

Is China Headed for Very Low Fertility

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Abstract

More than two decades after China's fertility dropped below replacement level, there is no sign of reversing its declining trend, even after a major reform in its birth planning policy. This paper examines China's fertility future by analyzing a longitudinal survey in Jiangsu province, which followed fertility attitudes and behaviors of reproductive age women in 2007, 2010 and 2014. By examining the factors and deliberations behind family's fertility decision, we demonstrate that fertility in China is under great pressure from rising economic costs and opportunity costs of children, intensifying social competition, and rapidly evolving norms of marriage and family. Without swept policy reforms and social changes, we project that China is headed for very low fertility, just like its neighbors in the East Asia.

Long Abstract

Background

More than two decades after China's fertility dropped below replacement level, there is no sign of reversing its declining trend, even after a major reform in its birth planning policy. China's fertility dropped to below replacement level in early 1990s, and stayed low ever since. According to the 2010 census, China's fertility level has dropped to around 1.5 or lower (Cai 2013). More recent data suggest that this downward trend is continuing. Partly as recognition of this low fertility reality and downward trend, Chinese government announced a major reform to its one-child policy in November 2013 – couples with one-side as a one-child are now allowed to have a second child. While it is still premature to assess the overall effect of this reform, government statistics shows that the take-up rate in the first six months of implementation is extremely low – less than 5 percent applied for this new exemption among over 10 million who are targeted. The added number of births is expected to be much lower than the government's own projection.

With the one-child policy still in place, low fertility in China has been often attributed to the effect of government policy (e.g. NPFPC 2007; Jiang 2007), but that's more a myth than truth. China's fertility was already among the lowest among developing countries before the launch of the one-child policy, and the one-child policy did little to bring down the fertility, but only caused large swings from year to year, in its first decades of implementation in the 1980s. The drop to below replacement level in the 1990s, and continued low ever since, have more to do with drastic changes in Chinese society, including rapid economic development, urbanization, globalization, rising cost of education, and many more. In other words, the below replacement fertility in China, shares many features with what have been observed in other societies.

While the Chinese government never shies away from boasting the great "success" of the one-child policy, putting out bogus claims like that "the program had prevented 400 million births" and calling other developing countries to follow the suit, it has been working on an explicit assumption that China's fertility has been around 1.8, in its own projections and plans and believed that fertility would bounce back by just tweaking the policy. Such an assumption is at least partly based on answers of desired family size based on surveys – often 60 to 70 percent of Chinese express a desire to have a second child. The above mentioned low take-up rate of the new two-children policy exemption limited usefulness of desired family size to predict fertility, and presents a good counterargument on how limited the birth planning policy has on people's fertility decision: the policy restriction could be a ceiling, but does not guarantee a bottom.

Then why China's fertility is so slow and how low it will go? In a previous paper (Zheng et al. 2009), we documented that families have well-articulated reasons behind their fertility decision, many had stated their intention not to go beyond one-child, even though many were qualified to have a second child. In this paper, we return to respondents who informed us of their fertility intention in 2007. We compare their expressed fertility desire (desired number of children), fertility intention (whether intending to have an additional child) and achieved fertility outcome three years later, and then seven years later. We seek to answer two specific questions: first, to

what extent fertility desire and intention relate to subsequent fertility outcomes, and second, to the extent that fertility desire and intention do or do not predict fertility behavior, whether there are any patterns that reflect the underlying reasons of reproductive decision making.

Data source and methods

During 2006-2014, a collaborated longitudinal study about childbearing desire, intention, and behavior was carried out in six selected counties of Jiangsu Province in east coast China, named Jiangsu Fertility Intention and Behavior Study (JFIBS). The study has a first wave survey took place in early 2007 with 18,513 women aged 18-40, a follow-up survey in early 2010 with a sample size of 20,827 (76% had the first survey), and a follow-up on second parity childbearing behavior in early 2014. Community information was also collected by a pre-designed form filled out by local authorities.

JFIBS was designed to understand reproductive preference such as fertility desire and intention, as well as childbearing plan and their relationship to childbearing behavior. We use different measures on opinions about childbearing: (1) ideal number of children without considering any constrain; (2) desired number of children (“how many children would you like to have?”); (3) childbearing intention among married women (“are you considering to have a/another child?”); (4) if there is a “yes” to above question, degree of certainty to have another child. Furthermore, we probed reasons behind the stated childbearing intention; a set of questions were also asked on opinions about having children. In follow-up survey of 2010, we revisited respondents of 2007 baseline survey with a follow-up rate of 86%, enable to exam stability and validity of fertility intention. Qualitative information was also collected by individual interviews, to verify the reported number and on people’s understanding about the difference between ideal and desired family size, and to further explore values and reasons relating to fertility intention.

This paper will use data from the surveys and interviews as well as utilize research findings from existing papers, to review measurements of fertility intention and their relationship to childbearing behavior, to explore possible determinants of the intention and behavior, and to discuss implications of fertility intention to future fertility change and policy reform.

Main Findings

We found that ideal number of children, 1.65 on average, is relatively stable and consistent across different groups, although younger generation has slightly lower average number. The desired number of children (1.42 on average) is lower than the ideal number of children but with significant difference across groups. Strong childbearing intention is a good predictor to second parity child birth in three-year period, but people with only weak intention to have another child change their mind considerably over the same period. Weak fertility intention is more like a general desire, usually does not translate into actions. The evidence shows that ideal number of children is a quite reliable measure but least valid for predicting future fertility, desired number represents demand for children and closer to reality, while strong childbearing intention is more valid to predict short-term childbearing. However, many factors, either external or internal, affect the intention and redirect the childbearing decision.

The determinants on fertility desire, intention, and translate from intention to action could be grouped into three dimensions: macro/institutional, familial, and individual. Ideal number of children is less sensitive to most of the factors, with the exception of intergenerational linkage. Birth policy has moderate relationship with desired number of children but far from dominant. Economic constrain, opportunity cost, and perceived cost of childbearing has a significant effect on intention to second childbearing. The Theory of Planned Behavior is found helpful in analyzing the discrepancy between fertility intention and behavior, where attitudes towards fertility, subjective norms, and perceived behavior control all have significant contribution.

Conclusion and discussion

While the low fertility comes with unique features embedded in its social, cultural and political context, it shares many same features as observed in other societies, namely structural changes that resulted in economic pressure and constraints imposed on young people, and ideational changes showcased by a more individualistic orientation that places marriage and childbearing at a lower priority than work and self-fulfillment in one's life (e.g. Caldwell and Schindlmayr 2003; Lesthaeghe and Surkyn 2004, Lesthaeghe 1995, van de Kaa 1987). We argue that the Chinese case needs to be examined under the broad context of the recent wave of globalization, and presents an important and unique opportunity to study the underlying forces of emerging global low fertility. For China, without swept policy reforms and social changes, we project that it is headed for very low fertility, just like its neighbors in the East Asia.