

Comparative Analysis of Population Aging and Fertility Policies in China and Japan

Jingtian Ye

*Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Nottingham Ningbo China, Ningbo, China
hmyjy14@nottingham.edu.cn*

Abstract. Population aging and declining fertility have become increasingly prominent demographic trends, particularly in East Asia. China and Japan are often examined together in this context, as both countries are experiencing rapid aging alongside persistently low birth rates, although their demographic transitions differ in timing and policy background. This study provides a comparative analysis of population aging trends and fertility policies in China and Japan. The research is based on secondary data drawn from international databases, national statistical reports, and existing academic literature. It focuses on demographic structures, policy developments, and the broader socio-economic conditions shaping fertility behavior. The findings suggest that policy adjustments alone have not led to a significant recovery in fertility levels. China's recent shift toward encouraging childbirth and Japan's long-term family support measures have produced only limited effects. Economic pressures, changing social expectations, and institutional constraints appear to play a more decisive role in shaping reproductive decisions. Overall, the analysis indicates that long-term structural factors outweigh short-term policy incentives, and effective responses to demographic change require broader institutional and social adjustments.

Keywords: Population aging, Fertility policy, China, Japan, Demographic transition

1. Introduction

Population aging and declining fertility have become central issues in discussions of long-term economic and social development. While these trends are visible across many regions, they have progressed particularly rapidly in East Asia. Japan entered an aging society earlier and has continued along this trajectory for several decades. China, by contrast, is experiencing a more compressed demographic transition, shaped in part by earlier population control policies and recent socio-economic changes [1, 2].

Existing research has explored fertility decline from multiple perspectives, including economic development, gender roles, and institutional arrangements [3, 4]. These studies offer valuable insights, yet direct comparisons between different policy environments remain relatively limited. In particular, the contrast between China's recent policy adjustments and Japan's longer policy history provides a useful basis for further analysis.

This study compares population aging trends and fertility policies in the two countries through a qualitative approach based on secondary data. It examines demographic patterns, traces policy

evolution, and considers the broader factors influencing fertility behavior. The analysis aims to clarify why fertility rates remain low despite ongoing policy interventions and to highlight the importance of structural conditions in shaping demographic outcomes.

2. Population aging trends in China and Japan

2.1. Aging trends in China

China has experienced a rapid increase in the proportion of the elderly population over the past few decades. This shift is closely linked to declining fertility and rising life expectancy. The long-term implementation of population control policies has contributed to a reduced birth rate, while improvements in healthcare and living standards have extended life spans [4].

Urbanization and economic transformation have further accelerated these trends. In many cities, smaller household sizes and delayed family formation have become more common. As a result, the share of the population aged 65 and above has continued to grow, placing increasing pressure on pension systems and healthcare services. The scale of China's population means that even modest changes in age structure translate into significant social and economic implications.

2.2. Aging characteristics in Japan

Japan represents one of the most advanced aging societies in the world. The country entered an aging phase earlier than most nations and has maintained a consistently high proportion of elderly individuals. High life expectancy, combined with long-term low fertility, has resulted in a shrinking and aging population [2].

The demographic structure in Japan reflects a sustained imbalance between younger and older age groups. A declining workforce and increasing dependency ratio have created challenges for economic growth and fiscal sustainability. Compared with China, Japan's aging process has unfolded over a longer period, allowing for gradual policy adaptation, although the effectiveness of these measures remains limited.

3. Evolution of fertility policies

3.1. China's policy transformation

China's fertility policy has undergone significant changes over time. The one-child policy, introduced in the late 20th century, was effective in controlling population growth but also contributed to long-term demographic challenges [1]. In response to concerns about aging and labor supply, the government gradually relaxed birth restrictions, first allowing two children and later introducing a three-child policy.

Despite these adjustments, fertility rates have not increased substantially. Economic considerations and changing social expectations have influenced family decisions more strongly than policy incentives. In urban areas, the cost of raising children and the demands of modern lifestyles have reduced the willingness to have larger families.

3.2. Japan's pronatalist policies

Japan has implemented a range of policies aimed at encouraging higher fertility over several decades. These measures include financial support for families, expanded childcare services, and

parental leave programs. Efforts have also been made to improve work-life balance and reduce the burden on working parents.

However, the overall impact of these policies has remained limited. Fertility rates have stayed low despite continuous adjustments. Structural factors, such as long working hours and entrenched gender roles, continue to shape reproductive behavior. McDonald's gender equity theory [3] provides one possible explanation for this outcome. The theory argues that fertility is likely to remain low when women experience greater opportunities in education and employment but continue to shoulder most family responsibilities. In Japan, the persistence of traditional gender expectations may reduce the effectiveness of government measures designed to encourage childbirth. This suggests that policy measures alone may not be sufficient without broader changes in social and institutional conditions.

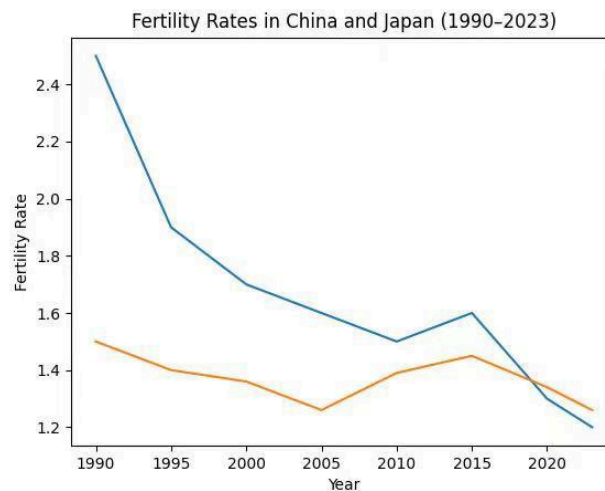


Figure 1. Changes in fertility rates in China and Japan, 1990-2023 [5]

As shown in Figure 1, fertility rates in both China and Japan have generally declined over the past three decades, although the pattern of decline differs between the two countries [5, 6]. Japan has experienced low fertility since the 1990s, and the rate has remained below the replacement level for a long period. China maintained a relatively higher fertility rate in the early years, but fertility declined noticeably over time. Even after the introduction of the two-child and three-child policies, fertility levels did not increase substantially. Previous research suggests that once fertility falls to a very low level, recovery can be difficult despite policy intervention [7].

4. Causes of persistently low fertility

4.1. Economic factors

Economic pressures play a significant role in shaping fertility decisions in both China and Japan. The rising cost of housing, education, and daily living has increased the financial burden associated with raising children. Becker's economic theory of the family suggests that fertility decisions are often influenced by the costs and benefits associated with raising children [8]. According to the National Bureau of Statistics of China [9], expenditures on housing, education and childcare have continued to rise in recent years.

In addition, labor market conditions contribute to uncertainty. Job instability and competitive work environments make long-term planning more difficult for younger generations. As a result,

decisions about marriage and childbearing are often delayed or reconsidered.

4.2. Social and institutional factors

Social changes have also influenced fertility patterns. Later marriage, increased individualism, and shifting attitudes toward family life have contributed to smaller household sizes. Greater participation of women in education and the workforce has further altered traditional family roles [3]. At the same time, many parents have become increasingly concerned with investing more resources in each child's education and future development. According to Li et al. [10], this tendency may encourage families to prioritize child quality over child quantity, which can contribute to lower fertility levels.

Institutional constraints remain important as well. In Japan, demanding work schedules limit the ability to balance employment and family responsibilities. In China, access to childcare and workplace protections for parents remains uneven. These factors create additional barriers to childbearing, even when policy incentives are in place.

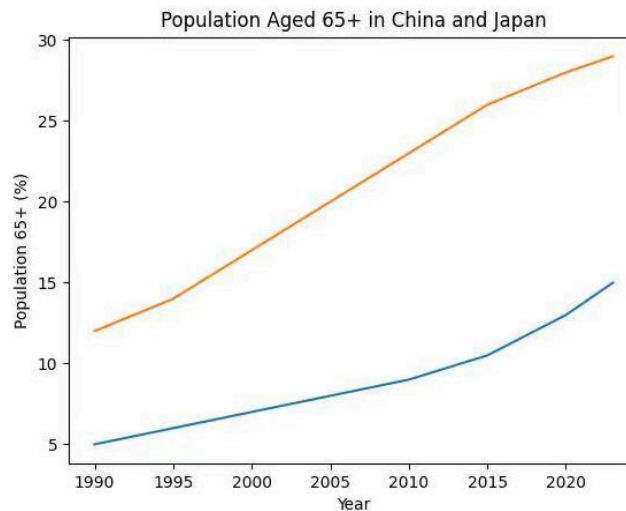


Figure 2. Share of population aged 65 and above in China and Japan [5]

Figure 2 shows that the proportion of people aged 65 and above has risen steadily in both China and Japan. However, Japan's aging process began earlier and has reached a much more advanced stage. China still has a lower share of elderly people overall, but the speed of population aging has increased considerably in recent years. As the number of older people continues to grow, both countries are facing challenges related to healthcare expenditure, pension systems, and labor supply. The figure also highlights that declining fertility and population aging are closely connected. A smaller number of births today is likely to contribute to a higher dependency burden in the future.

5. Policy implications and recommendations

5.1. Implications for China

Recent changes in China's fertility policy suggest that simply allowing families to have more children is not enough to increase birth rates. Although the government has gradually relaxed birth restrictions, many couples remain reluctant to have larger families. One major reason is the high cost of raising children, especially in large cities where housing, education, and childcare expenses

continue to rise. For many young adults, these financial pressures make it difficult to balance family plans with other life goals.

In addition to economic concerns, workplace expectations may also influence fertility decisions. Some parents, particularly women, worry that having children could affect their career development or future employment opportunities. Therefore, policy efforts should go beyond fertility incentives and focus on creating a more supportive environment for families. Expanding affordable childcare services, improving parental leave arrangements, and reducing education-related costs could help ease some of the burdens faced by parents [3, 8]. If these broader issues are not addressed, future policy adjustments may continue to have only a limited effect on fertility behavior.

5.2. Implications for Japan

Japan's experience shows that long-term efforts to encourage childbirth can face significant challenges when deeper social and institutional factors remain unchanged. Over the past several decades, the Japanese government has introduced a variety of measures, including childcare support, parental leave programs, and financial assistance for families. However, fertility rates have remained low despite these initiatives.

A possible reason is that balancing work and family life remains difficult for many young adults. Long working hours and demanding workplace cultures often leave limited time for childcare and family life. In addition, traditional expectations regarding gender roles continue to place a large share of household responsibilities on women, consistent with McDonald's gender equity theory [3].

Future policy efforts could place greater emphasis on improving work-life balance and promoting a more equal distribution of family responsibilities between men and women. Creating flexible working arrangements and increasing support for working parents may help reduce some of the barriers that currently discourage childbearing.

5.3. Broader implications for aging societies

The experiences of China and Japan offer useful lessons for other countries that are facing population aging and declining fertility. Although governments often introduce financial incentives to encourage childbirth, the evidence discussed in this study suggests that fertility decisions are influenced by a much wider range of factors. Economic conditions, social values, employment opportunities, and access to public services can all affect whether individuals choose to start or expand a family.

As societies become more urbanized and economically developed, the costs associated with raising children often increase. At the same time, changing lifestyles and personal priorities may reduce the desire for larger families. For this reason, policies that focus only on short-term financial support may not achieve their intended goals.

A more effective approach may involve combining economic assistance with broader reforms in housing, childcare, education, and labor market institutions. Governments should also recognize that demographic trends usually change slowly, meaning that the effects of policy interventions may take many years to become visible. Long-term planning and policy consistency are therefore important for addressing the challenges created by population aging.

6. Conclusion

The comparison between China and Japan suggests that fertility decline cannot be understood simply as a policy issue. Although governments can influence reproductive behavior through incentives and support programmes, decisions about marriage and childbearing are also shaped by broader social and economic conditions. In both countries, rising costs, changing lifestyles and institutional barriers appear to play an important role. These findings indicate that addressing population ageing may require long-term reforms rather than relying solely on fertility policies.

The analysis suggests that policies aimed only at encouraging childbirth may have limited effects unless they are supported by broader institutional reforms. Measures that improve work-life balance, strengthen family support systems, and reduce economic uncertainty may have a greater impact on fertility decisions over the long term.

Nevertheless, this study has several limitations. First, it relies primarily on secondary data and existing literature, which may not fully capture individual attitudes and behavioral motivations. Second, the analysis focuses only on China and Japan, limiting the generalizability of the findings to other countries.

Future research could incorporate survey data, interviews, or econometric methods to provide a more detailed understanding of fertility behavior. Comparative studies involving other East Asian economies, such as South Korea and Singapore, may also offer valuable insights into how different institutional settings influence demographic outcomes. As demographic change continues to reshape societies across East Asia, understanding the factors behind fertility decline will remain an important area of research and policy debate.

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