing trend of population fertility in China, it is necessary to enhance the national fertility willingness and promote the long-term balanced development of population. It is necessary to strengthen top-level design and improve the population development strategy and related policy systems such as finance, employment and social security.

5.1. *We Made Timely Adjustments to the Policy and Fully Lifted Restrictions on Family Planning*

The universal two-child policy is less than expected, and the effect of the three-child policy has not shown, failing to reverse the declining trend of China's birth population. Experts such as Ren Zeping and Liang Jianzhang suggested that China fully liberalize family planning restrictions, formulate policies to encourage and support birth, and remove the cap of "the only country in the world that still implements birth restrictions" [4,5].

5.2. *Establish a Comprehensive Financial Support System*

In terms of encouraging fertility, it is necessary to further improve the "central-local" fertility allowance subsidy policy, and introduce relevant fertility allowance subsidy policies and establish special funds for fertility allowance subsidies at the national level. We will further clarify the standards and scope of maternity allowances and establish a comprehensive reward system for central and local maternity allowances. The relevant departments of human resources and social Security, health, Statistics Bureau and other departments may, on the basis of the data of the average cost of childbearing and rearing of a household from local population censuses or sample surveys of households, reasonably formulate the standards of maternity allowances and subsidies, and provide subsidies according to a certain proportion of the average cost of childbearing and rearing of a household, and implement stepped subsidies according to the number of newborns in a family. In terms of supporting parenting, it is necessary to fully consider the main household consumption costs such as housing rental costs, nutrition costs, and custody fees of child-rearing families, and encourage places where conditions permit to subsidize rental, purchase, and meal costs for families with two or three children.

5.3. *Strengthen Legal Safeguards for Employment and Leave*

In the aspect of marriage and childbearing employment, referring to the experience of the legal protection of women of childbearing age in developed countries, the relevant laws and regulations for the protection of women of childbearing age are formulated in line with the actual situation in China, and the employment rights and interests of women before and after marriage and childbearing are protected by legislation. The main contents of relevant laws and regulations on the protection of women of childbearing age should focus on prohibiting enterprises and public institutions from discriminating against women of childbearing age in terms of marriage, age, pregnancy and other aspects in recruitment, and prohibiting enterprises and public institutions from taking improper actions such as forced job change, pay reduction, and dismissal of women of childbearing age or female employees with newborn babies at work. Further strengthen the punishment of enterprises and public institutions for illegal employment of women of childbearing age. In terms of maternity leave, it is proposed to formally incorporate paid parental leave into the scope of the law, and legislate to ensure that parents have enough time and stable income to care for their infants and young children through the establishment of paternity leave for fathers, the guarantee of on-duty pay for parents, and the appropriate extension of parental leave for families with two or three children.

5.4. *Promote Healthy Marriage and Fertility Values*

Make full use of TV, Internet, social media platforms, we-media and other media channels to increase the publicity of the correct values of marriage and childbearing, such as marriage and family social responsibility, love focus on communication and understanding, and build a public opinion propaganda "matrix" with diverse subjects and diverse ways to advocate a new type of marriage and childbearing culture. Through short videos, suicide live dramas, public interviews, special comments and other communication methods, the narrative

content of innovative publicity of new marriage and childbearing culture is enriched, and a series of “vane” cultural products are formed to publicize the correct values of marriage and childbearing. The Women’s Federation, the Youth League Committee, the Ministry of Education, the Publicity Department and other relevant departments should vigorously carry out the main propaganda activities of the “three steps” of the new marriage and childbearing culture into the community, into the campus and into the unit, and strengthen the correct guidance of the contemporary youth’s marriage and love concept of family.

5.5. Improve Childcare Service Systems

Encourage local people’s societies, health and other relevant departments to introduce service norms and industry standards for infant and child care service institutions, standardize the operation qualification and service content of the territorial infant and child care service institutions, and promote the childcare service personnel to work with certificates. Support the establishment of local associations of infant and child care service agencies, assist local governments to implement self-regulatory management of infant and child care service agencies, formulate a standard system for evaluation of childcare services and a “white list” of institutional service quality, and establish a corresponding “exit mechanism” for institutions with irregular operations and inadequate services. Local governments with relatively good financial status can use fiscal subsidies, service consumption vouchers and other financial means to provide appropriate operation subsidies to private infant and child care service institutions with certain universality, relatively standardized operation and good service quality, so as to effectively reduce the expenditure on family childcare services.

5.6. We Will Strengthen Support for Families with Children in Areas Such as Housing, Education, Taxation, and Social Security

In terms of housing, we can explore a trial “children’s housing allowance”, such as each family can get 50,000 yuan/child housing construction or purchase subsidies. In terms of education, on the one hand, we can explore the policy of free secondary school public education for new children in the pilot areas, and on the other hand, we can promote the cancellation of the policy of general employment separation after junior middle school, so as to effectively alleviate parents’ anxiety about education. In terms of tax revenue, the amount of personal income tax deduction for families with children will be increased. In terms of subsidies for starting businesses, we will increase support for people with children to start businesses. In the field of social security, the “family insurance” policy can be introduced for low-income families, one person works and one person pays, and the whole family can benefit; In the field of commercial insurance, childless policy holders aged 26 and above are required to pay a certain amount of additional premium for childless insurance.

6. Conclusions and Discussion

In fact, the fertility problem is not only a Chinese problem, but also a global problem. Changes in global geopolitics, intense economic competition, increasing pressure in life, changing ideas about marriage and childbearing among the younger generation, and even problems such as air pollution and food safety may be the reasons why young people are less likely to get married and have children. There is a long way to go to change this phenomenon, but we are aware of the seriousness of the problem and are trying to make a change. China’s top-down efforts to solve its fertility conundrum are showing results. On the basis of sorting out the domestic fertility policy, this paper actively learns the excellent experience of France and Germany, which reflects our determination to change.

The shortcoming of this paper is that the survey data come from the National Bureau of Statistics. Future research can also conduct detailed investigation and research on a specific region or community, and design a 3–5 years longitudinal follow-up investigation and research to obtain more real and detailed data and cases, so as to increase the rigor of the research.

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