

Factors Influencing Chinese Families' Childbearing Decisions after the Implementation of the Two-Child Policy

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Abstract: This study investigates the factors influencing Chinese families' childbearing decisions following the implementation of the Two-Child Policy. Through a combination of a literature review and semi-structured interviews with 11 parents from various occupational backgrounds, this research identifies three key influencing factors: economic burden, inadequate social support and challenges in educational resources. The research finds that the rising costs of housing and childcare significantly impact families' willingness to have children. Additionally, despite the government's efforts to encourage fertility, such as the introduction of the Three-Child Policy, the lack of effective social support and flexible work policies, to some extent, discourages people from expanding their families. Lastly, the high expenses of education and concern about the quality of education further deter parents from having more children. This study concludes that addressing these challenges requires comprehensive approaches, including financial relief, substantial social support and improved education reforms, thus reducing the burden on parents and improving fertility.

Keywords: childbearing decision making, family education resources, Two-Child Policy, Three-Child Policy, economic burden.

1. Introduction

The implementation of the Two-Child Policy and the Three-Child Policy - allowing families to have more children in China in 2015 and 2021, respectively, marked a significant shift from the previous One-Child Policy introduced in 1979, which aimed to address the problems of the ageing population and declining birth rate. This transformation has triggered a variety of socio-economic alterations and raises relevant concerns about its impact on family life, especially in the decision-making processes concerning childbearing.

Understanding the factors influencing fertility has become an indispensable precondition for development programs, particularly for developing countries that attach great importance to economic progress [1]. This is particularly important given the global fertility rate has decreased from 4.5 births per woman during 1970–1975 to 2.5 during 2005–2010 [2]. According to the National Bureau of Statistics, by the end of 2023, the national population of China was 1409.67 million, 2.08 million fewer than that at the end of the previous year [3]. The total number of births in the year was 9.02 million, with a birth rate of 6.39 ‰, which means that in 2023, the average number of births per thousand people was lower than 7. The natural population growth rate is -1.48 ‰, a decrease of 0.88 ‰

from 2022. As a developing country, China now has become one of the low-fertility-rate countries, which will hinder economic development [4].

For thousands of years, fertility has been the core of the traditional family in China, especially the pursuit of sons, which ensures the survival of the father's family name and bloodline [5, 6]. What's more, in Chinese society, elderly care is a deeply rooted family responsibility, thus childbearing functioning to ensure care in parents' old age. However, apart from the national policy mentioned above, industrialisation, modernisation and the establishment of the education system and pension system, have led to a major transformation in the significance of childbearing in China [7]. Hence, this study will examine the factors influencing Chinese families' childbearing decisions after the implementation of the Two-Child Policy.

2. Literature Review

The process of deciding to have children is influenced by complicated factors, such as social, economic, political and individual ones. These include the availability of valid and affordable childcare support, cultural norms, personal values and the suitability of the partner [8, 9, 10, 11, 12]. Demographic research shows that there are definite differences between men and women in their preferences and needs for starting families. For instance, women generally stress the importance of bearing children by a certain age more than men do and prioritise the availability of childcare [13].

In contrast, the factors affecting men's desire to have children are ranked from highest to lowest as follows: individual and interpersonal preparedness, physical health, economic prerequisites and social status of parents. Women attach the highest importance to individual and interpersonal readiness, but they believe social status to be the least important. For the other two factors, economic prerequisites and physical health, they deemed the former more critical than the latter [14]. To conclude, the current research on childbearing decision-making can be classified into three types: psychological elements (such as personality characteristics and personal values), individual distinctions (including age, gender, cultural background, education, economic status and religion), and informational factors (including prior experiences, knowledge and media exposure) [15, 16].

In China, factors influencing childbearing decision-making, to some extent, are often closely connected to governmental policies [17]. In the late 1970s, China implemented the family planning policy, which limited each couple to having only one child. The aim was to relieve population pressure and accelerate poverty alleviation [18]. The long-term implementation of this policy has resulted in an imbalance in the sex ratio at birth, the lack of labour resources and a decline in the working-age population. Hence, since the 21st century, in response to such negative consequences of family planning, China has begun to adjust its fertility policies.

In 2015, the two-child policy was introduced, which led to a noticeable increase in birth rates [4, 19]. The fertility rate increased by 12.95‰ and 12.43‰ in 2016 and 2017 respectively. However, the efficacy of this policy remains insufficient and has its limitations; by 2020, the number of births in mainland China had declined to only 12 million, marking the lowest figure since 1962 [20]. Subsequently, in 2021, China further revised its fertility policy, allowing couples to have up to three children, known as the three-child policy [21]. However, it remains to be seen whether the policy will reverse the low fertility rate and help slow down population ageing [22].

Moreover, in a study of Hunan Province, located in central China, the intention to have a second or third birth is not high, which is largely influenced by the people's gender, age, residence, marital relationships, educational levels, average working time, childcare support, marital satisfaction, accessibility of educational resources, health condition of both spouses, loan situation, size of living house and the first or second child's gender [22]. Other studies conducted in other cities and provinces such as Shanghai and Jiangsu in China indicate that the willingness to have additional children, particularly among those who already have one or two children, remains relatively low. This

reluctance is mainly influenced by several factors, including the woman's age, the proportion of household expenditure dedicated to the child's annual costs and concerns related to the child's education [17]. These factors are largely tied to economic and social considerations, which to some extent are contrary to traditional Chinese family values, emphasising early marriage and large, extended families [23].

Following the implementation of the new fertility policy, there is a relative lack of empirical research. Under the new fertility policy, which encourages multiple births, research on families' intentions and actual behaviours regarding having more than one child remains limited. Investigating the decision-making process and influencing factors when families consider having a second or third child represents a significant gap in the existing literature. Additionally, whether there are supportive measures to facilitate the implementation of the new fertility policy, thereby altering the current low birth rate situation, is a further aspect that this paper aims to investigate and study.

3. Methodology

This research was conducted from August to November 2024. Secondary data was obtained from scholarly literature, government documents and news reports, providing a comprehensive framework for comprehending the strategic approaches to factors influencing childbearing in China.

Primary data was collected through semi-structured interviews with 11 participants, aged between 28 and 50 years, with various occupational backgrounds, such as freelancers, teachers, civil servants, employers and online streamers and who are about to give birth or have one or two children (see Table 1 for a summary of the participants).

These participants were selected to ensure a wide range of perspectives regarding family fertility under the changes in birth policies. Each interview followed a semi-structured form, allowing flexibility for participants to express their experiences and thoughts while maintaining a consistent focus on key areas of inquiry. Interviews were conducted online, lasting between 30 to 60 minutes.

To protect the privacy of participants, the identities of the interviewees are anonymised in this article. All personal data and interview transcripts are safely saved and will be deleted within one year after the study's conclusion.

Table 1: Summary of Participants.

Anonymised name	Occupation	Fertility Condition
Participant A	employer of a design company	2
Participant B	online streamer	1
Participant C	housewife	2
Participant D	freelancer	0
Participant E	civil servant	2
Participant F	self-employed	1
Participant G	civil servant	2
Participant H	teacher	1
Participant I	student	1
Participant J	employer of a grinding tool company	1
Participant K	doctor	2

(Source: Author)

4. Findings

This research finds that, following the implementation of the Two-Child Policy, three main factors influence Chinese families' childbearing decisions, as discussed below:

4.1. Economic Factor

The first factor is economic pressure. Early work on China's two-child policy identified cost as a major disincentive to having a second child but financial constraints may affect childbearing desire [24]. Having a job, a stable income and house ownership become prominent decision-making factors for childbearing.

Participant K, a 40-year-old mother of two, who has a stable job in a hospital, shared her thoughts on the factors influencing families' childbearing decision-making:

"When the second baby was on the way, the first thing we consider was whether we could afford to support this child. Next, we considered our personal energy and the feelings of our first child."

This participant expressed her concern over the financial burden of fertility, which ultimately led her not to have any more children. Participant F also expressed her concerns:

"I think family's financial situation is the most crucial factor in deciding whether to have a second or third child. Therefore, considering my own circumstances, I will not have a second or third child."

Similarly, Participant D, who is preparing for pregnancy, emphasised the high cost of raising children and planned to only have one child. The rising costs of parenting, along with increasingly high housing prices, are all factors that, to some extent, deter childbirth.

"I didn't consider economic factors too much when having a second child. Of course, the economy foundation determines the superstructure, and the better the economic conditions, the greater the help for the child's growth. However, the constantly rising housing prices and increasing childcare costs in cities make it difficult for many families to afford or dare not have children." (Participant E)

Although Participant E did not directly state the economic pressure brought about by raising children, factors such as house prices and childcare costs indirectly reflect the economic aspect that affect her decision to have children. As Participant A said, "It's not that children can't be supported financially, but the challenge lies in raising them well beyond mere sustenance."

4.2. Social Support and Policy

The second factor is social support and policy. Dex and Smith argued that family-friendly policies, such as childcare and flexible working hours, are associated with improvements in productivity and performance [25]. Notably, some studies go further supporting a positive relationship between fertility and family-friendly policies [26].

In this research, Participant H, a 29-year-old mother of one, who works as a teacher in a school, said:

"I believe that social support can influence the decision to have children to some extent, because favourable government policies and social welfare can alleviate the financial pressure and concerns of parents, and some childcare services can better address the issue of not having elderly relatives to help with childcare."

However, some participants expressed negative thoughts about social support:

"Social support can serve as a reference, but not a decisive factor. In my opinion, when raising a child, social support can only add icing on the cake. The key lies in what kind of life parents themselves can provide for their child." (Participant F)

Similarly, although the government has implemented policies to encourage childbearing, other participants feel that these policies have offered little practical help.

“I am not very familiar with social support myself, but when I asked those around me who have given birth in the past two years, they all said that they feel that social support has little or no effect, and I don't know if the government's publicity in this area is not sufficient.” (Participant D)

Some even pointed out that public policies did not provide assistance for their childbearing.

“The government's support policies for having two or three children have little substantive effect... For childcare services, the system is not yet perfect, the cost is too high, and the pressure of taking care of children is entirely borne by families. The current model is for couples to rely on their own efforts and for parents to assist in taking care. Second child mothers in government agencies are not considered only children, so they cannot enjoy this welfare.” (Participant E)

Participant K, a professional in obstetrics, shared her thoughts on social support from her professional perspective: “To establish a childbirth-friendly society, we must not only focus on the birth of each new life but also prioritise the physical and mental health of mothers and infants and the harmony of the family. This requires a comprehensive effort from all levels of society. Social support, to a certain extent, has increased the willingness to have children.”

4.3. Family Education Resources

Last but not least, family education resources are an important factor. According to Wang's study, the cost of a child's education affects family fertility [27]. Nowadays, young parents invest more time, attention and money in their children's preschool education and hope to give their children the best education. This certainly accounts for the family expenses and can limit parents' desire to have children. Almost all participants expressed such ideas.

“I have always believed that the cost of education is the key to raising a child. A good school has advantages in various aspects such as the teaching level of teachers and the overall quality of students. Moreover, during the growth process of children, the cost of various tutoring classes, interest classes, and study tours continue to rise, making education the biggest expense for many families. If you want to have two children, whether you can maintain the education cost of two children and achieve balanced distribution needs to be carefully considered. In addition, there is also the cost of parents' family education in the education cost. Whether you can reasonably allocate the educational companionship time and tutoring class transportation for the two children is a problem that needs to be considered.” (Participant F)

From Participant F, who has one child, we know that education costs are a key factor in raising a child. High-quality schools, with excellent teachers and good students, come with high fares, adding a heavy burden on many families. Apart from the ever-increasing cost of education, it is necessary for parents to sacrifice personal time to care for their children. This situation is particularly difficult for families where the mother is the primary caregiver for the child; she is more likely to be the child's caregiver at the cost of opportunity in the family. With the increasing cost in terms of opportunities, the desire to have children is gradually weakening [27].

Participant B directly pointed out that the current education system is a major factor hindering more births:

“Education acts as a deterrent to having children. The high cost of schools today does not necessarily equate to quality, and when it comes to the education of children, teachers often require more from parents, supervising or even directly tutoring to meet the teachers' expected goals, with few having the ability or willingness to communicate directly with the children. All responsibilities are pushed onto the mothers, leaving already anxious and helpless mothers to scramble for training institutions to fulfil the teachers' expectations. Most extracurricular

classes today are expensive and ineffective, with good teachers hard to come by. Moreover, when a good teacher leaves, the remaining classes are often completed by other teachers. When the substitute teacher's teaching level is poor, it is difficult for parents to terminate the classes or search for a better teacher."

This participant considers family education resources as a barrier rather than a supportive factor. Moreover, she highlights that teachers often delegate most of the educational responsibilities to the parents, especially mothers, intensifying stress and anxiety for mothers; this leads to a reliance on expensive tutoring and extracurricular programs, further complicating the decision to have another child. Participant J concluded that the whole society is too competitive - teachers are caught up in the race for performance metrics, while children are swept up in the pursuit of academic achievements, which greatly affects fertility.

5. Conclusion

This empirical study attempts to identify the factors influencing Chinese families' childbearing decisions after the implementation of the Two-Child Policy. It found that economic burdens, inadequate social support and numerous challenges in children's education are the major reasons for participants' unwillingness to have more children. Although some policies, such as the Three-Child Policy, have been introduced to encourage childbearing, there are still many practical obstacles.

Dealing with these problems requires holistic methods. The government needs to adopt more effective policies that could provide financial relief for families. In addition, it is crucial to create a fertility-friendly society and supply more accessible childcare services around workplace and communities. Lastly, efforts to reform the education system and reduce parents' burdens are essential, which should lay emphasis on the well-rounded development rather than solely academic performances.

The limitation of this study is associated with the relatively small sample size. This means that the findings, to some extent, cannot be generalised. Hence, further research, particularly the case studies, should be implemented in the future. Notably, the aspect of family education resources, a significant concern to many parents, needs to be studied in-depth.

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