

# The Historical Changes and Evolutionary Logic of China's Fertility Policy

-- Based on the paradigm of historical institutionalism analysis

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## Abstract

Population problem is an important issue of social development and one of the keys to achieve sustainable development. As an important part of population policy, the scientific understanding of fertility policy and the grasp of its historical change and evolution logic are necessary measures to alleviate the aging trend of small children and promote the long-term balanced development of population. From the perspective of historical institutionalism, China's family policy has gone through five historical stages: incubation, exploration and development, establishment and implementation, relaxation and optimization, and encouragement and inclusiveness. From the perspective of structural changes, changes in the national macro environment, changes in social fertility concepts and the promotion of multiple actors have promoted the evolution and development of China's fertility policy. From the perspective of historical change, the historical change of China's fertility policy has the phenomenon of path dependence and the policy turning of key nodes. Looking forward to the future, we should flexibly adjust the fertility policy by paying attention to the change of population structure; We will protect women's rights and interests and create an equal social environment. Improving the fertility service model and providing comprehensive fertility protection will contribute to the healthy and stable development of China's population.

## Keywords

Fertility policy, Institutional changes, Historical institutionalism, Family Planning.

## 1. Introduction

Population is an important foundation for economic and social development. China has always been a populous country with one of the largest populations in the world. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, China achieved the transformation of population reproduction pattern in just over 30 years, and successfully entered the ranks of countries with a low fertility level [1], which was mainly due to China's fertility policy. As a basic component of the population and fertility system, the fertility policy refers to the sum of laws and measures enacted by the government to affect people's reproductive behavior [2]. Its goal is to influence the population growth rate and improve the quality of population development [3] by controlling the number of births, so as to meet the needs of economic and social development. Since the founding of New China more than 70 years ago, the type of population reproduction in China has undergone great changes, from the almost primitive type of high birth, high death and low growth in the early period of the founding of the People's Republic of China, through the traditional type of high birth, low death and high growth, and then into the modern type of low birth, low death and low growth. At present, China is in the post-population transition stage, under the guidance of the basic national policy of family planning, China has implemented the

one-child policy for a long time in the past 30 years, strictly control the number of new population, resulting in China's fertility rate continues to decline, showing an obvious negative population growth trend, fewer children, aging and other problems are becoming increasingly acute. In order to encourage fertility and improve the population situation, the state gradually liberalized birth control through gradual policy adjustment. In May 2021, the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee deliberated and adopted the Decision on Optimizing the Family Policy and Promoting Long-term and Balanced Population Development, proposing to implement the policy of allowing each couple to have three children and supporting measures. The three-child policy is an important measure to optimize China's population structure, maintain human resource endowment, and promote long-term and balanced population development, and is a further improvement and optimization of China's family policy.

The existing research results on the changes of China's population and fertility policy are very rich. In recent years, the academic research on population and fertility policy can roughly take the introduction of the three-child policy as the dividing line. Before the introduction of the three-child policy, most of the academic circles discussed the impact of the two-child policy and the comprehensive two-child policy, as well as the reflection and initiative on the adjustment of the family planning policy. Liu Yana and Fei Huan believe that there is room for further adjustment and improvement of the family planning policy, and its basic orientation is to achieve a long-term balance between population and society [4]. Wang Jun and Jia Xiaofei proposed that in the face of the population reality of two children alone and universal two-child policy, it is a general trend to fully liberalize family planning and return the fertility decision to the family. When necessary, fertility encouragement and supporting social policies should be implemented [5]. Shi Renbing et al believe that the two-child policy and the universal two-child policy have obvious effects in the short term, but in the medium and long term, the effect of policy adjustment is very limited, and it cannot meet the needs of long-term population development in China [6]. After the introduction of the three-child policy, academic researches mainly focused on analyzing the social impact of the three-child policy and explaining how to strengthen supporting measures. Liu Zhongyi proposed that in order to enhance the inclusiveness of the one-child policy, it is necessary to explore and summarize new policy implementation paths innovatively, and establish and improve the corresponding realization mechanism based on the actual situation [7]. By analyzing the change trend of fertility rate in the future, Zhang Yi designed to prevent the fertility rate from continuing to decline in the short term, maintain and fluctuate to increase the fertility rate in the medium term, and improve the fertility rate in the long term. Establish the goal of releasing the dividends of the three systems of a fertility friendly society [8]. Wang Jun and Wang Guangzhou explored the low fertility intention in the context of the three-child policy from three aspects: effective measurement of fertility intention, causes of low fertility intention and public policy formulation based on fertility intention [9]. Research on China's population and fertility policy has been very detailed in academic circles, but there is still room for expansion and extension. Although most studies will divide the evolution process of China's fertility policy into stages, some scholars will also study the influencing factors of fertility policy change. However, few articles have conducted a comprehensive and systematic analysis of the evolution logic of the family policy from the structural view of historical institutionalism and the analytical framework of historical view.

In such a critical historical period of the realization of Chinese modernization and the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, it is of great practical significance to review the vicissitude of China's population and fertility policy and its influencing factors. Since the founding of the People's Republic of China more than 70 years ago, the evolution of the family policy has experienced a reversal from encouraging birth to controlling birth and then encouraging birth. Behind this evolution trajectory involves complex political, economic and social concepts and other factors. In order to fully and accurately understand the historical and realistic logic

behind the adjustment of the fertility policy, we must start from the perspective of historical institutionalism and examine the fertility policy in the specific time and space situation at that time. Only in this way can we more clearly and rationally understand and grasp the historical motivation and future path of China's fertility policy adjustment, lay a solid foundation for the realization of scientific population management services, and provide a more targeted reference basis for the formulation and implementation of the fertility policy to alleviate the aging trend of small children and promote the long-term balanced development of population.

## 2. Historical institutionalism paradigm

In the 1980s, historical institutionalism began to rise. As an important part of the new institutionalism theory, it gradually became an important analytical tool for the study of institutional change. According to the new institutionalism theory, the system, as a kind of public goods, moves from equilibrium to disequilibrium and then to new equilibrium. When the supply and demand of the system are basically balanced, the system is stable. When the existing system cannot meet the public demand, the system will change until the new equilibrium point is reached. Historical institutionalism examines institutional change in the course of history, emphasizing the time order of historical nodes and the diachronic analysis of their interrelation, and exploring the causal chain of institutional change. Standing in the perspective of middle-level theory, historical institutionalism not only avoids the rigid constraints of only talking about the grand institutional background such as the state and the system, but also avoids the excessive micro-experience description of behaviorism.

The structural view and the historical view are the two analytical dimensions of historical institutionalism. The structural view focuses on the interaction between the macro, meso and micro structural elements involved in institutional change, and how this interaction promotes the evolution of institutions. In the process of institutional change, structural variables such as national institutional background at the macro level, interests and ideas at the meso level, and actors' preferences at the micro level will all have certain impacts on specific institutional arrangements, and the arrangement order of different structural elements may also lead to changes in the direction of institutional change [10]. Therefore, the structural relationship between the above three aspects is the core issue concerned by historical institutionalism [11]. On the other hand, the historical view emphasizes the analysis of the sequential changes of institutions from a dynamic perspective, focusing on the important issues of why institutions change while maintaining relative stability, namely path dependence and key nodes. Path dependence can be divided into two categories, broad and narrow. The broad path dependence means that the events in the former stage may have some influence and restriction on the events in the later stage, thus affecting the evolution of the system. In the narrow sense, path dependence is mainly reflected in the phenomenon of "increasing returns", which means that once the system is formed, it will continue along the established direction under the influence of learning effect, synergistic effect, adaptive expectation and exit cost [11]. However, at some point, there may also be key nodes, which lead to the adjustment of the operating direction of the system, thus contributing to the change of the system.

The evolution and development of China's fertility policy has been more than 70 years, from the incubation, exploration and development, establishment and implementation, relaxation and optimization to the current encouraging and inclusive period, the evolution of the fertility policy is very clear, and the logic behind the change needs to be further explored. Therefore, based on the analysis paradigm of historical institutionalism, this study reviews the historical change process of China's fertility policy since the founding of New China, recognizes and grasp the evolution logic of fertility policy from the analysis framework of structural view and historical view, dialectically treats the long-term nature and complexity of population birth

problem, and looks forward to the future policy trend. Thus, it breaks through the straight-line thinking mode of "treating the pain from the head to the head", emphasizing the present and neglecting the history and the future [12], helps grasp the adjustment thinking of the fertility policy, and promotes the coordinated development of population, economy and society, which has important theoretical value and practical significance.

### **3. The historical changes of China's fertility policy**

#### **3.1. The incubation period of the fertility policy (1949-1954)**

In the early years of the founding of New China, the economic foundation of the country was very weak, and the material resources and financial capital were extremely scarce [13]. At this time, the primary task of the country was to concentrate on consolidating the people's power, restoring production and promoting economic construction, and these tasks required the participation of a large number of labor forces. At the same time, influenced by the traditional concept of "having more children and more happiness" and "raising children for old age" and the Soviet Union's population policy, China adopted the method of encouraging fertility to promote population growth, and stipulated strict birth control and abortion procedures. Due to the strict implementation of the restricted birth control policy, the birth rate in China from 1949 to 1952 has been maintained at about 37‰, and there has been the first birth peak in China. With the continuous rise of birth rate, China's population has exceeded 600 million in the "one general" survey in 1953, and the natural growth rate has reached 23‰. This phenomenon of population explosion has a serious impact on economic and social development, and the voice of limiting birth is more and more strong, so the country began to try to explore the method of limiting birth. In general, there was no formal, clear and stable fertility policy in this period, and it was in a stage of brewing and repeating.

#### **3.2. The Period of exploration and development of the fertility policy (1955-1979)**

Due to the rapid population growth, the shortage of housing facilities and the increasing burden of living began to become prominent, and the central government began to attach importance to the population issue. In March 1955, the Report of the Leading Party Group of the Central Ministry of Health on birth Control to the Party Central Committee was the first document on birth control in China, marking a fundamental change in the Party's birth thinking [14]. Later, affected by the Great Leap Forward movement, China's social economy suffered serious setbacks, and there was a nationwide fertility low tide. The three-year difficult period and the compensatory birth after that led to the second baby boom in China, and the social and economic pressure was further deepened. In December 1962, the Directive on Earnestly Advocating Family Planning proposed the implementation of family planning in both urban and densely populated rural areas, marking the official launch of China's family planning work [15]. In 1970, Zhou Enlai stressed that family planning was a national planning issue rather than a health issue. In 1973, population planning was officially included in the "Fourth Five-Year Plan". In December of the same year, at the first family planning report meeting in China, the policy of "late, rare and few" was put forward, which marked that the content of China's family policy began to become clear and specific. In 1978, the Third Plenary Session of the 11th CPC Central Committee announced the implementation of reform and opening up, and the focus of the government's work was changed to "take economic construction as the center". However, the rapid growth of population led to a high tension between population and economy. In January 1979, the National Conference of Directors of Family Planning Offices made it clear that "it is recommended that each couple should have a maximum of one or two children". During this period, the development of family planning work was finally on the right track after the tortuous exploration in the early stage, and the restrictive family planning policy took shape.

### **3.3. The Period of establishment and implementation of the fertility policy (1980-2012)**

On the basis of the exploration of a series of previous birth policies, in September 1980, the third session of the fifth National People's Congress issued an Open Letter to All Communist Party Members and Communist Youth League Members on the Problem of Controlling China's Population Growth, calling on the Party and league members to take the lead in responding to the "one child" policy [16], marking the official introduction and full implementation of the one-child policy. China's fertility policy has shifted from loose to tight. In 1981, a special State Family Planning Commission was established, and family planning authorities from the central to local levels were gradually established. In 1982, family planning was included in the Constitution as a basic state policy, further increasing its importance. In April 1984, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China forwarded the Report on Family Planning, which adjusted and amended the one-child policy, that is, "open small mouths, stop big mouths and prohibit crooked mouths" [17]. In 1990, the results of the "four PRP" showed that the national population had reached 1.13 billion, and the "Decision on Strengthening Family Planning Work and strictly Controlling Population Growth" once again emphasized that the implementation of family planning was urgent [18]. In the 21st century, the strict implementation of the family planning policy has made China's population present a trend of "low fertility rate, low mortality rate and low natural growth rate". In 2006, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and The State Council issued the Decision on Comprehensively Strengthening Population and Family Planning Work to Comprehensively Solve the Population Problem, marking a new stage for China to stabilize the low fertility level. The results of the "six pronged measures" in 2010 show that China's population growth is already at a low fertility level stage, but the aging process of the population is gradually accelerating, and the problem of population structure is prominent, which requires timely adjustment of the family policy. Therefore, various localities have begun to explore the implementation of the two-child policy. During this period, although the family policy has undergone several small adjustments before and after, the one-child policy is still the most obvious and iconic feature of this stage, and the working mechanism and administrative system of family planning management have been strengthened unprecedented.

### **3.4. Period of relaxation and optimization of the fertility policy (2013-2019)**

In order to further optimize the population structure and improve the quality of the population, with the goal of "promoting balanced population development", the central government has continuously adjusted and optimized the fertility policy and gradually relaxed the birth restriction. In November 2013, the Third Plenary Session of the 18th CPC Central Committee adopted the Decision of the CPC Central Committee on Some Major Issues concerning the Deepening of National Reform, proposing the implementation of the two-child policy, which means that couples can have a second child if one of them is an only child. On this basis, in October 2015, the Fifth Plenary session of the 18th CPC Central Committee further proposed the implementation of the universal two-child policy, completely lifting the two-child birth limit. Although there was a compensatory baby boom in China after the implementation of the universal two-child policy, and the number of newborns increased significantly, the release of the policy effect did not meet the expectations, and the downward trend of population growth was not fundamentally reversed, which was not enough to cope with the long-term changes in population situation in the future. Therefore, a wider range and more profound measures to adjust the fertility policy are imminent. During this period, the fertility policy has been adjusted twice by steps and stages, highlighting the trend of gradually lifting the limit on the number of children.

### **3.5. The Encouraging and inclusive Period of the fertility policy (2020 to the present)**

In order to further address the problem of low fertility rate and aging population, in October 2020, the Fifth Plenary Session of the 19th CPC Central Committee deliberated and adopted the Proposal of the CPC Central Committee on Formulating the 14th Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development and the Long-term Goals for 2035, proposing to "implement a national strategy to actively respond to the aging population." Formulate a long-term strategy for population development, optimize the family policy, and make it more inclusive." China's total fertility rate is only 1.3, falling below the international warning line of the "low fertility trap" of 1.5. At the same time, China's family size continues to shrink, with the average population per family only 2.62 people. The population growth situation is not optimistic. In June 2021, the CPC Central Committee and The State Council issued the Decision on Optimizing the Fertility Policy to Promote the Long-term and Balanced Development of Population, pointing out that "implementing the policy of allowing one couple to have three children and supporting measures", giving specific instructions on optimizing the fertility policy. The three-child policy is a complementary consideration to the ineffective adjustment of the previous family policy [19]. Different from the previous two-child policy and the comprehensive two-child policy, the fertility policy of this period emphasized the importance of supporting measures of the fertility policy in parallel with the three-child policy, which marked the determination of the central government to change the concept of fertility.

## **4. The evolution logic of China's fertility policy**

### **4.1. Structural view analysis of the evolution of China's fertility policy**

#### **4.1.1. Situation elements: Changes of the national macro environment**

As the superstructure, the fertility policy is determined by the economic base. The existence of the fertility policy must match the economic base and must be adapted to the constant changes in the productive forces and relations of production. In the early years of the founding of the People's Republic of China, China's economic foundation was weak, the level of industrialization was low, the industrial structure was dominated by labor-intensive industries, and the labor force became the most important factor of production for economic growth [13]. Therefore, the government encouraged birth in order to cope with the population loss caused by the long-term war and the recovery of the economic and social situation. However, the Great Leap Forward caused the serious imbalance of the national economy and fiscal deficit, coupled with the national food shortage caused by natural disasters, population control and birth control became necessary choices. Since the reform and opening up, "development is the absolute principle" and "taking economic development as the center" have become the basic principles of governance. In 1980, the publication of the Open Letter raised the importance of population control to "bearing on the speed and future of the Four modernizations". Implementing the family planning policy and controlling excessive population growth became an important strategy for promoting economic development and realizing opening-up. Since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, China's economic development has entered a new normal, the transformation of the pattern of labor supply and demand, the rapid rise of excessively low fertility rate and population aging caused by the one-child policy for many years, have caused concerns from all walks of life. Therefore, the government began to adjust and relax the population policy in 2013, in order to cope with new problems and new challenges such as labor shortage and population aging, and promote sustainable social and economic development.

The political environment has a profound impact on the adjustment of the fertility policy [4]. In the early days of the founding of the People's Republic of China, China was faced with a harsh

external political environment. Due to the imperialist blockade and war provocation, China joined the war to resist the United States and aid North Korea. The huge war mobilization urgently needed manpower support, coupled with the confrontation between the two camps of capitalism and socialism, the one-sided foreign policy strategy of China at that time was also an important reason to learn from the Soviet Union to encourage childbirth. In the early 1950s, China established a planned economic system, and the fertility policy was also included in the national plan, and the government strengthened the management of population and birth. Since 1980s, with the deepening of reform and opening up, China has been increasingly connected with the international community, influenced by complex and diverse social and cultural influences, and changes in the government's ideas and ways of thinking have guided the direction of policy adjustment. At the same time, changes in the international situation and the need for reform of China's own political system have triggered policy adjustments at the macro level. China's family policy has begun to attach importance to the sustainable development of the population, family happiness and the protection of children's rights and interests. Since 21st century, China has accelerated the transformation and upgrading of the government, in order to meet the needs of comprehensive coordinated and sustainable development of the economy and society, our country once again carried out many rounds of strategic adjustment, the implementation of more loose fertility policy, in order to alleviate the problem of population aging and population structure imbalance.

The population situation is the direct reason for the adjustment of the fertility policy [4]. Population status, that is, the size, gender, age structure, fertility status and change trend of the population, are the most basic decision-making basis for the change of fertility policy, and the direct purpose of the adjustment of fertility policy is to regulate the reproduction activities of the population. In the early years of the founding of New China, the population structure was unbalanced, and the proportion of young and middle-aged people, especially men, was out of proportion. Therefore, the government encouraged birth to alleviate the shortage of population after the war. However, by the late 1950s, the rapid growth of the population had a sharp contradiction with the lack of social productivity and material materials in China at that time, and the government began to explore birth control. In the past decade, the "three consecutive adjustments" of the fertility policy were also carried out with such considerations in mind. The restrictive fertility policy has precipitously reduced China's fertility rate, but the subsequent loose policy has not brought about the expected rebound in the birth population. Due to the continuous decrease in the number of women of childbearing age and the low fertility intention [20], as well as the continuous improvement of urbanization level, the phenomenon of late marriage, late childbearing, fewer children and infertility has become a new social trend. Which has a severe impact on the negative population growth. At the same time, with the continuous extension of life expectancy, people will be more inclined to marry and have children late, and the inversion of the age structure of "less young and more old" has become the norm of family and social life, and a series of population problems have followed, which has become an important driving force to promote the urgent adjustment of the fertility policy.

#### **4.1.2. Concept elements: the change of social conception of childbearing**

The fertility policy of our country can not be separated from the influence of international mainstream population trends. Malthusianism believed that "population bomb" and "population crisis" posed a great threat to human civilization, and population cybernetics became the mainstream population trend of thought in the 1960s. At that time, China was in a period of rapid rebound after three years of natural disasters, and the contradiction between population growth and material materials became increasingly prominent, which gave birth to the exploration of the family planning policy. The one-child policy, introduced in 1980, was also strongly influenced by the international population trend. After that, the international population trend of thought shifted from controlling population growth to focusing on

population development and population quality. The United Nations put forward the concept of "sustainable population development", and the Chinese government gradually emphasized the principle of "eugenics and family planning are equally important", focusing on population structure optimization and talent accumulation. At present, the global population growth rate has slowed down and the fertility rate has been low for a long time, which drives the mainstream international population trend of thought from "population control theory" to "population proliferation theory", advocating the adoption of measures to encourage fertility and improve fertility level. China has put forward the three-child policy and supporting measures in line with the changes of The Times and the global population development strategy. The change of the government's conception of fertility has directly promoted the adjustment of the fertility policy. As the designer of the policy, the government's cognition of the population issue greatly affects the goal and content of the fertility policy. In the early days of the founding of New China, the government's cognition of population issues was greatly influenced by China's traditional thought and the Soviet Union's population policy. Therefore, the slogan "There is strength in numbers" was put forward to encourage more births. In the early 1970s, with the increasing pressure of population growth, the Chinese government began to adopt the family planning policy to control the population growth. In the decades after the implementation of the family planning policy, the government's conception and cognition of fertility has gradually changed, and it is no longer limited to simple population control, but makes overall planning and coordination from the perspective of the overall development of the country, and pays more attention to the long-term balanced development of the population. From the late 1980s to the early 1990s, the government put forward the policy of "family planning, good birth and good birth", stressing the need to promote the concept of scientific birth and improve the quality of the population. In recent years, as the problem of the aging population has become increasingly prominent, the Chinese government has made new changes in the concept and policy of childbearing. It has begun to introduce a series of policies to encourage childbearing, emphasizing the need to build a childbearing friendly society and encourage couples of appropriate age to have children in order to ease the pressure of the aging population.

To a certain extent, the change of the public's conception of fertility has also promoted the adjustment and transformation of the fertility policy. With the continuous development of our country's economy and society, the public's understanding of the birth issue is constantly improving. In the early days of the founding of the People's Republic, the state vigorously advocated fertility, and under the influence of the traditional concept of raising children for old age and having more children, people believed that having more children was a contribution to the family and the country. After the 1970s, the state carried out the family planning policy, and the public gradually realized the negative impact of too many children on society and families, and began to accept and support the family planning policy. In recent years, the traditional concept of birth has gradually faded out of people's vision. More than 30 years of strict family planning has made the public concept of birth more rational and paid more attention to good birth and good birth. Many families have begun to choose to have fewer, good birth or even no birth. At the same time, the diversified life style also satisfies people's individual needs, marriage and birth. Childbearing is no longer a necessity. In some big cities, economic difficulties brought about by the three mountains of housing, education and health care, discrimination against women in employment, and family responsibilities have also reduced the public's willingness to have children, urgently requiring the government to issue new policies to stimulate fertility.

#### **4.1.3. Main element: the promotion of multiple actors**

Since the founding of the People's Republic of China, various entities such as the government, experts and scholars, international organizations, social organizations and the public have all



played different roles in the evolution of China's family planning policy, and jointly promoted the continuous improvement and optimization of China's family planning policy.

The government is in the leading position in the process of the change of China's family policy, and plays an important role in the formulation and revision of the family policy, publicity and promotion, implementation and supervision, subsidies and preferences. The formulation of fertility policy needs to fully consider the population change, economic development, social and cultural factors, etc. Since 1949, according to the national conditions and social needs at different stages, the government has issued a series of birth policies and supporting measures, from the implementation of the one-child policy, to the implementation of two children alone, two children across the board and the current three-child policy. Through continuous adjustment and improvement of the government's family policy, the family policy has gradually become flexible and activated, which has promoted the improvement of the population structure and the sustainable development of economic society.

Experts and scholars play an important role in the reform of China's family policy. By forecasting and analyzing social development trends, experts and scholars in different disciplines not only provide strong support in the formulation and implementation of fertility policies, but also play an important role in the change of public fertility concepts and the improvement of social awareness. At the same time, experts and scholars have also provided more scientific and feasible suggestions and programs for the adjustment and optimization of policies.

With the deepening of China's opening to the outside world, the changes in the fertility policy have also been influenced by international organizations. International organizations and external forces have improved the public's awareness and quality and promoted the transformation and upgrading of China's fertility policy by continuously improving population awareness, popularizing reproductive health knowledge and improving women's status. For example, the United Nations has put forward the concepts of "moderate fertility" and "sustainable population development", which have had an impact on the formulation of China's fertility policy.

The public and social organizations are also important promoters of the changes in the fertility policy. In the early stage of the implementation of the family planning policy, the public generally accepted the family planning policy promoted by the government, but as time went on, more and more people called on the government to pay attention to the quality of the population and the rights of the family, and gradually more diversified views emerged. The changes in the public's conception of fertility and demands for fertility affected the direction and form of the government's family policy to a certain extent. In addition, social organizations, especially some women's rights and interests organizations, child protection organizations, family education organizations, continue to pay attention to the national family planning policy, actively offer suggestions and suggestions, and promote the continuous improvement of China's family planning policy.

## **4.2. Historical perspective analysis of the evolution of China's fertility policy**

### **4.2.1. Path dependence: Self-reinforcing mechanism keeps the policy alive**

Historical institutionalism holds that institutions may fall into path dependence in the long process of evolution. Under the path-dependent mechanism, once an institution is chosen, people will attach great importance to it and be bound by the norms and beliefs within the institution. People tend to predict their behavioral choices and the consequences of their decisions, so they are less likely to choose to behave in ways that do not follow the rules of the system. In addition, they further rely on their existing experience and knowledge, thus creating a self-reinforcing cycle of behavior, which makes the existing pattern of the system a formal code of conduct. This path-dependent phenomenon makes it quite difficult to change the

system and even more difficult to challenge it. Because once people get used to a fixed system or behavior norm, they are more likely to be restricted and constrained, and they are more likely to be reluctant to take the initiative to change it. In addition, any system reform inevitably has risks and uncertainties, so it is difficult for people to give up the existing model of accepting the system and try to avoid the uncertainty brought by the system reform. Therefore, it can be said that path dependence is a major obstacle to institutional reform, especially in the highly competitive and fast-changing environment, this obstacle will be more significant. The path dependence phenomenon of China's fertility policy can be explained from four aspects: learning effect, adaptive expectation, synergistic effect and exit cost.

First, the learning effect refers to improving the quality and efficiency of future decisions and action plans through the knowledge, experience and skills gained from past experiences and behavioral practices. During the period of exploration of the family planning policy, the government and the public realized that the demographic dividend would become an unbearable burden in the future, and drew a conclusion from the past practice and experience that it was necessary to control the number of births. The influence of this learning effect may continue into the future, and even if the policy changes, people's perceptions will still be difficult to change; Second, adaptive expectation refers to anticipating what is likely to happen in the future based on past experience and making action plans accordingly. For example, during the implementation of the one-child policy, many people benefited from it and gradually recognized the one-child policy, believing that it was necessary to control the size of the family, and expecting a family with only one child was the best situation, which strengthened the influence of the one-child policy to a certain extent. Third, Synergies are actions or policies that interact and complement each other so that the overall effect is better than individual actions or policies. During the implementation of the fertility policy, the government will adopt a series of supporting policies and measures to promote the implementation of the policy, such as strengthening the population census, promoting education reform, and strengthening the construction of medical and health infrastructure. The interaction and supplement among these policies make the implementation effect of the fertility policy more significant, but the synergistic effect of these policies will also lead to the emergence and continuation of the path dependence phenomenon; Fourth, the exit cost refers to the price to be paid for modifying or abandoning the current policy or system. During the implementation of a fertility policy, the government will invest a lot of human, material and financial resources to promote and implement the policy. If the policy changes, the government may need to pay a lot of exit costs. At the same time, people also need a certain amount of time to adapt to the new policy, people may need to bridge the gap and disorder caused by the difference in thinking and value conversion caused by the path dependence phenomenon, which requires a lot of time and energy costs. When formulating and implementing policies, these factors need to be taken into account comprehensively, so as to reduce the impact of path dependence and better balance the current needs with the possibility of future development.

#### **4.2.2. Key nodes: Major historical events promote policy adjustments**

The evolution of China's fertility policy has lasted for more than 70 years. Since the concepts of "family planning" and "voluntary moderation" were put forward in the 1950s, the fertility policy has been in a dynamic state of change [21]. From the perspective of the development context of family policy, there are four key nodes in the evolution of family policy in China.

(1) In 1955, "Report to the Party Central Committee on birth Control" was published: From encouraging birth to birth control

In the early days of the founding of New China, under the influence of China's traditional fertility concept and the Soviet Union's population policy, in order to cope with the loss of personnel caused by the long-term war, especially the loss of young and middle-aged groups, and restore

the normal operation of economic and social order as soon as possible, the government began to encourage fertility on a large scale, resulting in a surge in China's population in a short time, far exceeding the social carrying capacity at that time. Does not match with the development needs of The Times, social contradictions become increasingly acute, population control and birth control has become a necessary choice for the country. In 1955, the Report of the Leading Party Group of the Ministry of Health of the CPC Central Committee on birth Control to the Party Central Committee openly pointed out that "Our Party is in favor of proper birth control." As the country's first official document on birth control, the publication of this report marked a fundamental change in the Party's fertility thinking from encouraging birth to birth control. The government realized the negative impact of overpopulation and began to explore ways to control birth.

(2) The "Open Letter" was published in 1980: the one-child policy was formed, and the fertility policy changed from loose to tight

In the 1970s, the huge population caused serious social and economic pressure on our country. At the same time, China's reform, opening up and economic development are speeding up. The central government is aware that population control is not only a population issue, but also involves the country's economic development and social stability. Under such circumstances, the government began to pay attention to the economic benefits brought by one-child families. Compared with multi-child families, one-child families can devote more resources and energy to children's education and training, effectively improve the population quality while controlling the population size, which is very beneficial to the enhancement of national competitiveness and children's future development. Thus, in 1980, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China issued an Open Letter to All Communist Party Members and Communist Youth League Members on the Problem of Controlling China's population Growth, advocating that each couple should only have one child, marking the official introduction and implementation of the one-child policy. To a certain extent, the one-child policy can help alleviate the problem of overpopulation in China and control the population growth rate. Generally speaking, the implementation of the one child policy is during the period of China's rapid development. The government can better achieve the purpose of controlling population and promoting economic development through the adjustment of population policy. It also marks the change of the fertility policy of our country from loose to tight. In the more than 30 years since then, although the policy has undergone some adjustments, its essence has not changed fundamentally.

(3) The Third Plenary Session of the 18th CPC Central Committee in 2013: the two-child policy was introduced, and the fertility policy changed from tight to loose

The focus of policy formulation is not immutable, but constantly adjusted as the economic and social development situation changes [22]. Previously, the one-child policy has been implemented for more than 30 years, and has achieved remarkable results in population control, but it has also led to a series of problems, which are manifested in the gradual decline of demographic dividend, rapid aging of population, serious imbalance of population structure, imbalance of labor supply and demand, and insufficient competitive advantage of talents. The institutional risks of the one-child policy have gradually emerged [23]. At the same time, China's economic growth and social progress have changed people's conception and demand of fertility, and the trend of fertility decline is very obvious. The central government has realized that it must adjust the existing fertility policy to alleviate the challenges brought by the population problem to the society, and the two-child policy came into being. In 2013, the Third Plenary Session of the 18th CPC Central Committee officially announced the implementation of the two-child policy, which allows couples to have two children if one parent is an only child. The introduction of the two-child policy aims to guide eligible couples to have two children, thereby optimizing the country's population structure and enabling. The policy tends to be reasonable

and controllable, and tries to ease social contradictions and conflicts. The introduction of the one-child policy also marks the gradual relaxation of China's family policy from tightening, and the further implementation of the universal two-child policy on this basis also reflects the relaxed trend of China's family policy.

(4) The outline of the 14th Five-Year Plan for 2020 and the Vision goal for 2035: the fertility policy from restraint to inclusiveness

In 2020, China conducted the seventh population census, and the results show that the objective situation of China's low birth rate is no longer optimistic. The implementation of the universal two-child policy has not brought the expected large-scale population growth, coupled with the general downturn in social fertility demand, which has become a huge threat to the sustainable development of China's economy and society, and it is urgent to issue a new fertility policy to stimulate fertility. In order to further deal with the problem of continued low fertility rate and aging population, in October 2020, the Fifth Plenary session of the 19th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China deliberated and adopted the "Proposal of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Formulating the 14th Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development and the long-term Goals of 2035", proposing to "implement a national strategy to actively respond to the aging population." Formulate a long-term strategy for population development, optimize the family policy, and make it more inclusive." On this basis, in June 2021, the CPC Central Committee and The State Council issued the Decision on Optimizing the Family Policy to Promote Long-term and Balanced Population Development, pointing out that "To implement the Policy of allowing one couple to have three children and Supporting Measures", giving specific instructions on optimizing the family policy, emphasizing the importance of improving the supporting measures of the family policy, It marks the change of the central government's conception of fertility from "restriction" to "encouragement and tolerance".

## 5. Summary

Since the founding of New China, China's family policy has gone through a tortuous process of development and change, and has been constantly upgraded and improved. Entering a new stage of historical development, China will face more risks and challenges from a long-term low fertility level and a deepening aging population. As the core content of the family planning system project, the family policy has been dynamically adjusted along with the changing situation of population and the needs of economic and social development. The pace of optimizing the family policy will not stop in the future. Therefore, we need to correctly view the current situation and future of population development, and formulate appropriate family policy and supporting measures to cope with the new population challenges.

### 5.1. Pay attention to changes in population structure and make flexible adjustments to fertility policies

As China's population is becoming increasingly small and aging, the government should take effective measures to strengthen the population census, pay close attention to changes in the population structure, and guide the trend of population change in due course. In the formulation of the family policy, the government should dynamically adjust and improve the family policy with the goal of good birth and good birth. It should not simply emphasize the pursuit of population quantity, but comprehensively consider the balance of population quantity, quality and structure, as well as the balanced relationship between population factors and economic and social factors, resources and environmental factors. Focusing on the long-term impact and comprehensive effect of population change, the design of family planning policy should be more long-term and forward-looking. At the same time, the government should strengthen the publicity and education of the fertility policy, and guide the public to

establish the value recognition of the fertility policy norms. In addition, the government should take into account the differences between regions when formulating fertility policies, and adopt moderately diversified fertility policies according to the population structure and social and economic conditions of each region in China, so as to better meet the fertility needs of different regions and groups, promote the fertility policy to be more humane and accurate, and attach importance to the harmony and happiness of individual families and family development. To coordinate the overall interests of the country and the individual interests of reproductive families, so as to improve the operability and realizability of the policy.

### **5.2. Protecting women's rights and interests and creating an equal social environment**

Fertility policy is closely linked to the protection of women's rights and interests. In the future, the formulation of fertility policy needs to pay more attention to and support for women, and attach importance to the needs and legitimate rights and interests of housewives in the reproductive process, so that they can receive equal reproductive support. The government can support women's childbearing and child-rearing needs by setting up special funds and adjusting supporting welfare policies for childbearing, so as to increase women's confidence and motivation for pregnancy and child-rearing. What needs to be emphasized is that strengthening workplace protection for women and reducing workplace discrimination are also crucial to improving women's willingness to give birth. Gender inequality in family division of labor has restricted women's career development and made women afraid and unwilling to give birth. The government can protect women's rights and interests in employment and career development by strengthening supervision and inspection of gender discrimination, implementing male maternity leave system, female flexible work system, and strengthening maternity subsidies for pregnant female workers. Create a more equal social support environment, relieve women's contradictions and pressure between work, family and childbearing, give women more sense of security, and thus promote the fertility intention and fertility level.

### **5.3. Improving fertility service models and providing comprehensive maternity protection**

Strengthening supporting measures for fertility services is an important direction for the improvement of fertility policies in the future, which should be a comprehensive, whole-process service system including before, during and after the event. At the same time, capital investment is a key factor for the implementation of supporting measures for fertility services. The government can improve the supply quality of reproductive services by increasing capital investment, so as to improve the satisfaction of childbearing age groups. Specifically, the government can strengthen health management and consultation services for pregnant and lactating women, provide guidance and help to families who wish to have children, and make pregnancy preparation and pregnancy more scientific and healthy. At the same time, by establishing a medical security system for the whole process of childbearing, we can promote equal access to public health services and provide more comprehensive and thoughtful medical and health services for mothers, infants and young children, such as establishing maternity nursing stations and increasing screening for diseases among newborns, so as to relieve families of their worries. In addition, we will give full play to the functions of community universal childcare services, form diversified childcare services, and solve the pressure of childcare for families with multiple children or infants and young children. Of course, in addition to the above measures on fertility policy, the relevant policies of housing, education, taxation, employment and elderly care should also be reformed in coordination with the fertility policy, so as to jointly establish a comprehensive maternity service security system, accelerate the construction of a childbearing friendly society, lay a solid social foundation for

the improvement of fertility intention, and thus help the better implementation and implementation of fertility policy.

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