

# The Improvement of New Fertility Culture System in the Context of China's "Three-Child" Policy

Biqi Qiu\*

School of European Languages and Culture South China Business College, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou, China

\*Corresponding author: 1811000519@mail.sit.edu.cn

**Abstract.** The "three-child" policy is a further adjustment and liberalisation of China's family planning policy. With the implementation of the "three-child" policy, the fertility rate has not rebounded significantly. With the impact of the epidemic in recent years, China's population has experienced negative growth for the first time in the past 2022. This situation is making the population issue more and more serious and of greater concern. The theme of the study is fertility policy and fertility culture in China. This paper uses factual analysis to analyse the significance of building a new fertility culture for China's 'three-child' policy and its accompanying measures. The study concludes that a new fertility culture that promotes the subjective well-being of child-rearing and opposes bad marriage practices should be developed. The most important aspect of building a childbirth-friendly society for women is to focus on the issue of "workplace punishment" for women, and for the government and enterprises to share the burden of subsidising women's childbirth.

**Keywords:** China fertility policy; fertility culture; intergenerational responsibility.

## 1. Introduction

Since September 1982, family planning has been defined as one of China's basic state policies. Since the founding of New China, population issues have varied from period to period and the government has introduced policies such as the "one-child" policy, the "two-child" policy and the "three-child" policy and its supporting measures to address the issue. On 31 May 2021, the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC) adopted a meeting to further optimise the fertility policy and implement the policy of allowing a couple to have three children and its accompanying support measures. But nowadays, almost two years after the implementation of that past, the rebound in the birth rate is not obvious. According to data released by the National Bureau of Statistics, in the past 2022, 9.56 million people were born in the year, with a birth rate of 6.77%, 10.41 million people died, with a population mortality rate of 7.37%, and the natural population growth rate was -0.60%, making China's population negative for the first time [1]. In order to solve the increasingly serious population problem, the state's efforts to promote fertility through policy liberalisation and its supporting measures have not been effective.

In terms of policy effects, some scholars think that it is not rigorous to judge the effectiveness of China's multi-child policy from the total fertility rate and the total number of births, including other children [2]. However, some Norwegian scholars have argued that there are differences in the duration of the policy and its effects on families with different number of children and that the effects of other social factors on the policy cannot be ignored [3]. Chinese scholar Mu Guangzong has mentioned in several papers that when the effects of fertility policy are limited, it may be the influence of fertility culture on fertility behaviour that creates fertility inertia and an endogenous fertility trap [4, 5]. It is therefore necessary to build a new culture of fertility, to provide a favourable culture of fertility for people of childbearing age and to increase their willingness to have children.

Fertility means reproducing offspring, conceiving and giving birth in the female body. Due to the peculiarities of women's physiology and social roles, women are both the subjects of childbirth and bear most of the responsibility of caring for children in the family. However, research by national and international scholars has found that the proper use of parental leave by fathers to participate in family childcare activities. Not only does it reduce the opportunity cost of lost childbearing for mothers, it

also increases families' willingness to continue having children [6, 7]. As the education system improves and the right to education is guaranteed, the number of years of schooling increases, women's childbearing conflicts with their careers, and the shortcomings of the labour market system put women in a 'motherhood dilemma' or even a 'motherhood penalty' [8, 9]. The gender gap in society and the family Gender inequality in society and in the family is an important reason for China's low fertility rate, so it is important to pay practical attention to the physical and psychological difficulties of women, to care for the different problems women encounter in the family and in the workplace, and to build a new fertility culture by ensuring that women's rights are protected [10, 11].

Since the founding of the nation, the Chinese nation has achieved rapid development from standing up, getting rich to getting strong, and people of childbearing age now experience the social changes, economic systems and ideological innovations in between. Under the influence of long-term family planning, the negative effects of the lower fertility rate and gender imbalance issues have overlapped in recent years, resulting in adverse competition in China's marriage market [8, 12]. Coupled with the COVID-19 epidemic in recent years, this has accelerated the decline in fertility rates in China, as the emergence of many uncertainties and unknown risks due to the epidemic, the anxiety of unemployment and the increased pressure of childcare for families with study suspensions have pulled down the fertility intentions of people of childbearing age again [13]. From a data analysis perspective, the fertility intentions of China's childbearing age group are also influenced by Confucian culture, where the implicit intergenerational responsibility of the family exacerbates the cost of childbearing [14].

In the relevant literature analysing fertility culture, there is a tendency to consider the construction of a female-friendly fertility culture, but less mention is made of the importance of implicit intergenerational family relationships and responsibilities, in fertility culture and the impact on fertility intentions. In today's world of material and spiritual wealth, and with the opportunity of the 'three-child' policy, the author argues that this is a move by the state to further open up fertility, and that there is a need for a fertility culture that is more in line with social development to encourage and facilitate the transition from fertility intentions to actual fertility actions among people of childbearing age. This paper will analyse the "three-child" policy from a policy analysis perspective, using a progressive analysis model. The paper also uses documentary analysis to analyse the impact of childbearing on the population of childbearing age and the impact of implicit intergenerational relationships and responsibilities of families on fertility intentions, in order to contribute to the construction of a new fertility culture and to provide reference value for the adjustment of the 'three-child' policy and supporting measures.

## **2. Analysis of China's "Three Child" Policy**

### **2.1. Analysis of China's "Three-Child" Policy Using a Gradualist Model**

Gradualism was proposed by the American scholar Lindblom and this model emphasizes that policy adjustments are made on existing policies [15]. The gradual process of policy making by policy makers is more to meet different needs at different times, and it is not difficult to see this feature in China's family planning policy.

In 1949, when the People's Republic of China was founded, the population was relatively small. In order to meet the needs of the nation's construction, the government of China introduced a policy of restricting contraception and abortion to encourage childbirth and promote population growth. With the aim of alleviating the enormous pressure on China's social resources caused by rapid population growth, the State Council's "Report on Good Family Planning Work" in 1978 proposed a policy of "late, sparse, and few". Because of the lag in the emergence of population problems, the policy are difficult to respond and address measures quickly and at short notice. The implementation of the "one child" policy has led to an imbalance in the gender ratio of China's population, an ageing population and a social pension crisis [16]. In order to solve the population problem and alleviate the negative

impact of the population problem, from the conditional "two-child policy" introduced by the government in 2002 to the "full three-child policy" in 2021.

From the "comprehensive three-child policy" introduced by the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee in 2021 to the improvement of the supporting measures related to the "three-child policy" proposed by Premier Li Keqiang in 2022. The adjustment of the "three-child policy" is also based on the original fertility policy, in line with China's economic development, to promote the policy in a steady and progressive manner to encourage childbirth. However, the rebound in the birth rate has not been as effective as expected, and there was even negative population growth in the past 2022. Increasingly complex social issues like the COVID-19 pandemic and other unexpected problems can create limitations on the effectiveness of government for emergencies that start from a single direction.

## **2.2. Analysis of the Impact of the "Three Children" Policy on Women in the Workplace Based on Social Labeling Theory**

Social label theory is a social work theory based on the theories of sociologists Leimert and Becker. In social interaction activities, everyone has the possibility of "primary transgressions", but only primary transgressors who are "labeled" are able to start "transgressive behavior" [17]. In society, women's gender roles are always given more domestic responsibilities due to the biological sex and gender differences between men and women [18]. In addition, women's prime childbearing years coincide highly with the peak of personal capital, women are often faced with the dilemma of choosing between family and work. It should not be overlooked that companies incur significant additional and replacement labour costs during pregnancy, childbirth and breastfeeding. This has led to the labelling of the female workforce in the labour market and to gender discrimination [18].

It is undeniable that companies, as profit-making organizations, will consider maximizing benefits and minimizing costs when employing people [19]. The extension of maternity leave in the "three-child policy" will increase the maternity costs of enterprises in terms of allowances, social security and wages, which will undoubtedly increase the "labeling" of women in the workplace, promote gender discrimination in the workplace, and indirectly affect women's willingness to give birth [20]. The government should share the cost of companies' work during pregnancy, childbirth and breastfeeding for women, and improve the maternity insurance system to ease conflicts between companies and women workers.

When women have to choose between family and work, it is always felt that women should choose to return to their families. On the contrary, women's employment and entrepreneurship can help them realize their self-worth, thus increasing their decision-making power within the family and their voice in society, providing role models for other women, and creating a more harmonious gender-equal society [18]. Women should be brave enough to tear off their "labels", say no to gender discrimination in the workplace, and defend their legitimate rights and interests through legal means.

## **3. China's "Three-Child" Policy and the New Fertility Culture**

### **3.1. Analysis of the Significance of the New Fertility Culture for the Adjustment of the "Three-Child" Policy**

Since the policy of "late, scarce, and small" was proposed in 1978 and the conditional "two-child" policy was opened in 2002, People became identified with the idea of having only one child in a family during this time. With the rapid economic development of China after the reform and opening up, people's concept of marriage and childbirth has changed to "late marriage, late childbirth, preferential childbirth" [8]. The "three-child" policy is a further liberalization after the opening of the second child, which further broadens the boundary of reproductive choice and reflects the respect for the individual's reproductive freedom. However, once fertility culture inertia is formed and fertility behavior forms a certain pattern, the response to fertility policy will not achieve the expected effect

[4]. Therefore, it is necessary to construct a new fertility culture, build a fertility-friendly society, alleviate fertility anxiety and provide a favorable social environment for the "three-child" policy.

When talking about the new fertility culture, it is important to contrast it with the old fertility culture. During family planning, the pressure of "one-child" foment the prevalence of the feudal concept of "son preference over daughter". Women were persecuted to varying degrees in the family and in society. Immature contraceptive and birth control techniques have caused physical harm to women. In families with one daughter, women have been subjected to pressure from family members and doubts about their self-worth [21]. Although these old fertility cultures now exist only in some areas, the current population of childbearing age has witnessed this period of history. Moreover, the frequent absence of paternal responsibility in child-rearing makes women insecure in their willingness to have children, which in turn affects their reproductive decisions and actions. The lack of male involvement in the family increases the cost and stress of childbirth for women, which directly affects women's choice to have two or three children.

In the new fertility culture, practical care and concern for women is an important starting point [10]. To truly care for women, the government should respect the physical, psychological, and social differences between the sexes and focus on how to reduce the economic, opportunity, and time costs associated with female childbearing. Policy adjustments should be based on the problems women encounter in the four areas of marriage, childbirth, upbringing and education [4]. Encouraging fertility is not enough to rely on fertility policies alone; to win the low-fertility war, a "combination" of complementary measures must be formed.

According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory, human physiological needs, security needs, emotional belonging needs, respect needs, and self-actualization needs are pyramidal from the bottom up [22]. According to the general law of human development, the bottom level is physiological needs, which support the entire pyramid of needs, followed by security needs. These two needs then correspond to people's income and housing, and policy adjustments need to be linked to these two aspects to protect the basic needs of people of childbearing age. On the issue of work, policies need to extend parental leave while also sharing with companies the labor allowance for parental leave. The cost of family childbirth needs to be supported by income from work, and the state should be the main body responsible for family policy. Paid maternity leave for both parents will shift the pressure to enterprises, resulting in a "motherhood penalty" that increases the opportunity cost of childbirth for women [4]. The emphasis on joint participation of both parents in the family scenario of childbearing, parenting and education is a long way to go. Besides the dualization of family policies, the solidified idea of "men's work centers around outside, women's work centers around the home" should be revolutionized. In terms of housing, policies should provide appropriate housing support to multi-child families, remove the threshold for multi-child families to settle in cities, and provide low-cost rental or purchase subsidies for multi-child families with housing difficulties [8].

## **4. The Content of a New Fertility Culture**

### **4.1. Effects of Family Intergenerational Relationships and Implicit Intergenerational Responsibility on Fertility Intentions**

In Confucian-influenced regions of Asia, such as China, Japan, and Korea, fertility behavior is influenced by implicit intergenerational responsibility [14]. In the traditional family-based production unit in China, the emphasis is on "more children, more happiness" and more children to obtain more labor. However, the "one-child" fertility restriction in the past promoted the concept of "son preference", which resulted in a gender imbalance in the population and an imbalance in the ratio of men to women among the marriageable population, resulting in a vicious competition in the marriage market. In the traditional Chinese concept of marriage, the male family bears more of the economic expenses of marriage, and with the current increase in housing prices, "sky-high bride price" incidents are frequent, especially in rural areas, which are deeply influenced by traditional culture [7]. The "sky-high bride price" not only affects the marriage rate, but also creates an implicit intergenerational

responsibility that generates a long-term hidden cost of childbearing, which in turn affects fertility intentions and behavior [14].

Marriage practices violate men's rights to survival and development in some areas, and the gender of children has a negative impact on family economy [7]. The author argues that this implicit intergenerational responsibility not only generates implicit reproductive costs, but also contributes to new types of reproductive gender preferences, such as the unhealthy reproductive concept of "having a daughter is an investment bank and having a son is a construction bank".

People should advocate a healthy and equal view of marriage, focusing on protecting the marriage rights of marriageable people. It should stop the vicious competition in the marriage market, reduce the hidden intergenerational responsibility pressure, alleviate the concerns of people of childbearing age about the hidden long-term cost of childbirth, and establish a correct fertility concept.

#### **4.2. Adjustment of the "Three-Child" Policy and its Supporting Measures in the Light of the New Fertility Culture**

The annual birth rate of one child in China has been declining in recent years, which has slowed the process of having a second child [13]. Despite the opening up of the 'three-child' policy, very few families are able to have three children. It is unlikely that the three-child policy will lead to a rebound in fertility, but the three-child policy is a progressive, inclusive and open approach to fertility policy in China [4]. "The adjustment of the three-child policy and its supporting measures should be based on respect for the differences in beneficiary groups and regional development, in line with the development of the times and in line with the new fertility culture. The supporting policies for the three-child policy should combine marriage, childbirth, parenting and education [4].

In terms of marriage, the right guidance should be strengthened. Due to years of family planning, China's fertility was characterised by gender preference and a gender imbalance in the population. With the decline in fertility, the gender imbalance in the population has increased [8]. Vicious competition has emerged within the marriage market, and men's marriage rights have been harmed by the sky-high bride price [12]. Policies should strengthen regulation of the marriage market, resist unreasonable marriage deals and protect people's right to marry.

With regard to fertility, social security and medical care are the focus. With regard to social security, the government should share with enterprises the cost of employing women during childbirth, and policies should be appropriately dualised to avoid indirectly penalising women in the workplace. With regard to medical care, especially in backward rural areas, local people of childbearing age should be able to receive timely medical treatment for maternity-related illnesses, and pregnancy and maternity examinations should gradually be included in medical insurance. As people of childbearing age have become more educated, it has become a trend to marry later and have children later. The government should support medical research related to advanced childbearing, so that people who have children later in life also have medical coverage.

In terms of parenting, the responsibility for parenting is borne by both the family and society. Parenting in the family environment should promote the involvement of fathers and grandparents, harmonious and equal parenting by both sexes and grandparents. Daytime parenting activities also require social assistance, and the establishment of community childcare and trusteeship agencies can help two-income families.

In terms of education, sharing quality educational resources and encouraging the teaching of children according to their abilities. As China's educational resources are limited and highly differentiated, competition for scarce quality educational resources can increase the hidden costs of childbirth. Reducing the burden within schools instead gives training providers outside schools a leg up. The government should promote the equalisation of quality educational resources across regions and populations, encourage the teaching of students according to their abilities, reduce the hidden costs of childbirth, and alleviate anxiety about childbirth and education.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper uses a factual analysis to analyze the significance of a new fertility policy under the "three-child" policy. In today's rapid economic development, many things are changing, such as the emergence of the new crown epidemic, and increased social risks that threaten people's willingness to have children, making it difficult for a progressive fertility policy to respond in a timely manner. While individual reproductive rights are increasingly valued now that the government has opened up to three children, the "motherhood penalty," widowhood, and implicit intergenerational responsibility continue to affect the fertility intentions of people of childbearing age, and thus their reproductive actions. It is especially important to build a new fertility culture system and a fertility-friendly society, especially for women.

The adjustment of the fertility policy should be people-oriented, focusing on the main reasons why people of childbearing age "do not want to have children" and "do not want to have children", and the focus and strength of the supporting policies should be accurate and appropriate. The government should share the cost of childbirth with enterprises to prevent women from being labeled in the workplace, and gender discrimination in the workplace should not only be strictly controlled, but also encouraged to guide women in employment and entrepreneurship, so that gender equality awareness can then be spread to more scenarios. Encourage and guide men to participate in family rearing initiatives to relieve women's pressure to find a balance between work and family, so that women can feel valued and respected both in society and in the family. Strictly catch and resist the vicious competition in the marriage market, promote modern and free marriage, and relieve the pressure of hidden intergenerational responsibilities on people of child-bearing age.

The significance of this study is to build a new culture of fertility and to provide a favourable social environment for the "three-child" policy and its supporting measures in China, and to make reference to its adjustment. The shortcoming of this paper's research is that the new fertility culture is not specific to different age groups but is only generalised to all people. As people of all ages have different ideologies, the fertility culture they accept and understand will be different. Future research could examine the new fertility culture in more detail for different groups of people. Fertility culture should be constantly innovated according to the changing times and mindsets.

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