

A Comparative Investigation of China and South Korea's Fertility Encouragement Policies

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Abstract. Based on the data released by the United Nations, the population growth rates of China and South Korea are both at extremely low levels, and the population is severely plagued by the trend of aging. At the same time, with the liberation and development of social ideology and the increase of social pressure, the cost of childbirth for young people in the new era is high so their willingness to give birth is low. In this context, the two countries have introduced a series of different policies to encourage childbirth in the past. This article adopts literature and comparative analysis methods to analyze the policies and social backgrounds of encouraging fertility in China and South Korea, from a new perspective, to view the low fertility trap faced by China and South Korea, and provide reasonable response measures. It proposes practical and feasible suggestions for solving the fertility problems in China and South Korea, such as facing the survival difficulties of young people understand the difficult choice between reproductive instincts and individual freedom among young people in the new era. And it will be helpful for the government to implement relevant policies to reduce the pressure on young people's fertility, such as housing prices, supporting educational facilities, and maternity leave. In addition, the concept of gender equality should be implemented throughout the entire process, eliminating explicit and implicit employment discrimination caused by childbirth and gender.

Keywords: China and South Korea, fertility encouragement policy, female equality.

1. Introduction

Based on the data released by the United Nations in the 2022 World Population Outlook, the birth rate in South Korea in 2022 was only 0.55, making it the country with the lowest birth rate in the world. The low willingness of young people to have children has been a problem that has plagued South Korea for many years. China, which is also an East Asian country, also faces the problem of low fertility rates. According to the 2022 World Population Outlook, China's birth rate in 2022 was only 0.754, ranking ninth among the top ten countries with the lowest birth rate. The population issue is a top priority for a country. With the difference in economic development speed among countries within the East Asian region, there have been significant changes in family form and structure, and the fertility rate has also begun to decline. Family fertility support policies have gradually been put on the agenda[1]. In the mid-20th century, South Korea's fertility rate reached the highest in the world. After 2005, South Korea's fertility policy shifted from suppression to encouragement, and a series of encouraging fertility policies were introduced, but they did not achieve significant results. The fertility rate has repeatedly reached new lows[2]. Since the implementation of the comprehensive two child policy in 2015, neighboring China, which is also part of the Confucian cultural circle in East Asia, has not achieved the expected annual birth population. Therefore, in 2021, China issued the "Decision of the Central Committee and the State Council of China on Optimizing Fertility Policies to Promote Long Term Balanced Population Development", which pointed out the further optimization of fertility policies and the implementation of the policy of one couple having three children and supporting measures, indicating the Chinese government's urgent determination to solve the problem of low fertility.

However, there is still a gap in relevant research. The articles by Zhang Huizhi, Wang Hongman, and others mostly analyze the changes and development of family fertility policies in different historical periods from the perspective of historical evolution, while there is a lack of targeted in-

depth research on the fertility policies, especially the encouraging fertility policies, of the two low fertility countries in China and South Korea[1,2].

This article mainly adopts literature and comparative research methods to provide reasonable suggestions for the formulation of fertility policies in China and South Korea in the next step, by comparing the changes in fertility policies and the social reality behind them, as well as the similarities and differences in encouraging fertility policies between China and South Korea.

In addition, apart from the fact that China and the South Korea is being geographically close, having deep historical origins, and belonging to the Confucian cultural circle, it is worth noting that both of them have implemented varying degrees of fertility suppression policies for a period of time after the population reached its peak in the last century. The fertility rates of the two countries have strong comparative research value. In order to solve the dilemma of low fertility and escape the trap of low fertility as soon as possible, South Korea has introduced a series of related policies such as birth subsidies, education exemptions, and education funds since 2014 to stimulate childbearing among eligible women, but none of them have achieved significant results; However, China's two child policy has also had little effect. Therefore, the Chinese government launched the three child policy and related supporting measures in 2021 to encourage eligible families to have three children, taking into account marriage, childbirth, parenting, and education, and improving the implementation of proactive reproductive support measures such as finance, taxation, insurance, education, housing, and employment[3].

2. Overall of China's and South Korea's Fertility Policy

2.1. The Shift of China's Fertility Policy

Population development cannot be separated from complex economic and political scenarios and social ideologies[4]. In summary, this article roughly divides China's population policy into three stages - encouragement, suppression, and encouragement.

The encouraged fertility stage began around 1949 and ended around 1959. After the establishment of the People's Republic of China, social stability, rapid economic development, continuous improvement in people's living standards and medical and health conditions, and a high willingness of the people to have children; At the same time, various industries in society are in need of revitalization, and there is an urgent need for a large number of labor force to participate in social production. Therefore, the Chinese government has gradually restored its labor force, encouraged childbirth, and rapidly increased its population. Taking 1949 as an example, China's population growth rate was 16%. By 1957, the population growth rate had risen to 23.2%.

The stage of inhibiting fertility began around 1971 and ended around 2014. At this stage, due to the development of the economic level, population growth is on the verge of losing control, and the Chinese government is gradually implementing varying degrees of family planning restrictions. In 1971, the State Council approved and forwarded the "Report on Doing a Good Job in Family Planning", which included the indicators for controlling population growth in the national economic development plan for the first time. The country has formulated a fertility policy of "late, rare, and few" and "advocating for the best number of children for a couple, with a maximum of two".

The stage of encouraging fertility began from 2015 to present. In order to distinguish different levels of low fertility in detail, the United Nations report generally considers the lower than replacement level (the total fertility rate is 2.1) The fertility rate is called low fertility, when the total fertility rate is below 1.5 and 1.3, it is called "very low fertility" and "extremely low fertility" respectively. This article mainly uses relevant United Nations data for analysis, so the above method of dividing fertility levels is followed. Since 2015, the fertility rate in South Korea has been declining for seven consecutive years, with young people pursuing a higher quality of life and a more free way of life, leading to a decrease in the willingness of eligible age groups to have children. China's fertility rate is gradually decreasing, and the phenomenon of population aging is becoming more serious. The fertility policy has once again shifted to an active policy of encouraging fertility. From the decision

of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council in 2015 on the comprehensive reform of the two child policy and the improvement of family planning service management to the decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council in 2021 on optimizing family planning policies and promoting long-term balanced population development, it is pointed out that the policy of one couple having three children can be implemented and various supporting measures will be gradually implemented. The Guiding Opinions on Fertility Support Measures, issued in 2022, have introduced a series of specific measures to implement positive fertility policies. The government should take the helm to introduce more practical policies or firm regulatory mechanisms to create a family friendly workplace and integrates it into the fertility support system, gradually improve the inclusive childcare service system including increasing the supply of inclusive childcare services, reduce the operating costs of childcare institutions, and improve childcare services, the quality of childcare services and the mechanism for maternity leave and benefits protection such as gradually incorporating suitable childbirth pain and assisted reproductive technology projects into the payment scope of the medical insurance fund. Furthermore, accurately implementing preferential policies for purchasing and renting houses, strengthening housing taxes to reduce the burden on families with children, building a favorable employment environment for childbirth, encouraging employers to provide services such as holiday custody would also be a beneficial attempt.

2.2. The Shift of South Korea's Fertility Policy

South Korea's fertility policy can be mainly divided into two stages - short-term suppression stage and long-term incentive stage.

Due to the rapid economic development of South Korea in the last century, the population also rapidly expanded. Based on this, South Korea began implementing a birth control policy in 1962, which was mainly promoted through "family planning", including four stages: the introduction of "family planning", the diversified development of birth control policies, the enhancement of birth control intensity, and the end of birth control policies[5].

The above policies quickly solved the problem of population expansion in the short term, but after only 23 years, South Korea entered a period of low fertility, with continuous decline in population growth rate and total fertility rate, and rapid and deep aging of the population. Therefore, since 2005, the South Korean government has been promoting a transition from fewer to more children, committed to increasing the total fertility rate and achieving long-term balanced population development. In response, the South Korean government has gradually increased its financial investment in related fields such as education, housing, and welfare security. South Korea has invested and is expected to invest 189 trillion and 196 trillion Korean won through the formulation of relevant laws and the implementation of the Four Basic Plans for Low Fertility and High Age Society, committed to encouraging fertility, promoting population growth, achieving moderate population size, and improving population structure. However, the expected results have not been achieved so far [6].

3. Comparison and Contrast

3.1. Similarity

3.1.1 Similarity in Social Background

The concept of "fewer children" originated from Japanese, and the concepts of "fewer children" and "fewer children aging" have gradually become social policy terms that describe the characteristics of population development in East Asia. East Asian countries, represented by China and South Korea, are gradually entering an "ultra few child" society. For its reasons, Shen Jie provided a detailed explanation in the article from three perspectives: the "compressed" industrial development model in East Asia (a rapidly developing industrial model in the short term), the asynchronous relationship

between the "compressed" economic development in East Asia and the evolution of culture and values, and the intervention methods and timing of social policies with fewer children[7]. The so-called "compression type" industrial development model is understood in this article as the process of industrial and economic development compressed into a very short period of time by latecomer countries through learning from the first mover countries in a short period of time, pursuing rapid and efficient development. Both China and South Korea are like this. Compressing the industrial and economic development process of the first mover countries from hundreds of years to decades will inevitably lead to some difficult to solve social problems, such as a low fertility "fewer children" society. The conflict between modern society and traditional values brought about by the "compressed" economic development model is one of the reasons for such problems in China and South Korea. As neighbors of the Confucian cultural circle, the traditional ideas of both countries have been deeply influenced by Confucius' Confucianism. The modern concept of freedom has seriously impacted the traditional values of marriage and love, and the concept of inheritance continues to affect the gender imbalance in the birth rates of both countries, further leading to the phenomenon of female infertility in the new era. Confucianism begins with family relationships and ascribes different roles and responsibilities to various family members. Confucianism begins with family relationships and ascribes certain roles and responsibilities to different family members. Confucian patriarchy strengthens expectations or norms that women have to take the roles of homemaker such as taking care of children, maintaining household or attending elderly family members. While in modern society, the popular nuclear families function far differently from traditional farming families, the Confucian separation of the roles of husband and wife still exists in Korea and China [8].

Observing women's lives from the perspective of life history, childbirth coincides with key events such as women's access to higher education and career advancement. The optimal age for women to have children is also the golden age for career development[9]. Fertility has become a linked event where both women's development and family pressures overlap. In addition, the "compressed" industrial and economic development model is also constantly increasing its demands on contemporary young people. In this situation, more and more young people choose to be self centered and give up their reproductive attributes in a reality full of pressure and uncertainty.

Taking Korea as an example, the phenomenon of "fewer children" or the problem of low fertility cannot be solved with a single dimension of stimulating fertility. The "fewer children" society with low fertility rates has been a derivative of the "compressed" industrial economy in East Asia. To try to solve this problem, it is necessary to comprehensively consider many social factors and coordinate to solve the problem of low fertility rates.

3.1.2 Similarity of Public Policies

In terms of government intervention, both governments have made cautious judgments about their own population situation and made reasonable adjustments to population policies at different times. At present, both countries are committed to reducing the burden of childbirth through welfare policies. Taking South Korea as an example, in 2014, the South Korean Labor Regulations added a policy of model fathers, encouraging fathers to take on more household chores after the birth of their children; Vigorously carry out childcare programs nationwide to provide childcare fee reductions or subsidies for low-income families; The government provides subsidies for early childhood funds and provides one-time childbirth subsidies; Introduce a 3+3 parental leave system; Even the "Fourth Low Fertility and Aging Social Basic Plan" has been formulated, and the South Korean government will provide a monthly childcare subsidy of 300000 won to every family with 0-1 year old babies starting from 2022, and will increase it to 500000 won by 2025. Taking China as an example, the Chinese government also uses welfare policies to stimulate childbearing among eligible individuals through policies such as maternity allowances, medical subsidies, extended maternity leave, education incentives, tax incentives, and other social security subsidies. The "Several Measures for Optimizing Fertility Policies (Implementation)" announced by Changshan County, Zhejiang Province, China proposes to provide 50% of the self funded subsidy to families who have successfully implemented human

assisted childbirth in accordance with the law, with a maximum subsidy of 30000 yuan per household per occurrence. For families with three children, if the per capita living area in the urban area of the county is less than 30 square meters, they can purchase a newly built commercial house with an area of no less than 120 square meters in the urban area of Changshan County and receive a one-time payment of 200000 yuan for the house ticket.

In addition, due to the influence of traditional Confucian concepts and past policies, the rates of illegitimate births in both China and South Korea are extremely low, with a relatively low proportion of illegitimate births in the total fertility rate and fewer phenomena of illegitimate births. According to data released by the OECD in 2020, the out of wedlock birth rate in South Korea is only 2.5%, while there is currently no official statistics on out of wedlock birth in China. However, referring to data from East Asian regions such as Japan (2.4%) and South Korea, the out of wedlock birth rate is somewhat low. And this year, China has continuously improved its support for illegitimate childbirth in terms of policies. The "Opinions of the General Office of the State Council on Solving the Problem of Registering Household Registration for Individuals without Household Registration" issued in 2015 pointed out that the problem of household registration for illegitimate childbirth children should be clearly solved. In 2021, it was explicitly proposed to fully decouple household entry, enrollment, and employment from personal fertility status. In 2022, it was further strengthened that maternity insurance would cover the medical expenses for female employees' childbirth. The protection role of maternity allowances and benefits emphasizes that "as long as the payment responsibility of maternity insurance is fulfilled, there is no threshold for the enjoyment of benefits at the national level. Korean society has also started discussing the opening up of illegitimate childbirth for many years. For example, the Korean Ministry of Women's Family stated in 2021 that it will discuss legal and ethical disputes related to illegitimate and single childbirth.

3.1.3 Similarity of Social Status Quo

Furthermore, it is worth noting that in the context of women's independence, gender inequality in the employment markets of both countries, as well as implicit discrimination caused by marriage and childbirth, are also one of the reasons for the low fertility rates in both countries. Both country has taken a series of practical measures to truly protect the rights of women about the marriage and childbirth related issues confronted in the job market, but the discrimination against women due to fertility issues still exists. According to the "2023 Survey Report on the Current Situation of Chinese Women in the Workplace" released by Zhaopin Recruitment, the proportion of women suffering from occupational discrimination is as high as 90%, with issues such as childbirth bundling and marriage and childbirth being the main reasons; According to data released by the South Korean Organization for Economic Cooperation and the South Korean Bureau of Statistics in 2021, female employment in South Korea is very sluggish, at only 42.2%, far below the average level of 56.8% in G5 countries. The reproductive discrimination faced by women in the workplace has led to their low willingness to have children, but their low willingness to have children has not led to an increase in female employment rates, resulting in a further deterioration of the current employment situation for women. Both China and South Korea have a trend of improving measures in this regard. For example, the traditional family model of female heads can be ensured by reducing the amount of unpaid labor in the family, establishing public kindergartens, daycare centers, etc., and transferring the unpaid labor in the family to the government and society. Both countries have also introduced a series of relevant policies to ensure this.

3.2. Differences

Due to differences in national systems and national conditions, there are significant differences in the formulation and implementation of fertility policies between China and South Korea, and they face different obstacles. Firstly, South Korea faces greater pressure and difficulties in addressing the reproductive pressure of young people and reducing capital control and exploitation of labor. The chaebol in South Korea, which controls resources and power, has a significant impact on policy formulation and implementation, making it difficult to fundamentally safeguard the interests of

workers from the perspective of workers. Secondly, women's rights and gender conflicts are an important issue among young people in South Korea today. The various systemic discrimination faced by Korean women has led to their low willingness to have children, and their reproductive rights have become their last resort to defend their rights. Therefore, in order to further solve the fertility problem in South Korea, it is necessary to alleviate the division and contradiction between genders to a certain extent. But the South Korean government started early in encouraging fertility policies, and the relevant policies are more comprehensive.

The pressure faced by China in encouraging fertility policies is relatively clear, mostly from the pressure of the real economy and the diversity of personal values. Moreover, the Chinese government is more likely to alleviate the pressure and alienation of capital on labor from the perspective of workers, protect the rights and interests of workers, and enhance the willingness to have children. But China started relatively late in encouraging fertility policies, and the relevant policies are not yet sound and complete, and there is still a long way to go.

4. Policy Optimization Suggestions

Taking South Korea as an example, the government has introduced relevant policies to guide the implementation of gender equality and the popularization of concepts, reducing gender opposition and contradictions. It is also a practical method for the government to attach more attention to the protection of women's rights in the employment environment, reduce discrimination caused by marriage and childbirth, and to some extent enhance women's willingness to have children. In addition, it is possible to further emancipate traditional social concepts, improve the implementation of policies related to illegitimate childbirth, safeguard the basic rights of illegitimate children (such as settling down, receiving education, etc.), and to some extent increase their willingness to raise children. Research has shown that the provision of childcare leave has a significantly positive association with overall fertility intentions [10]. In addition, the government can provide policy subsidies for medical means of childbirth to help alleviate the difficulties faced by the infertile population. In addition, the most important thing is to control capital's control and plunder of labor through institutional innovation, so as to ensure the institutional protection of the reproductive interests of the reproductive subjects[2].

Taking China as an example, the government should introduce relevant policies to further protect and implement the rights and interests of women in the workplace, and alleviate women's fear of marriage and childbirth. In addition, the most important thing is to introduce relevant policies to alleviate the reproductive pressure of young people, such as housing costs, education costs, etc., to ensure coordinated changes in residents' income and life fertility, and focus on solving income distribution issues[11].

For both countries, the government should try to build a policy system of childbearing support with multiple stakeholders sharing responsibility, treating children as public goods rather than private goods, and further moving family care from the private sector to the public sector.

A policy system for childbearing support with multiple stakeholders sharing responsibility should be led by government departments, which could fully mobilize the enthusiasm of all aspects of society, and establish a multi-level reproductive support mechanism where the government, market, society, and families share responsibilities [12]. Research has shown that Workplace family provisions seem to have a particularly important effect on increasing second birth intentions. The second birth intentions are seen to be dramatically higher for women who work in companies provide multiple policies to guarantee their rights compared with companies offer fewer guarantees [13]. In addition, the trend of continuous decline in the fertility level of women of childbearing age due to the improvement of their education level seems to be inevitable [14]. The OECD survey results show that the ideal number of children for women is two or more, indicating that women naturally do not plan to have children, but are more trapped in real-life conditions. Therefore, how to achieve a balance between improving

women's education level and increasing their willingness to have children through policies is a problem that both countries need to solve.

When China and South Korea formulate their own policies to encourage childbirth, local specific population policies have to be more frequently cultivated, especially at the advent of big data and geoinformation, more specific and practical analyses like the GWR model is supposed to be applied to related research in South Korea and China so that more accurate and reasonable local policy options could be provided[15]. More consideration should be given to the country's national conditions and practical factors, adapting to local conditions, and formulating effective policies that are suitable for the country's current situation.

5. Conclusion

In current situation, China and South Korea are confronting similar issues of low fertility rates and the situation is extremely severe. In history, both countries have experienced a shift from restraining to encouraging fertility policies. In addition, due to the development of a "compressed" industrial economy and the resulting cultural and social issues, unilateral financial support cannot alleviate the problem of low fertility among young people. Instead, a series of comprehensive policies, such as safeguarding women's rights, reducing unpaid labor in families, supporting education, and childcare security, need to be adopted to solve the problem.

In terms of implementing specific policies to encourage childbirth in both countries, South Korea started earlier and introduced more comprehensive measures, while China started later and had fragmented policies. The policy of encouraging childbirth in South Korea is greatly hindered by Korean feminism, and gender issues are an integral part of the process of encouraging childbirth in South Korea. However, the relevant contradictions in China are more relaxed, and are more concerned with the consideration of practical economic factors and values.

In summary, in the process of stimulating fertility, both countries have similar experiences, face similar practical difficulties, and face different obstacles in the implementation of specific policies. Solving the fertility problem is a national strategy, and both countries have a long way to go, requiring new ideas, ideas, and a more comprehensive perspective. When formulating specific policies to encourage childbirth, both countries should adapt to local conditions, flexibly respond, and explore policies that are suitable for their own national conditions. They should not blindly copy or solidify them.

This article has practical significance for solving the problems of low fertility and aging population in China and South Korea, and provides practical and feasible solutions for the governments of both countries. At the same time, it brings good news to families in both countries who are willing to have children or are unable to bear the burden of childbirth due to practical pressure. In addition, a relative balance has been achieved between childbirth and the fight for women's rights, which has solved a major obstacle to the formulation and implementation of policies that have been encouraging childbirth for a long time.

Due to the complex specific conditions and environment of the two countries, the constantly changing current situation, and related force majeure factors, this article only conducts rough research and discussion, and there is still a lack of analysis from certain perspectives. In the future, more in-depth and practical research can be conducted from the perspective of how fertility policies promote gender equality and women's liberation.

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