



A New Perspective on the Decline of China's Birth Rate: Analysis Based on the Insufficient Ability of Intergenerational Child-rearing

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Abstract: Influenced by the dual impact of delayed retirement policies and postponed childbearing ages, the ability of elderly Chinese to care for their grandchildren is decreasing year by year. The lack of care for children born to young couples has contributed to the decline in China's birth rate. This paper observes the decline in China's birth rate from a new perspective and attempts to analyze the reasons behind it from the angle of intergenerational child-rearing. The results indicate that China is influenced by the reality of the annual decrease in the size of the pension fund pool, and delayed retirement has become a forced choice, leading to a lack of time for the elderly to care for their grandchildren. Meanwhile, delaying the age at which the elderly care for their grandchildren has lowered their ability to do so. Furthermore, with further economic and social development, the impact of multiculturalism and the changing values have further delayed the age at which women bear their first child, again postponing the age at which the elderly care for their grandchildren and reducing their ability to do so. In terms of policy practice, China needs to establish a comprehensive social work system to enhance the ability of elderly grandparents to care for their grandchildren. Simultaneously, for those nearing retirement who have opportunities to care for their grandchildren, a flexible retirement system should be established. Priority should be given to taking care of grandchildren, thus enhancing the overall societal willingness to bear children and reversing the trend of declining birth rates.

Keywords: intergenerational childcare, birth rate, delayed retirement, postponed childbearing age

1. Introduction

China has long held the title of the most populous country in the world and has contributed a significant population dividend to its economic growth. During the Ming's Wanli eras, China's population had already reached 190 million. After experiencing massive changes in dynasties, upheavals, natural disasters, and epidemics such as the plague, by the early years of the Qing Kangxi period, the population had further decreased to just over 140 million. Subsequently, there was a steady increase, and by the early years of the People's Republic of China, the population had reached 450 million. The baby boom after the founding of the nation further fueled population growth, ultimately reaching a record of around 1.4 billion people. Even under the control of the family planning policy, China's population still far exceeds that of any other period in history. However, the sharp decline in the birth rate in China today suggests a trend of annual population decline in the future, and the decrease in the number of newborns indirectly exacerbates the problem of population aging.

This paper will start from the perspective of intergenerational childcare and analyze and supplement the reasons for the sharp decline in China's birth rate based on the current situation. The further analysis will primarily focus on two points: delayed retirement and postponed childbearing age. The aim is to identify the logic behind the significant decline in China's birth rate from this perspective and provide feasible policy recommendations to maintain a sustainable level of birth rate in China.

2. Literature Review

In response to the declining birth rate in China, scholars have conducted targeted research from various perspectives. For instance, Kang et al. (2020) analyzed the reasons for the decrease in the willingness of young couples to have children from the angle of the high housing prices in China, which increase the cost of childbearing. Chen and Zhang (2019) studied the relationship between pension insurance and the willingness to have children based on the Chinese General Social Survey, pointing out that a sound pension insurance system has a nonlinear impact on social willingness to have children. These analyses have to some extent explained the reasons for the decline in China's birth rate. However, the shortage of caregivers for infants and toddlers must receive sufficient attention. Therefore, in addition to economic, ideological, and social security factors, the question of who takes care of newborns within families becomes one of the biggest constraints on China's

population growth (Wang Yazhang, 2016).

Generally, after childbirth, from childcare to escorting children to school and even providing certain material support to children, much of the responsibility falls on the grandparents of the newborn within the family. In other words, grandparents support young parents through intergenerational childcare (Zou et al., 2018). Not only in China but also in many other countries, to cope with the high costs of childbirth and child-rearing, the responsibility of caring for grandchildren within families is often borne by grandparents (Yu et al., 2023). Intergenerational childcare is essentially a form of transfer payment, where grandparents transfer their time endowment to their children through caring for grandchildren, thus influencing their children's reproductive decisions (Du and Lin, 2022). Therefore, the intergenerational caregiving situation in society will evidently have a significant impact on the birth rate.

Based on the existing literature, research on intergenerational childcare mainly focuses on its impact on the labor market (Lu et al., 2017; Zou et al., 2018), its effects on the physical and mental health of the elderly (Song et al., 2013; Wang and Chen, 2019), its influence on children's growth and future development (Ao et al., 2022), and the real issues related to its impact on children's reproductive intentions (Yan Chengliang, 2018; Yu and Gong, 2021). However, there is relatively little further analysis on the factors influencing intergenerational caregiving capacity. These studies only suggest that intergenerational childcare will affect the social birth rate through channels such as reproductive intentions and the cost of child-rearing. If we further explore the factors influencing the capacity of intergenerational caregiving, we will discover that delayed retirement and postponed childbearing age would increase the average age of grandparents. Consequently, this would reduce the capacity of grandparents to provide childcare, thereby lowering the overall societal birth rate.

3. Dynamic Facts of Delayed Retirement and Postponed Childbearing Age among Chinese Grandparents

According to the China Pension Development Report 2023 released by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in 2023, the issue of delayed retirement in China has been further prioritized, with the retirement age potentially being set at 65. Delayed retirement can alleviate the current tension in China's pension fund pool from two perspectives. Firstly, elderly individuals working for additional years can contribute more to their pension funds. Secondly, during their working years, they can choose to receive fewer pension payments, thus achieving both revenue enhancement and cost reduction. Consequently, the delayed retirement of grandparents inevitably results in them being unable to enter into the rhythm and state of caring for their grandchildren in advance.

Another social reality that requires our attention is the significant postponement of the childbearing age among young adults of childbearing age. This phenomenon is to some extent an inevitable choice of social progress and is related to the diversified values of contemporary young people. However, it objectively leads to a further delay in the average age of grandparents caring for grandchildren. According to data released by the National Bureau of Statistics, from 2013 to 2022, within just ten years, the average childbearing age in China has been delayed from 26.11 years to 28.35 years, postponing by nearly two years. Moreover, the average childbearing age in 2013 was already delayed by four years compared to 1990. The postponement of the childbearing age is the result of various societal, cultural, and other factors working together and can hardly be reversed in the short term.

4. Logical Mechanisms of Delayed Retirement and Postponed Childbearing Age on Birth Rate

The influence of intergenerational childcare on birth rates primarily operates through two pathways: delayed retirement and postponed childbearing age. The specific logical mechanisms are outlined below:

4.1 The Impact Mechanism of Delayed Retirement on Birth Rates

The implementation of delayed retirement policies has already been put into practice. Previously, retirement ages for women were extended from 50 to 55, while for men, it was extended to after 60, and individuals could further delay retirement to 65 based on personal circumstances. After delaying retirement, if one's grandchildren are born during the delay period, it inevitably leads to a gap in childcare. A delay of 5 years results in a significant decline in the physical function of the elderly, reducing their ability to care for grandchildren.

4.2 The Impact Mechanism of Postponed Childbearing Age on Birth Rates

Postponed childbearing age leads to a decrease in the natural fertility rate. The specific logical mechanism lies in the delayed childbearing age of women, causing them to miss their optimal fertility period or even rendering them unable

to conceive (Chen and Jin, 2011). China's rapid industrialization process and issues related to fast-food diets and food safety have exacerbated infertility problems, especially among older nulliparous women, posing a serious challenge to population growth. Risks of newborn mortality, congenital abnormalities, and other health issues have significantly increased compared to decades ago. Additionally, postponing the childbearing age further delays the age at which grandparents care for grandchildren. While previously, individuals in their 40s could provide care for grandchildren, now it's essentially delayed until after 60, with many grandparents waiting until they are in their 70s to take on such responsibilities.

5. Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

Currently, China is facing a significant social issue of plummeting birth rates, which is not only attributed to subjective reasons but also to the objective fact of inadequate childcare for newborns. Based on the analysis and conclusions of this paper, addressing this issue requires enhancing the capacity for intergenerational childcare. Intergenerational childcare within families is an unavoidable reality for young people when it comes to solving the problem of childbirth. For families in China, which have transitioned from the agricultural era to the industrial and even information age, most parents of newborns are engaged in non-agricultural work, focusing their energy on career development. Therefore, for grandparents who have the reality of caring for grandchildren, certain flexible retirement policies can be implemented, prioritizing the care of grandchildren for these middle-aged and elderly individuals. Additionally, considering the fact that the average age of grandparents is increasing year by year, social work interventions can help enhance their ability to care for grandchildren from a sociological perspective. Moreover, efforts should be made to strengthen the construction of socialized childcare and regulate kindergarten and nursery institutions through legislative measures. Social forces can be leveraged to lighten the burden of childcare for grandparents. Addressing the reality of postponed childbearing age among parents of newborns requires further lowering the age at which parents have children. Encouraging young people to marry and have children during their undergraduate and master's studies, while providing certain social support such as setting up childcare facilities in universities, can help lower the average age of grandparents caring for grandchildren, thereby increasing their average caregiving capacity and ultimately enhancing family's willingness to bear children.

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