

# Beyond Fertility Rates: Birth as a Challenge

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## Abstract

In light of the persistent decline in fertility rates, societies have shifted from a state of shock to a state of inquiry regarding the psychosocial reasons behind the reluctance of young adults to reproduce. This study adopts a socio-psychological perspective to elucidate the underlying factors that influence the decision-making process of Chinese youth with respect to reproduction. Using content analysis based on collected news materials from online newspaper such as Wall Street Journal, Forbes, The Economist, and ABC News, the study mainly focuses on how major Western media has depicted the explanations of low fertility in China. Results show that, social stresses, such as financial burdens, educational pressures, and career pursuits, might have transformed childbirth from a choice to a challenge. Moreover, media and modern education have expanded the discourse on child-giving to encompass not only biological birth but also the mental and emotional shifts that occur for mothers and families. The study highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding of the sociological and psychological factors that underlie the decision-making process of individuals with respect to reproduction in contemporary society. Faced with an aging society and shrinking population of future working forces, China should see beyond the statistics, but figure how to cope with the mindset changes in young generations.

## Keywords

Birth, Social Structure, Reproduction, Fertility Rate

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## 1. Background

The world nowadays witnesses low fertility rate (*World Bank Open Data, 2022*). Over the last 50 years, the global fertility rate has halved. Crude birth rate collapsed from 30 per 1000 people in 1970s to 17 newborns in 2020s. The number of newborns per woman is around 2.3, with a strong tendency of continuous declining. Taking the United States as an example in the West, its newborn num-

ber per woman dangles around 1.7 in 2021. Moreover, American women are delaying motherhood generally (Tavernise et al., 2021). Birthrate of females between the age of 20 and 24 in every state decreases dramatically. Though females between the age of 25 and 29 shows less drastic decline in birthrate, the overall tendency remains unoptimistic. In the meanwhile, countries in the East are not performing any better. Japan, the first country that entered super ageism society in Asia, the average newborns of its per 1000 people in 2021 fell way behind the average number of the world, approximately 7 persons. And its neighbor, China, 7.52 newborns (World Bank Open Data, 2022). Japan's average births per woman surpassed the United States in a pessimistic way, demonstrating 1.3 newborns (World Bank Open Data, 2022). As for China, though have loosening up the one-child restriction by encouraging two-child and even three-child policy, fertility dropping escalated as if people deny birth decisions without hesitation. According to the data report from 2021, the fertility rate in China declined to 1.164 persons per woman (World Bank Open Data, 2022). Beyond these striking facts, researchers attempt to find the pattern of why people withdraw from giving birth anymore. Regrettably, research indicates that individuals' willingness to bear children and their level of adaptation to their present living environment are both significant determinants of their decision-making processes in real life. This study focuses on unfolding underpinning sociological factors that impact people's choices of fertility, as well as exploring how such influences persuade people not to have children or even resent the idea of reproduction. To accomplish the aforementioned goal, the study will first conclude previous empirical research findings, and afterwards raises analyses from a sociological perspective.

## 2. Literature Review

The striking phenomena of low fertility rate cross the globe called upon researchers' interest on exploring what type of situation societies are facing and what factors have pushed things to come so far without prewarning. A study (Brown, 2021) illustrates, when non-parents aged below 50 being asked about to what likelihood they would have children in the future, 44 percentage of which answered not likely, composed of 21 percentage "not too likely" and 23 percentage "not at all likely" responses. It means near half of the participants are relatively determined not to have children. This number rises 7 percentage compared to the 37 percentage in 2018. Interestingly, when further asked why, 56 percentage of childless parents responded that "they just don't want to have children", indicating there were no particular reasons and such decisions were simply made out of their internal intuitions. The left 43 percentage reported a few reasons, among which medical reasons and financial reasons were listed as top one and two, with respectively 19 and 17 percentage of supporters. Data also shows there was no gender difference in this case. If dividing the aforementioned childless adults into two different groups, the obvious division criterion comes

to whether they are subject to the willingness of have children. The former group apparently, presents low interest in terms of embracing a kid to the family, while the latter one might have interest but cannot afford to do so due to external reasons.

If using whether one has the willingness or possesses an internal expectation in terms of having children as a simple criterion, three notions related to infertility can be easily differentiated. The first is childlessness. It implies a status of non-parental hood. Therefore, no biased feelings reveal with this norm being brought up. The second is childfree. The status of childfree is an outcome of personal choices. One that chooses to stay free from children bearing voluntarily is a childfree person. The composure of these characters remains unrevealing to most countries; however, Michigan took the initiative to break the ice.

The University of Michigan conducted a cross sectional study in Michigan to see the current status/willingness of people in terms of fertility (Neal & Neal, 2022). They put all participants into five genres using a verbally well-designed questionnaire. The five genres include 1) Already a parent, 2) Not a parent yet, 3) Undecided, 4) Childless, and 5) Childfree. Results of the study suggest that, 20.9% of adults in Michigan do not want children. When using the samples to boldly predict the number of childfree parents in the whole state, there would be over 1.6 million people who voluntarily withdraw themselves from having kids. Interestingly, the State of Michigan presents highly similar demographic features with those of the whole country. It means the outcome in this study can fairly be used to estimate the number of childfree-attitude holders cross the United States. When applying this method, researchers found out nearly 500 million to 60 million Americans might be childfree persons in the country.

The astonishing findings strike the nerves of many, but these are far from over. Researchers decided to find out when childfree decisions were made by the participants (Neal & Neal, 2022). Answers were over 60 percentage reported they made up their minds during teenage years and the ages of 20 to 29. Early life decisions were proved to have a determinant role in this situation. But how and why, low fertility willingness began to embed in societies?

The analysis of fertility unfolded in all ways. The aforementioned studies concentrate on the description of the current fertility status in all countries, with leading research conducted by Pew Research Center (2021, 2023) and the University of Michigan (2022). Explanatory research on the social factors that cause a lack of willingness to have children mainly focuses on economic frameworks. Early in 1960s, fertility had been revealed as an economic topic (Becker, 1960). Studies that focus on the leading feature of women on birth issues flourished as the rise of feminism studies (Ford, 2017). Employment and education was considered as two of the most essential and evident factors that impacts individual's decision on whether and when to have children (Muller, 1974; Upadhyay et al., 2014; Zhang & Zhao, 2023). Psychological layers of reproduction managed to gain increasingly scholars' attention (Shattuck & Schwarz, 1991). This study tries to decompose the reasons behind the generally low fertility willingness in China

from a sociological perspective, not particularly from a female gaze, but an analysis on a family-unit perspective, to explore what birth means to the family and what external stresses have led to the situation.

### 3. Method

The study conducted a content analysis based on news materials gained from online newspaper publishers, such as The Economist, Forbes, Wall Street Journals, and the ABC News. Keywords combined of online newspapers name and “fertility in China” or “birth in China” are input as inquiries for search outputs on Google Chrome. News that came out between May 2021 and June 2023 were selected out as text data.

Content displayed in such materials were categorized under the social stress framework brought up by William Cockerham in the book *Medical Sociology*. Cockerham (2021) states that most threats in modern society do not require physical responses as people no longer live in a world that needs to physically *fight or flee*, but these symbolic threats cause psychological responses to arise. Thus, this study would from a socio-economic perspective, summarize the external threats that people encounter upon reproduction decisions. The analysis in section 4 will particularly focus on life stressors identified in the social stress framework, which comprises socioeconomic status, life event (employment, occupational career, education, etc.), and social capital (social influences from family, friends, and even the media). Following the aforementioned analysis, the study will also briefly discuss the mindset changes and adaptations reflected beyond the social stress in section 5.

## 4. Applying the Social Stress Framework to Analyze Childfree Phenomena

### 4.1. The Best Contraceptive Pill Ever: Home Mortgages

Among one of the article in the news collection, a father said to the media, if he had kids, that would lead to a decrease in his own life (Ning, 2023). As a previous study mentioned, one of the top reasons why young adults have “cold feet” whenever considering having a kid, is financially. Child rearing costs in super major cities in China reach more than 1 million yuan (Stanway, 2022). Modern Chinese hold the idea of settling down first before getting married or building a family. Settling down refers to settling the housing issue. If a Shanghainese hopes to purchase an apartment for preparation of marriage, according to the average housing price in 2020s, which ranges from 50 k to 100 k per square meter, this person would need 5 to 10 million yuan to afford a 100 square meter apartment. After down payments of approximately 500 k, he needs to pay mortgages for 8 to 20 years top without interruption. For first generation Shanghainese who are approaching middle class or still below middle class, mortgages symbolize a sustainable source of pressure, which attributes to explaining the father’s words in the report.

#### **4.2. Competence for Best Schools: A Financially Long-Run**

Educational burdens fundamentally are financial burdens. If mortgages are a visible investment with an exact number indicating how much one should pay, then educational investments are holes that might never be filled full with. As the school district system exists, parents wishing for as best education as possible for their children need to spread extra money for housing at the school district, to get their kids lawfully selected by the target schools. Neighborhoods nearby districts of high-quality educational systems, ranging from elementary school to high school, have relatively more competitive housing markets compared to regular housing areas. Moving for schools seems common for most families in China (Long, n.d.).

#### **4.3. Working for the Family or Working for My Career? It's Hard to Pursue Both**

Relatively few marriages have merely one breadwinner nowadays in China. Mothers are more likely than fathers however, to report it makes harder for them to advance at work being a parent (Barroso & Horowitz, 2021). It turns out when it comes to duties at home in egalitarian marriages, meaning both parents work as breadwinners, females significantly bear more burdens on caregiving and housework issues (Chavda, 2023). Mothers might face more challenges to balance parent roles at home and professional roles at work, as data implies family related duty falls more on the female's side. As average educational level grows in China, more and more females would feel the necessity to pursue personal career as a financially independent individual, which could possibly lead to a postponement in the mother's role.

Moreover, to delay a parental role apparently falls not only within a female's concerns, but also arouses males' considerations. Studies show, males and females at work both report feeling like they could hardly give 100% at work with children under age 18 at home, taking up respectively 43 and 51 percentage of all. Nearly 17 percentages of parents believe they have been passed over for an important assignment, and even a promotion because of their parental responsibilities (Barroso & Horowitz, 2021). To pursue a vocation life from time to time stands against the role of a parent.

### **5. Mindset Changes beyond the Social Stress Framework**

Beyond the external factors that drive marriage couples away from birth, financial reasons, educational pressure, career pursuit, mindsets of individuals have changed for better adaptation to social stress. In the face of external stresses in a modern world, psychological changes came together with the biophysical rejection.

#### **5.1. Beyond a Machine: Birth-Giving as a Profound Psychobiophysical Transformation**

When news that prenatal mom suicides with newborn blasts on the internet,

first voices are often like, *why?* Bodies seen as merely undergoing biophysical changes during birth, cannot avoid the fate of being taken for granted as labour machines. Parents or families who undergo drastic psychological transformations during and after childbirth are often met with cold eyes, as others may find it incomprehensible or even view it as a shameful mutation. Therefore, prenatal depression never encounters the right attention as it deserves. As some might fight hard to refuse this continuously existing neglect of mental caring for prenatal families, it actually reflects the belief that everyone should function as part of the society machine, has impacted and evaded more profoundly into our everyday life than one could possibly imagine. The denial and criticism towards prenatal depression reflect how deep our society could fall into the pit of technocratic mechanism.

The technocratic model claims the righteousness to separate minds from body, as individuals should perform objectively, following the rules set by societies (Davis-Floyd, 2001). Thus, biomedical models treat patients as machines with deviant parts, alienating care giving thoughts on patients' illness experiences from procedurally biophysical treatment. Many people believe that moms merely undergo biophysical transformations similarly to wombs undergoing physical changes. Amy Farrah Fowler, the actress in *Big Bang*, said publicly in a streaming video that "when I decided it was time to become a mom, I had no idea what birth would be like". Sharing of birth experiences on social media, breaks the habitual thinking and common beliefs that giving birth is natural, or giving birth shall be easy. Filter bubbles of birth fairy tales have burst.

## 5.2. The Dilemma of Birth: Personal Choice vs. Family Bloodline

The presence of a Y chromosome is what designates men as lawful heirs. The most horrifying point about patriarchy is that it works not only in the field of business and politics, but also in every family unit, in the household, in people's beliefs. In the East, there is a Chinese saying of carrying on the bloodline of the family's name; in the West, lawfully heirs in the first order of an empire or a business corporation comes to males as well. Reproduction duties fall on women's shoulders, while succession duties carried out by men. Is the common sense of birth after marriage settles deeply in minds generally because of a habitual instinct of carrying on family bloodlines or because of genuine readiness to welcome a child as part of one's life new journey? Questions alike are being raised more frequently by younger generations, to whom children might not be necessarily essential component to fulfill the meaning of life.

## 5.3. Capital Market Labors: The Primary Destination for Future Generations

A primary reason why low fertility rate causes panics in authorities lies in a lack of labors in capital markets. In 2021, the proportion of the elderly population surpasses 14 percentage, symbolizing China entering the aged society (Textor, 2023). Concerns over the potentially shortage of labor in future markets arouses

actions. Governments promulgated policies to encourage couples to rear children and in more preferable cases more than one. Parental leave uptake among men has increased. Billions of dollars have channeled to entitle monthly allowance to parents for each child between newborn to two years old (Deutsche Welle, 2023). In China, three-child policy has followed right after two-child policy released in 5 years only to witness continuously decrease of average fertility rate from 1.77 to 1.16.

Child rearing is a lifelong investment project. For most families under middle-class, if having chosen to bear one child, some of them probably would focus on this only child instead of having more kids to separate the already limited financial resources. Parents struggle to offer the best options for children, wishfully supporting them to climb the hierarchical ladders to an upper class in future. Investing in only one child then stands a better chance of success. However, fear of global-wide economic downturns illuminates most families under middle-class to realize, no matter the efforts and investments they pour into, the majority of their next generations would still work in the similar position under the same hierarchical class as they did, that having kids *now* almost equivalent to fueling financial inputs as well as future manpower to the capital market from which the father generation has fought their life to escape. They are transfusing their life money for a better future of their kids, a future destined to be the same as theirs 18 years later.

## 6. Results

Based on content analysis of online news related to birth issues in China, the study applied the social stress framework to summarize possible explanations of low fertility willingness. In terms of socioeconomic status, the subsidiaries that come along with birth are housing issues and education concerns. This reaffirms the findings from empirical research (Becker, 1960), that standards of living, both for the family and for the child, adjust to the rise in income; while the inverse relation between income and reproduction exists as if it is a zero-sum game. As for the second stress indicator, life events, such as career pursuits, and occupational explorations, are identified as essential goals some would pursue above everything else. Giving birth however, appeals to be sometimes contradictory to what career-oriented people desire, which contributes to the explanation why people choose not to reproduce at their most prosperous ages. The last social stress indicator comes to social capital, which refers to influences from family, friends, and other surrounding environments. It shows that although elder generations value birth, young generations make more and more dependent choices nowadays. As what has been discussed in section 5, people would refer to more sources to acknowledge the hidden layers of information related to birth, such as prenatal depression, real biophysical changes in the mom's body during and after birth. Social stress changes behavioral intention, making people to respond psychologically. These intertwined relationships between social stress, birth decisions, and mindset changes might help the public comprehend

the nature of fertility status in all societies.

## 7. Conclusion

Observing the significant decline in fertility rates worldwide, it appears that the world has limited range of techniques available to address this issue. This is a result of a shift in the mindset of young adults, driven by the inescapable pressure of external factors that discourage procreation. The decision to have children is influenced by a multitude of socioeconomic concerns that permeate even the mere thought of welcoming a child into the family, including housing issues, education-related investments, and threats to one's career. Moreover, social media and information platforms provide individuals with an opportunity to view diverse lifestyles and the physical and psychological transformations that occur during childbirth. While it is not for us to judge whether individuals experience apprehension or hesitation upon decisions, historically, people had the access to a wealth of information beyond the confines of a filtered reality on birth, due to the proliferation of media platforms. Beyond the changing statistics, childbirth might have emerged as one of the greatest challenges ever faced by young adults in modern society.

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## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there are no competing interests, including but not limited to financial interests or personal relationship interests, that could have influenced the work presented in this paper.

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