

The Change in Marriage and Childbearing Culture in China and Its Influence on the Fertility Rate

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Abstract: With the rapid development of modern society, China's marriage and childbearing culture has also undergone great changes, but there is little discussion on the influence of the change of marriage and childbearing culture on the fertility rate. Through research, it is found that in China's traditional marriage and childbearing culture, people's marriage and childbearing behavior is greatly influenced by the family, so "early marriage and early childbearing", "multiple births and childbearing", and "preference for male children" are significant features in the traditional marriage and childbearing culture. After entering modern society, China has gradually formed a new modern marriage and childbearing culture, and materialism has gradually replaced familism, in which materialism is essentially a low fertility culture. Therefore, under the influence of a series of intermediary factors, this new marriage and childbearing culture has kept the fertility rate at a low level.

Keywords: Traditional marriage culture; Familism; Modern marriage culture; Materialism

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1. Introduction

According to the seventh national census, China's total fertility rate has dropped to 1.3 in 2020, making it one of the lowest in the world. The implementation of the "comprehensive two children" and "single three children" policy also indicates the complete reversal of the birth policy from restriction to encouragement. The most important thing to improve the fertility level is to solve the problem of people who "do not want to give birth", "dare not give birth", and "cannot give birth." To analyze the reasons why people "do not want to give birth", "dare not to give birth", and "cannot give birth", researchers need to explore the culture of marriage and childbearing from the macro perspective, and the concept of marriage and childbearing from the micro perspective. Marriage culture is not only the core of family culture but also the foundation of social culture^[1]. It permeates so widely in all spheres of life that every class is affected by it. Therefore, it is not only of theoretical significance but also of great practical value to re-explore the marriage and childbearing culture at this moment.

This paper conducts an in-depth study from the perspective of individual concepts of marriage and fertility,

which constitute the unique marriage and fertility culture of each era. The study analyzes the influence of marriage and fertility culture on fertility rate from the changes in marriage and fertility culture, to find a new marriage and fertility relationship that can fit the current era background.

2. Traditional marriage and childbearing culture

Family is a very important part of traditional Chinese culture. Qian Mu once said that Chinese culture is built on the concept of family, and everything else comes before the concept of family. Therefore, familism is one of the most prominent features of Chinese traditional culture. It attaches great importance to the stability and coordination of interpersonal relations within the family, requires members to take the overall interests of the family as the most fundamental interests, emphasizes “respecting the ancestors” and respecting the elders and the young, and especially emphasizes the reproduction and prosperity of the family. China’s traditional marriage and childbearing culture is greatly influenced by familism. The most important function of marriage and childbearing is to meet the needs of family succession, increase labor force to enhance family power and social status, and so on. Therefore, the traditional marriage and childbearing culture has the characteristics of “early”, “many”, and “male”, that is, early marriage and early childbearing, multiple births and more births, and emphasis on males. It is reflected in the following aspects.

First, the individual’s marriage and childbearing behavior is to serve the interests of the family, and even sacrifice the interests of the individual because of the family arrangement when necessary. To carry on the family line is the biggest motivation for reproduction, and only sons can carry on the family line, whereas daughters are not eligible to carry on the family line. In the traditional small-scale farming mode of production, men are the main guarantee of family life, because most of the family’s means of living are from the land, and men are better labor force. The cultural tradition that sons can carry on the family line and the property inheritance system determines that sons have the responsibility and obligation to support the elderly. Therefore, when people choose the number of children, they often think that only by having more children can they guarantee their old age.

Second, early marriage and general marriage. The demands of the ruling class on the population demanded that early marriage between men and women be fixed in the form of a legal system and forced to be enforced. The long-term early marriage system and early marriage customs have a great inertia effect on people’s marriage behavior. Early marriage will lead to early childbearing, early marriage is to speed up the increase in the value of the population, to achieve the important task of carrying on the family line. Because marriage and family responsibilities are combined, people do not have so much freedom to choose, and in the traditional society where marriage is a prerequisite for fertility, only universal marriage can achieve universal fertility, and only can the “population flourish.”

Third, gender imbalance and high fertility. The preference for men in the traditional marriage and childbearing culture has led to an endless stream of preference for sons. If no boy has been born, some people will even choose to abandon or drown female infants, as acts of infanticide, so there is a gender imbalance. The family-oriented marriage culture’s promotion of early and universal marriage, preference for male children, and pursuit of “more children and more happiness” ultimately lead to high fertility rates.

3. Modern marriage and childbearing culture

The traditional fertility culture gradually withdrew from the historical stage with the development of the

productive forces of the feudal system and people's more independent and broader understanding of the concept of marriage and childbearing. The concept of equality between men and women and the new scientific and civilized ideas in marriage and childbearing spread and gradually became a consensus. Meanwhile, with the development of productive forces and the change of production mode, the social function of the family as a means of alleviating income risks gradually weakened. The role of emotional function is becoming more and more prominent, people's consideration of fertility will be less out of consideration based on economic function, and more on emotional value needs, China began to enter a new stage of reproductive culture. The change from traditional marriage culture to modern marriage culture is embodied in the following aspects.

First of all, the rapid development of society has led to the emergence of social mass production. Therefore, the demand for labor force is no longer just a quantity of competition but transformed into a quality of competition, people in the concept of fertility will inevitably be affected by this phenomenon and will be more and more inclined to have fewer and optimized children. At the same time, with the improvement of the social old-age security system, the way of old-age care is gradually transitioning from family-based to society-based, which also completely changes the relationship between the number of births in traditional society and the mutual promotion and advancement of family development.

The second is the shift from early marriage and early childbearing to late marriage and late childbearing. Early marriage and early childbearing are no longer the mainstream of people's pursuits. Late marriage and late childbearing, fewer and better births have become the conscious choice of most people, and the reproductive concept and reproductive behavior of gender equality and no gender preference is the core content and important symbol of gender reproductive culture in modern society^[2]. On the whole, the old patriarchal system and concepts have lost their existence in the economic and social conditions of modern society, because women can completely "carry on the family line", and the real "extinction" is that women no longer participate in childbearing. From a family perspective, there is also a growing acceptance of the idea that daughters are also descendants. In reality, daughters are even more careful, and most elderly people prefer to live with their daughters.

Finally, materialism is increasingly prevalent in China, and the mainstream marriage and childbearing culture in China has gradually changed from being dominated by familism to being dominated by materialism. Some studies believe that after the reform and opening up, "material values have become a basic social value in the history of the change of Chinese social values... Material values and values have almost ascended to the throne of the highest values and values in China"^[3]. Under the guidance of materialistic values, individuals regard "material" as the most important basis for marriage, and those who hold materialistic views on marriage regard material conditions as the most important criteria for choosing a mate, and are more inclined to regard marriage as an "option" rather than a "necessary option" in life.

4. Discussion on the demographic mechanism of low fertility caused by modern marriage and childbearing culture

With materialism replacing familism as the mainstream value, individual fertility intention and fertility behavior have undergone great changes, and "low fertility" has become the main theme. From a macro point of view, the population of a country is neither the more the better, nor the less the better, but the appropriate scale is good, the standard of the appropriate scale is the population and economic and social development, resources, and environmental carrying capacity, is conducive to promote the realization of coordinated and sustainable economic and social development, the people can enjoy the maximum welfare^[4].

One is delayed marriage and childbearing. The delay in marriage and childbearing is the result of many factors, such as the increase in the migrant population. According to the social choice theory, the migrant population is mostly homogeneous, and they usually have a higher education level, strong adaptability, career ambition, and a strong desire for development, so they are more inclined to marry later ^[5]. The increase in the number of years of education also naturally leads to the delay of marriage and childbearing. At the same time, the level of education determines the level of people's cultural quality to a large extent, which determines the difference in people's material and spiritual needs, which in turn leads to different ideas on fertility, and finally has an impact on the level of fertility. In addition, material factors are also very important influencing factors, such as unwillingness to miss the critical period of career development and choosing to spend the time to earn material instead of marriage, love, and birth and waiting until they have accumulated enough material before entering marriage or birth. Some scholars have found that women's economic potential can improve their likelihood of marriage, and women's economic potential plays an increasingly important role in the formation of marriage ^[6-7]. As a result, some women choose not to marry or become infertile for economic reasons.

The second is the rising cost of education. Becker, a micro-demographic economist, put forward the "cost-utility theory of children." He believes that the cost concept of raising a child includes both the direct cost, that is, the direct expenditure on reproduction, and the indirect cost, including the opportunity and time invested by parents for reproduction. At the same time, with the continuous improvement of social living standards and people's attention to the quality of children, the cost of raising children has also risen, especially in the cost of education. The fertility concept of fewer and better births will become more and more popular under multiple pressures. At the same time, for young women, parenting means not only economic costs but also time costs and opportunity costs. Some studies have found that women need to pay a "motherhood penalty" such as the time cost (or corresponding economic cost) of 3 years in their reproductive choices and the opportunity cost of blocked career development ^[8].

The third is serious work-family conflict. Social mass production is formed with the highly detailed social division of labor of productive forces. In modern society, people must participate in social production to obtain income. In this case, the main factor of family economic development is no longer the number of the family labor force but should be whether the labor force can be absorbed by capital, that is, whether it can participate in social production. The combination of these two aspects has promoted the transformation of the masses' conception of fertility and the transformation of fertility culture from quantity to quality. Materialists in society tend to regard material wealth and economic success as the main value goals, to obtain wealth, they will tend to choose more difficult jobs and require more time investment, which may lead to greater pressure and conflict in family life, and thus have to give up having more children.

The new generation of the childbearing age population has long been different from the previous generation in terms of values and lifestyle and has formed a new survival mode that has adapted to Chinese society since the reform and opening up. All factors work together to have a huge impact on their fertility concepts and reproductive behaviors ^[9].

5. Conclusion

Reproductive behavior is the result of the interaction of family, social, and economic development, cultural tradition, individual fertility desire, and national fertility policy. The dominant values of familism in traditional Chinese society determined that familism marriage culture became the mainstream marriage culture at that time. Since the reform and opening up, with the establishment and development of the socialist market economy,

materialistic values have spread in China, and the materialistic marriage culture has gradually replaced the familial marriage culture and become the mainstream marriage culture.

The materialistic marriage and childbearing culture is essentially a low-fertility culture. It affects individuals' marriage and childbearing concepts and behaviors through a series of mediating factors, including delayed marriage and childbearing, more serious work-family conflicts, and the increase in education costs.

Although modern marriage culture prevails, the existence of other marriage cultures cannot be denied. In some areas where the economy is backward or the clan power is still strong, the traditional family concept of marriage and birth still exists. People must firmly believe in the important role of culture as a spiritual force, take the Marxist population theory and marriage, fertility, and family theory as guidance, based on China's excellent traditional culture in marriage, fertility, and family, combined with the new situation of China's new era, promote the transformation of marriage and childbearing culture, reshape the masses' concept of marriage and childbearing. The people of childbearing age should be guided to gradually shift to the behavior mode of age-appropriate marriage and childbearing^[10].

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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