

THE LEGACY OF THE QING DYNASTY: RETHINKING CHINA’S DECLINING FERTILITY

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I. INTRODUCTION

China’s fertility decline has reached historically unprecedented levels in recent years. Although China entered the low-fertility stage later than many developed countries, the pace of its decline has been exceptionally fast. The transition to below-replacement level fertility (i.e., below 2.1 births per woman) occurred at very different times across East Asia: Japan reached this level as early as 1957, South Korea in 1984, and China much later in 1991. However, by 2024, their total fertility rates had converged at similarly low levels: 1.01 in China, 1.22 in Japan, and 0.73 in South Korea¹ China’s fertility decline followed a different trajectory. While Japan and South Korea entered low fertility decades earlier, China’s total fertility rate fell much more quickly. This unusually rapid decline raises the question of whether China’s historical and social context may have shaped fertility decisions in ways that differ from those of its East Asian neighbors.

While these regional comparisons provide important context, this article focuses on the specific historical and structural factors shaping China’s fertility decline. In particular, it argues that the legacy of gender norms, the national economic pressures, and sensitivity to inequality

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1. U.N. Dep’t of Econ. & Soc. Affs., Population Div., Rep. of World Fertility 2024, at 51, U.N. Doc. DESA/POP/2024/TR/NO.11 (2025).

and privilege, all of which are rooted in historical experience, continue to shape individual expectations about the future and decisions regarding marriage and childbearing.

II. GENDER NORMS

The first dimension of this argument concerns the legacy of gender norms, which can be traced back to institutional and ideological practices in the Qing dynasty.

Within this system, the patrilineal and patriarchal structure of Chinese clans assigned higher social and economic value to sons than to daughters, contributing to widespread practices such as female infanticide and imbalanced sex ratios.² As a result, the gender inequality and son preference became more deeply embedded in late imperial institutions.³ Scholarship also emphasizes that these gender norms were shaped by a complex interaction of social, economic, and cultural forces, and their long-term legacy may still influence modern attitudes toward family formation.⁴ In particular, these norms shape expectations about gender roles within marriage, which ultimately affect individuals' willingness to have children.

A. *Women's roles*

Although the institutional structures of the Qing dynasty no longer exist, the gender norms they reinforced, especially those related to women's subordinate position within the family, are still playing a role in marriage and fertility decisions.

The persistence of patriarchal family structures and son preference can shape modern expectations about the division of roles within marriage, often placing greater responsibility on women. When marriage is associated with disproportionate housework burdens, career constraints and emotional labor, women may become less

2. See Therese Hesketh, Lu Li & Weixing Zhu, *The Consequences of Son Preference and Sex-Selective Abortion in China and Other Asian Countries*, 183 CAN. MED. ASS'N J. 1374, 1374 (2011) (discussing the phenomenon and causes of son preference and sex-selective abortion in China).

3. Hesketh, Li & Zhu, *supra* note 3, at 1374.

4. See Paul S. Ropp, *Women in Late Imperial China: A Review of Recent English-Language Scholarship*, 3 WOMEN'S HIST. REV. 347, 348 (Dec. 19, 2006) (discussing that the norms of female chastity in late imperial China was influenced by an interaction of social, economic, and cultural forces).

willing to enter marriage or have children⁵ These concerns may form part of the reasons behind the sharp decline in fertility in China⁶

The general gender norms were further intensified in the Qing dynasty through the promotion of female chastity. By the Qing dynasty, the promotion of female chastity had become much more widely supported.⁷ In some regions, such as Huizhou in the Guangdong Province in Southern China, this was reflected in the large number of “chastity arches” (paifang), which were built to honor women who were considered morally virtuous and to reinforce Confucian values.⁸ Women whose fiancés had died before marriage were encouraged to remain unmarried for life. In extreme cases, some even committed suicide to demonstrate their loyalty.⁹ Scholars suggest that the popularity of such practices in the late imperial period was linked to the widespread cultural preference in sexual loyalty, as well as social and political uncertainty.¹⁰

Moreover, the Qing government actively promoted such ideals by formally recognizing and honoring chaste women. For example, state policies under emperors such as *Yongzheng* and *Qianlong* formally rewarded women who upheld these ideals, including chaste widows

5. See generally Dang Yuan, Impact of Occupational Pairing on Women's Fertility Plans: Roles of Domestic Burden and Housework Satisfaction, 11 *FRONTIERS in SOC.* 1, 2 (Mar. 2, 2026); see also Kathryn Edin & Joanna M. Reed, Why Don't They Just Get Married? Barriers to Marriage among the Disadvantaged, 15 *THE FUTURE of CHILDREN* 117, 122 (2005); see also Li Sun, Yinxia Wei, Yuxia Luo, Yiran Kang, Yutong Ye & Wangzhuo Xu, How Emotional Labor Shapes Marital Intentions: a Moderated Mediation Model of Discrepancy Feelings and Self-esteem in Young Adults, 17 *FRONTIERS in PSYCH.* 1, 3 (Mar.10, 2026).

6. See generally Emily Feng, *Not a Married Heterosexual Woman? You might not Get Certain Reproductive Care in China*, NPR (Feb.15, 2022), <https://www.npr.org/2022/02/15/1078018548/china-reproductive-maternity-benefits-married-women-lgbt>

7. See Qitao Guo & Harriet T. Zurndorfer, *The Female Chastity Cult in Huizhou During the Late Imperial Era: Demographics, Books, and Monuments*, 17 *NAN NÜ* 1, 7 (2015) (discussing the female chastity cult and chastity arches in late Qing).

8. *Id.* (discussing the phenomenon and roots of the chastity cult in Huizhou).

9. See Ke Zhao, *The Phenomenon of Chaste Women in the Ming and Qing Dynasties*, 24 *GLOBAL J. HUM. -SOC. SCI.: D HIST., ARCHAEOLOGY & ANTHROPOLOGY* 49, 50-51 (2024) (discussing several cases in Qing that females committed suicide to demonstrate their chastity).

10. *Id.*

and those who committed suicide to preserve their chastity when facing rape by bandits or invaders.¹¹

The Qing chastity norm not only regulated women's sexuality but also defined the ideal woman as someone who sacrificed personal interests for family honor and moral duty. This ideal of female self-sacrifice and obedience overlapped with the patriarchal expectations that women should prioritize family obligations, which remains influential. In contemporary China, such ideas can appear in the unequal distribution of housework, family care responsibility, and career sacrifice. As a result, these traditional expectations about women's roles in family formation would impose disproportionate costs on them, making them less willing to marry or have children.

B. *Imbalanced Gender Ratio*

In Qing China, a strongly patriarchal society, a widespread belief is that male children have higher social and economic value than female children.¹² So many families practiced sex-selective infanticide to limit the number of children, leading to the declining number of newborn girls.¹³ Over time, these practices reduced the number of women available for marriage and created an imbalance between men and women.¹⁴ This imbalance affected not only population structure, but also the marriage market by intensifying competition among men for partners.

Similar patterns can be observed in contemporary China. Persistent sex-selective abortions and son preference have produced a long-term gender imbalance in the population. The imbalance between men and women means that some men are unable to find partners

11. See Susan Mann, *Review of Disgraceful Matters: The Politics of Chastity in Eighteenth-Century China by Janet M. Theiss*, 65 Harv. J. of Asiatic Stu. 522, 528 (2005) (discussing the Qing's policies to encourage chastity); see also Teemu Ruskola, *Review of Matthew Sommer, Sex, Law, and Society in Late Imperial China by Matthew H. Sommer*, 44 Am. J. Legal. Hist. 517, 518 (2000) (discussing the Qing state's intervention in local society to regulate sexuality and suppress sexual deviance).

12. Ropp, *supra* note 5, at 354, 366.; see also Yanzhe Zhang, Bowen Zou, Huai Zhang & Jian Zhang, *Empirical Research on Male Preference in China: A Result of Gender Imbalance in the Seventh Population Census*, 19 Int. J. Environ. Res. Public Health, 6482, 6485 (2022) (discussing the belief that the male children have much higher value than the female ones).

13. Hesketh, Li & Zhu, *supra* note 3, at 1374.

14. See Shuang Chen, *Demography of Qing China*, Oxford Res. Encyc. Asian Hist. (Apr. 20, 2022) (discussing that the sex-selective abortion and son preference lead to an unbalanced number of male and female), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277727.013.445>.

under prevailing social expectations.¹⁵ Data suggests that China had a surplus of about 51 million men between 1983 and 2020.¹⁶ Other research indicates that the number of excess men aged 20 to 49 could reach 40 million by 2040.¹⁷

This imbalance in the marriage market may also help explain declining fertility. Because childbearing in China largely occurs within marriage, such imbalance has reduced overall marriage rates and consequently lowered the fertility rate. Beyond this quantitative effect, the pressures associated with an imbalanced marriage market may also discourage both men and women from entering marriage or having children.

III. NATIONAL ECONOMIC PRESSURES

China's contemporary economic structure is deeply influenced by a history of disrupted development during late Qing, when foreign intervention, unequal treaties, and indemnity payments imposed substantial economic burdens on China and constrained domestic development.¹⁸ Following the late imperial period and subsequent political transformations, China entered the modern era under conditions of relative economic disadvantage. This historical context contributed to a strong national focus on rapid economic growth and development, which is associated with long working hours, demanding work expectations and intense job competition.¹⁹ During the period between the end of the First Opium War and the Second World War, the Qing imperial court signed between five hundred and more than

15. See Zhiqiang Dong, Yaseen Alhaj-Yaseen, Yang Jiao & Yuejue Zhong, *Surplus Men and Scarce Women: The Impact of Mating Competition on the Desire for Sons in China*, 26 PAC. ECON. REV. 339, 340 (2021) (discussing the intense male competition in finding partners).

16. Dudley L. Poston Jr, Eugenia Conde & Bethany Desalvo, *China's Unbalanced Sex Ratio at Birth, Millions of Excess Bachelors and Societal Implications*, 6 VULNERABLE CHILD. & YOUTH STUD. 314, 318 (2011).

17. Youhua Chen, *Zhongguo he Ouzhou Hunyin Shichang Toushi (A Look at the Marriage Market in China and Europe)*, at 52-53 (2004).

18. See Baomin Dong & Yibei Guo, *The Impact of the First Sino-Japanese War Indemnity: Transfer Problem Reexamined*, 56 INT'L REV. ECON. & FIN. 15, 16 n.3 (2018) (discussing that Qing's treaty with Japan brought heavy economic burden on China).

19. See Clayton D. Brown, *China's Great Leap Forward*, 17 EDUC. ABOUT ASIA 29, 29 (2012) (discussing China's national emphasis on rapid economic development in the 1950s); see also Hongyun Zheng, Puneet Vatsa, Wanglin Ma & Xiaoshou Zhou, *Working Hours and Job Satisfaction in China: A Threshold Analysis*, 77 CHINA ECON. REV. 101902, at 2 (2023) (discussing the long working hours and demanding working requirements in China).

one thousand unequal treaties.²⁰ Foreign reparations and loans imposed a substantial economic burden on the state. For example, China's defeat in the Sino-Japanese War resulted in a debt of 204 million taels, which is reflected in the Treaty of Shimonoseki.²¹ Debt service payments rose sharply, from 22.8 percent in 1899 to over 30 percent of government spending in the early twentieth century.²²

To pay the indemnity debt, large amounts of silver were transferred to foreign banks, such as HSBC, for conversion and repayment.²³ In some provinces, even regular semi-annual fiscal revenues were directly transferred to foreign banks.²⁴ A significant portion of these funds used for debt repayment came from taxes on goods and land, placing a disproportionate burden on Chinese taxpayers.²⁵ As a result, foreign debt obligations not only strained state finances but also contributed to broader economic pressures within Chinese society.

These historical burdens contributed to long-term disruptions in China's economic development, leaving gaps which are difficult to get filled. China's economic position has undergone a dramatic shift since the nineteenth century. Its share of global GDP declined from approximately 32.4 percent in 1820 to 13.2 percent in 1890, reflecting a significant relative decline during the late Qing period.²⁶ This decline helps explain the strong post-foundation emphasis on economic catch-up and rapid industrialization.

Due to these historical events, China fell behind the major industrial powers in the early 1950s, when the communist People's Republic of China (PRC) was newly founded.²⁷ In response, the Chinese government adopted a strategy of modernization, which was widely understood as a process through which economically backward countries could catch up with the world's advanced economies, aimed

20. For a comprehensive list of these treaties, *see generally* JOHN VAN ANTWERP MACMURRAY, *TREATIES AND AGREEMENTS WITH AND CONCERNING CHINA, 1894-1919* (1921).

21. *See* Dong Yan, *The Domestic Effects of Foreign Capital: Public Debt and Regional Inequalities in Late Qing China*, in *A WORLD OF PUBLIC DEBTS* 201, 209 (Nicolas Barreyre & Nicolas Delalande eds., 2020) (discussing that Qing's treaty with Japan brought heavy economic burden on China).

22. *Id.* at 210.

23. *Id.* at 214.

24. *Id.* at 211-12.

25. *Id.* at 214.

26. Angus Maddison, *Chinese Economic Performance in the Long Run: 960-2030 AD*, at 40 (2d ed., OECD Dev. Ctr. 2007).

27. Brown, *supra* note 20.

at narrowing the economic and technological gap with more advanced countries²⁸ Some scholars argue that China's rapid economic growth may have been accompanied with employees' working long hours²⁹ According to CEIC data, the average weekly working time in China has remained around 46 hours from June 2017 to February 2026.³⁰ By comparison, ILOSTAT data shows that the global average weekly working hours is approximately 38.67.³¹

Such long working hours are associated with significant physical and mental stress, including potential negative effects on reproductive health. Researchers have noted that mental stress is likely to cause the decline of sperm quality.³² It is also suggested that "job stress may affect fertility, its intention, and the infertility treatment process among people."³³ Moreover, the number of high-risk pregnancies is increasing significantly.³⁴

Under these conditions, individuals face substantial economic and time constraints when making decisions about family formation and fertility. The long working hours have reduced the time available for family life and are associated with adverse physical and mental health outcomes. As childbearing requires considerable time and energy, individuals facing persistent work pressure and health problems may

28. Xinhua Jian, An Analysis of the Similarities and Differences between Chinese and Western Modernization, 16 *WORLD REV. POL. ECON.* 4, 6 (2025).

29. See Russell Smyth, Xiaolei Qian, Ingrid Nielsen & Ines Kaempfer, Working Hours in Supply Chain Chinese and Thai Factories: Evidence from the Fair Labor Association's 'Soccer Project', 51 *BRIT. J. INDUS. REL.* 382, 383 (2013) (discussing that China's rapid economic growth is accompanied with extreme long working hours).

30. China Hours Worked: Weekly Average, CEIC Data, <https://www.ceicdata.com/en/china/average-working-hours-per-week/cn-hours-worked-weekly-average> (last visited Mar. 30, 2026).

31. Mean Weekly Hours Actually Worked per Employed Person, INT'L LAB. ORG., ILOSTAT, <https://ilostat.ilo.org/topics/working-time/> (last visited Mar. 30, 2026).

32. See generally Edward Wilson Ansah, Paul Obeng, Jacob Owusu Sarfo & Mustapha Amodu,

Influence of Psychosocial Work Factors on Male Fertility and Sperm Quality: A Scoping Review, 23 *REPROD. BIOL. ENDOCRINOL.* 131, at 8 (2025).

33. Sara Maghare Dehkordi, Amir Hossein Khoshakhlagh, Saeid Yazdanirad, Abdollah Mohammadian-Hafshejani & Hassan Rajabi-Vardanjani, The Effect of Job Stress on Fertility, its Intention, and Infertility Treatment Among the Workers: A Systematic Review, 25 *BMC PUB. HEALTH* 542, at 1 (2025).

34. See Jue Liu, Li Song, Jie Qiu, Wenzhan Jing, Liang Wang, Yue Dai, Geng Qin & Min Liu, Reducing Maternal Mortality in China in the Era of the Two-Child Policy, 5 *BMJ GLOBAL HEALTH* e002157, at 3 (2020) (discussing that high-risk pregnancies become more and more common in contemporary China).

become less willing to undertake long-term commitments. Therefore, the structural pressures associated with economic catch-up may contribute to declining fertility rates.

IV. SENSITIVITY TO SOCIAL INEQUALITY AND PRIVILEGE

Historical experiences in China have contributed to a high sensitivity to social inequality and privilege, which in turn shapes contemporary hostility to policy unfairness and future instability.

China's modern historical consciousness is deeply shaped by two experiences: the "century of humiliation," a period between 1839 and 1949 when China's government lost control over large portions of its territory at the hands of foreigners³⁵, and the hierarchical rigidity of late imperial society itself, particularly during the Qing dynasty. These experiences not only led to the consequences of unequal power relations but also left behind a normative expectation that PRC's legitimate political authority must not reproduce the asymmetries of the old feudal order. This expectation was built directly into the founding ideology of the PRC, which highlights the overthrow of imperial and hierarchical systems, a process that began with the collapse of the Qing dynasty and continued through a series of revolutionary transformations.³⁶ The ideology also emphasizes that state power derives from the people and should serve the broader population rather than privileged elites. The Preamble to the Constitution frames the PRC's founding as the result of people's struggles against imperialism, feudalism, militarism and privilege.³⁷ By emphasizing equality and opposition to privilege, this revolutionary narrative helped shape contemporary expectations of fairness. As a result, the perceived social inequality or preferential treatment may provoke particularly strong public reactions.

This inheritance functions, so that contemporary policies are often interpreted not only through the stated goals, but also from the

35. Alison A. Kaufman, The "Century of Humiliation" and China's National Narratives, Testimony Before the U.S.-China Econ. & Sec. Rev. Comm'n, Hearing on "China's Narratives Regarding National Security Policy" (Mar. 10, 2011), <https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/3.10.11Kaufman.pdf>

36. Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of the Philippines, 1911 Revolution Opened Door for China's Progress, CHINA DAILY (Sept. 21, 2011), https://ph.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zt/Xinhai/201201/t20120112_1334732.htm#:~:text=The%201911%20Revolution%20not%20only,well%20as%20its%20political%20modernization.

37. XIANFA pmbl. (1982, amended 2018) (China).

perspective of fairness and potential privilege. A recent debate about the sealing of drug-related criminal records could illustrate this dynamic. While the stated goal of the newly revised *Public Security Administration Punishments Law*, adopted by the Standing Committee of the Fourteenth National People's Congress in June 2025, was to facilitate the reintegration of individuals with drug-related records by allowing certain records to be sealed, the policy triggered strong public opposition.³⁸ A local government agency even posted an online comment: "So which young master (denoting younger members of wealthy and socially prestigious families in China) was taking the drug?" [哪位少爷吸了], which arouse heated discussions.³⁹ Under China's centralization system, it's uncommon for a local government agency to publicly express such a dissent to regulations issued by the central government. Why is the overall reaction so strong? The underlying concern is the opacity of the policy's design, the suspicion that privileged groups likely get benefit and overprotection from the changed policy and whether the rule "creates a backdoor to erase past offenses".⁴⁰ When policies are read this way, they erode individuals' trust in the fairness of institutions and their sense of predictability over future outcomes.

This erosion of institutional trust has direct implications for fertility decisions. Research suggests that lower levels of social and institutional trust are associated with reduced fertility intentions, operating partly through individuals' perceptions of social fairness: once individuals cannot predict how rules will be applied and feel that outcomes are shaped by hidden hierarchies, this uncertainty can reduce their willingness to make long-term reproductive commitments.⁴¹

38. See Yiyi Fan, *Revised Law Sparks Debate in China Over Petty Offense Privacy*, SIXTH TONE (Dec. 3, 2025) (discussing the strong public reaction to the newly released policy of sealing drug-use records), <https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1017927>.

39. Changhao Wei, *NPC Finally Responds to Controversy over Sealing Drug-Use Records*, NPC OBSERVER (Dec. 26, 2025), <https://npcobserver.com/2025/12/26/npc-finally-responds-to-controversy-over-sealing-drug-use-records/>.

40. Zekun Yang, *Record-sealing rule concerns addressed*, CHINA DAILY (Dec. 3, 2025), <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202512/03/WS692f7158a310d6866eb2c872.html>.

41. See Xin Deng, Yang Wang & Xiaobo Tao, *Social Trust and Fertility Intentions: Evidence from China with Causal and Structural Insights*, 107 INT'L REV. FIN. ANAL. 104616, at 9 (2025) (discussing that lower social trust would reduce fertility intentions); see also Arnstein Aassve, Francesco C. Billari & Léa Pessin, *Trust and Fertility Dynamics*, 95 SOC. FORCES 663, 675-677 (2016) (discussing that lower social trust would reduce fertility intentions).

Childbearing requires substantial long-term investments of time, money, and emotional resources.⁴² When individuals perceive opportunities and outcomes as increasingly shaped by privilege rather than effort, they may become more unwilling to take long-term investments and more concerned about their children's future prospects. Parents may feel compelled to invest greater resources in education and child development in order to secure their children's future opportunities.⁴³ This may reduce the attractiveness of parenthood and lower fertility intentions, consistent with research suggesting that concerns about children's future success and the increasing resources required to secure those prospects can discourage childbearing.⁴⁴

In this way, the history-rooted sensitivity to inequality and privilege indirectly causes the declining fertility rate.

V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, China's declining fertility rate cannot be fully understood through contemporary economic or policy factors alone. Rather, it reflects the long-term influence of historical structures and experiences that continue to shape social norms, institutional trust, and individual decision-making.

The legacy of gender norms, the national economic pressures, the sensitivity to inequality and privilege collectively shape individuals' expectations about the future and constrain decisions related to marriage and fertility. In this sense, low fertility in China is not simply a demographic phenomenon, but an outcome shaped by the interaction between historical experience and present conditions. Policies should address gendered family burdens, work intensity, and institutional trust, rather than relying solely on financial incentives.

42. See Anne H. Gauthier & Petra W. de Jong, *Costly Children: the Motivations for Parental Investment in Children in a Low Fertility Context*, 77 GENUS 6, 3-4 (2021) (discussing the substantial long-term parental investment in children, especially in a low fertility context).

43. *Id.* (discussing the substantial long-term parental investment in children, especially in a low fertility context).

44. *Id.*