

Comparative Study on the Aging and Declining Birthrate Issues in China and Japan: An Analysis of the Current Situation and Causes

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The aging and declining birthrate is a common challenge faced by many countries in the world today, especially those with relatively developed economies. As close neighbors in East Asia, Japan and China are particularly prominent in this issue. Japan is one of the countries with the highest degree of aging globally, and its process is characterized by “getting rich first and aging later”; while China is known for its “aging before getting rich” and its ultra-large elderly population, and is experiencing a similar demographic transition at a faster pace. This paper aims to systematically compare the current characteristics of aging and declining birthrate issues in China and Japan, and deeply analyze the similarities and differences in the underlying economic, social, and cultural reasons. The study finds that the two countries are similar in overall trends such as low fertility rates and inverted population structures, but there are significant differences in the timing of the problem’s outbreak, its severity, and specific causes. Japan’s predicament is rooted in its long-term economic stagnation, mature welfare social system, and profound individualization trend; while China’s challenges are closely related to unique family planning policies, rapid socioeconomic changes, and significant urban-rural regional differences, as well as the deep penetration of the declining birthrate phenomenon from urban to rural areas, and the accelerated disintegration of traditional fertility concepts.

Keywords: aging and declining birthrate, comparison between China and Japan, population structure, fertility rate, urban-rural differences

Introduction

The 21st century has been dubbed the “Population Century”, with the transformation of population structure exerting profound impacts on national economic development, social security systems, international competitiveness, and even social structures (United Nations, 2022). Among the numerous population issues, aging and low fertility are intertwined, posing a severe global challenge. Japan and China are particularly representative and valuable for comparison. Since the 1990s, Japan has been deeply immersed in an aging society, providing the world with a typical example of “getting rich first and aging later”. Conversely, China, while

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creating an “economic miracle” through reform and opening up, has also experienced an unprecedented reversal of population structure, where “aging before becoming rich”, due to the long-strict implementation of the family planning policy, occurred prematurely when per capita GDP was still at an above-average level (Wang, 2021).

Understanding the similarities and differences between China and Japan on this issue not only helps grasp their respective national conditions but also provides valuable insights for policy formulation. This article will first depict the current situations of aging and declining birth rates in both countries and compare their similarities and differences. Subsequently, it will focus on analyzing the underlying causes of this situation from multiple dimensions, including economy, society, and policy. Finally, the comparative study will be summarized, and the future outlook will be provided.

China-Japan Aging and Low Birth Rate Comparison

Similarities

Low Fertility Trap represents a core issue faced by both countries. Japan’s Total Fertility Rate (TFR) has been persistently low since it fell below the population replacement level of 2.1 in 1975. According to data released by the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare in 2023, Japan’s TFR in 2022 had dropped to 1.26 (Ministry of Health, 2023), becoming deeply trapped in the “ultra-low birth rate” dilemma. Data from the National Bureau of Statistics of China shows that China’s TFR fell below the replacement level in the late 1990s, and by the time of the seventh national population census in 2020, it had dropped to 1.3. In 2022, it further decreased to 1.07 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2022). Both China and Japan are in the extremely low fertility rate range and face severe challenges posed by the low fertility trap.

Negative natural population growth characterizes both countries as they have entered a phase of negative natural population growth. In Japan, the number of deaths has exceeded the number of births since 2007, and the population decreased by approximately 785,000 in 2022, hitting a record high (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, 2023). China’s population experienced its first negative natural growth in nearly 61 years in 2022, with 9.56 million births and 10.41 million deaths, resulting in a natural decrease of 850,000 people (National Bureau of Statistics, 2023). This marks China’s official entry into the era of negative population growth.

Increased life expectancy distinguishes both China and Japan as being among the countries with the longest average life expectancy globally. Japan has long held the top spot in the world, with women’s life expectancy nearing 88 years and men’s exceeding 81 years (Japanese Cabinet Office, 2023a). China’s life expectancy has also seen significant growth alongside advancements in medical care, reaching around 78.2 years (National Health Commission, 2023). Longevity is a hallmark of civilizational progress, but it also directly exacerbates the depth of population aging.

Differences

Differences in Process and Speed demonstrate that Japan’s aging is “gradual”. It took 24 years from entering an aging society in 1970 (with over 7% of the population aged 65 and above) to becoming an aging society in 1994 (with over 14% of the population aged 65 and above) (Tian, 2020). In contrast, China’s aging is “compressed”. It only took about 21 years from entering an aging society in 2000 to becoming an aging society around 2021 (Yuan, 2021), much faster than Japan, exhibiting the characteristic of “running ahead”.

Differences in population size and base reveal that the prominent feature of China's aging problem lies in its "huge scale". Currently, China has a population of over 260 million aged 60 and above, and over 200 million aged 65 and above (Office of the Leading Group for the Seventh National Population Census, 2021), with an absolute number far exceeding the total population of Japan. This means that China faces unprecedented pressure in addressing the demand for social services such as elderly care and healthcare.

Differences in economic development stages indicate that Japan, when facing deepening aging, is already a mature developed economy with a well-established social security system and a solid fiscal foundation (Minami, 2019), possessing the conditions of "getting rich first and aging later". China, on the other hand, is "aging before getting rich". With a per capita GDP only one-third of Japan's (World Bank, 2023), China faces extremely severe aging challenges, with its social security system still in the process of improvement and facing significant fiscal payment pressures.

Differences in urban-rural and regional disparities show that Japan's urban and rural areas have a relatively balanced degree of aging, while China's issue exhibits a significant "urban-rural inversion" characteristic. The aging degree in rural areas in China is 7.99 percentage points higher than that in urban areas (Du, 2022), and the uneven development exacerbates the difficulty of governance.

Comparative Analysis of Aging and Declining Birth Rates

Common Causes

Economic pressure significantly influences fertility decisions through multiple channels. The high cost of raising a child presents substantial financial barriers. In Japan, according to estimates by the Cabinet Office, the total cost of raising a child from birth to university graduation is approximately 20 to 30 million yen (approximately 1 to 1.5 million RMB) (Japanese Cabinet Office, 2023b). In China, a report released by the Yuwawa Population Research Think Tank in 2022 showed that the average cost of raising a child aged 0-17 in a family nationwide is 485,000 yuan, and the cost in first-tier cities such as Shanghai and Beijing even exceeds 1 million yuan (Yuwa Population Research Institute, 2022). The high costs of education, housing, and medical care are the primary factors inhibiting fertility desire.

Economic uncertainty further compounds these challenges. Japan has experienced the "Lost Decade", a prolonged economic downturn during which young people faced unstable employment and stagnant income growth for a considerable period of time. China also faces issues such as slowing economic growth and fierce competition for jobs, which have led young people to lack stable expectations for the future and to postpone or forgo childbirth.

Social and conceptual changes have fundamentally altered reproductive behaviors. Improvement in women's education level and labor participation rate demonstrates this transformation. Women generally receive higher education and are widely involved in employment. Their life goals are no longer limited to supporting their husbands and educating their children, and the opportunity cost of childbirth has increased significantly.

Individualism and diversification of lifestyles reflect broader societal shifts. The traditional "marriage and childbirth" is no longer a must in life. The concept of pursuing personal value realization and enjoying a free lifestyle is increasingly prevalent. The age of marriage is continuously postponed, and the proportion of non-marital childbirth is extremely low (especially not common in either country).

Reasons for Differences

The intensity and nature of direct policy intervention demonstrate significant variation between the two countries. China exhibits the most distinctive characteristic through the family planning policy as the most direct and unique compulsory external force that has led to a drastic transformation in population structure (Gu, 2019). The one-child policy, which lasted for over four decades (with gradual relaxation in later stages), forcibly and rapidly reduced the fertility rate through state power, artificially accelerating the aging process. In contrast, Japan has never implemented mandatory birth limitation policies. Its low fertility rate is more a result of the natural development of socio-economic culture (Akira, 2021).

The depth and breadth of socio-economic backgrounds also vary considerably. Japan faces challenges rooted in a highly mature and stratified “gap society” (Yamada, 2020). Prolonged deflation, the collapse of the seniority-based wage system, and a high proportion of non-regular employment have led to immense survival pressures for the younger generation.

China demonstrates unique patterns through the transformation of rural fertility patterns. The trend of low birth rates in China is exhibiting new developments as it rapidly spreads from urban areas to rural areas, which once had higher fertility rates. Traditionally, rural areas have been important regions maintaining relatively high fertility levels due to the relatively lower cost of raising children and the strong beliefs in “more children bring more blessings” and “raising sons to protect oneself in old age”. However, in recent years, with the acceleration of urban-rural integration and the general improvement in rural women’s education levels and subject consciousness, their fertility concepts and behavioral patterns have increasingly converged with those of urban residents, and the willingness to have multiple births (especially three or more) has sharply declined. In addition to economic cost factors, a deep-seated cultural psychological motivation lies in the fact that the practical foundation of the tradition of “raising sons to protect oneself in old age” is being shaken. Coupled with the increasing phenomenon of “dependent children” and frequent cases of children not supporting their elderly parents in reality, the traditional utility expectation of securing one’s later life through having multiple children has significantly decreased.

Additionally, the impact of the marital trust crisis represents another significant factor. An increasing number of young people are doubtful about the stability of relationships and marriages, and some even lose hope. The rise in infidelity in society, coupled with the contrast between the current legal protection of the rights of children born out of wedlock and the insufficient punishment for third parties who undermine marital families, has created a negative social psychological implication. This widespread lack of marital security has become an important sociocultural factor that cannot be ignored in exacerbating the phenomenon of low birth rates in China.

The maturity of social security systems presents another area of divergence. Japan maintains a comprehensive system that, despite increasing fiscal pressure, includes a mature pension and medical insurance system that covers the entire population, providing basic living and medical support for the elderly (Japan Social Security Research Institute, 2022). Conversely, China continues to develop its social security infrastructure, especially the pension and medical security in rural areas, which remains under continuous improvement. The traditional concept of “raising children to support oneself in old age” still has a strong foundation in reality. The decline in birth rates has directly impacted the family’s ability to provide for the elderly, exacerbating public anxiety about old-age care.

Conclusion and Enlightenment

Through the above comparative analysis, it can be observed that China and Japan share similarities and differences on the issues of aging and low birth rates, with commonalities emerging amidst the differences. In terms of the current situation, both countries are facing severe challenges posed by low fertility rates and an aging population structure. However, China's issues exhibit "compressed" characteristics, including a faster outbreak speed, a larger population scale, and being intertwined with the state of "not yet wealthy". In terms of causes, there are significant differences in their underlying essence and governance logic: Japan is "rich first and old later", and its problems are more of a natural result of developed societies advancing to an advanced stage. China, on the other hand, exhibits typical characteristics of "getting old before becoming wealthy", and its causes are highly complex: it is not only a natural trend of social development, but also systematically influenced by multiple factors such as population policies in specific historical stages, the current slowdown in economic growth and income inequality, changes in social atmosphere, and the insufficient perfection of marriage and family systems. The complexity and systematic nature of these causes mean that the challenges faced by China are structurally more complex, requiring more dimensions to be considered for resolution. Therefore, the situation in China is more difficult than that in Japan, necessitating a comprehensive, profound, and long-term perspective in top-level design.

Based on the aforementioned comparison, the implications for China are as follows: Firstly, it is imperative to fully recognize the long-term, strategic, and complex nature of population issues, elevating the response to population aging to one of the country's top strategic priorities. Secondly, the complexity of its underlying causes must be acknowledged, necessitating the adoption of systematic governance solutions that transcend mere population policies. This includes accelerating the establishment and improvement of a sustainable social security and elderly care service system encompassing both urban and rural areas, focusing on improving the economic structure to promote fairer and more reasonable income distribution, cultivating a healthy social atmosphere, and maintaining the stability of marriage and family through various means such as legal improvement and cultural guidance. Thirdly, all policies must adhere to a long-term perspective, emphasizing the exploration of the potential of the "silver economy" while actively promoting the transformation of the economy towards a model reliant on total factor productivity growth.

In summary, China and Japan face a long and arduous journey in addressing the century-old challenge of aging and declining birth rates. Compared to Japan, China's national conditions are more unique and complex, implying that it is neither feasible to simply copy the Japanese model nor can we expect a quick fix in the short term. Continuous comparison and in-depth research on this issue hold crucial theoretical and practical significance for exploring comprehensive governance solutions tailored to China's national conditions.

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