Challenging Normative Temporalities: The Role of Migration in Delaying Childbearing in Contemporary China

Research Background

Research on the intersection of urban-to-urban migration and fertility decision-making is underdeveloped, particularly in qualitative analyses. Previous literature, largely from the previous century, proposes five principal frameworks to explore the general relationship between migration and fertility. The *socialisation* and *selection* theories suggest that migrants retain fertility preferences irrespective of migration (Hervitz, 1985) , while *assimilation* and *adaptation* theories propose that destination societies influence reproductive behaviours (Goldstein & Goldstein, 1983). *Disruption* theory, on the other hand, emphasises how the process of migration disrupts individual fertility plans (Mendoza & Morén-Alegret, 2013). Despite rapidly changing societal dynamics, these frameworks continue to focus on rural-to-urban or international migration with socio-economic concerns, overlooking new patterns and dynamics.

This research proposes a temporality perspective to qualitatively examine the intersection between intra-city migration and fertility planning. Both migration and fertility are pivotal life course events, and temporality offers a significant lens through which these events can be collaboratively understood. Cwerner (2001: 7) argues that migration is concerned with time as much as with space, noting that 'time migrates with people'. With the widespread trend of delaying childbearing, this study investigates what individuals consider the 'proper' timing for parenthood and how migration affects these beliefs. By focusing on time and temporality, the research seeks to provide deeper insights into the nature of migration and childbearing, as well as inform our understanding of broader demographic trends, such as declining fertility rates.

The case of China is particularly relevant for this study. First, rigid life temporalities and fertility-centric ideologies, deeply embedded in Confucian culture (Huang & Charter, 1996; Zang, 2024), shape individual life planning. The prescriptive age norms on childbearing are worth further explorations. Second, China has one of the largest internal migrant populations globally, and intra-city migration has been recognised as an expanding trend in recent years (Cheng & Duan, 2021). Third, China's first recorded

negative population growth in 2023 marks a significant shift toward declining and delaying childbearing. This demography, coupled with cultural and migratory particularities, provides a compelling context for examining how the temporalities of childbearing intersect with migration and the societal evolving ideologies on fertility.

Methodology

The study was conducted in Shenzhen, a southern Chinese metropolis with a high proportion of internal migrants, making it an ideal context for exploring intra-city migration and fertility behaviours. Shenzhen has evolved from a small fishing village in 1979 to one of China's largest cities by 2010. With only 8% of its population being native-born (Ye, 2016), Shenzhen provides a unique opportunity to investigate how intra-city migration influences fertility intentions in a rapidly modernising society.

Grounded in the constructivist research paradigm, which posits that knowledge is constructed through social interactions (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997), life story interviews were used as the primary data collection method. Seventy life story interviews were conducted, each lasting around two hours, allowing participants to share comprehensive narratives of their migration and fertility experiences. The data were transcribed verbatim and analysed using constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006). Through line-by-line coding, the analysis offers a nuanced understanding of how temporalities influence the link between urban-to-urban migration and fertility decisions.

Preliminary Findings

The research yields key findings that extend existing frameworks, particularly in relation to *selection*, *disruption*, and *adaptation* theories.

Selection Theory: Choosing Non-normative Life Temporalities

The *selection hypothesis* traditionally suggests that migrants retain fertility preferences shaped in high-fertility areas, even after relocating to lower-fertility regions (Hervitz, 1985). This research extends the framework by arguing that migration may not simply reflect pre-existing fertility preferences, but may also signal a preference for non-normative life temporalities. Many young adults choose migration to escape traditional

life courses – typically defined by rigid timelines for marriage and childbearing – and instead pursue alternative trajectories. Migration serves as an act of independence, allowing individuals to explore new possibilities that resist conventional norms, including the intention to delay childbearing.

Disruption Theory: Weakening Family-Enforced Time Norms

Disruption theory classically emphasises how migration can disrupt fertility plans due to factors such as economic instability and spousal separation (Mendoza & Morén-Alegret, 2013). This research extends the theory by showing how migration weakens familial and intergenerational influences on fertility behaviours. Ideologically, migration distances individuals from local societal pressures and family-enforced fertility norms. Physically, migration creates geographic distance, which limits direct family interference in childbearing decisions, giving young adults greater autonomy over their reproductive choices.

Adaptation Theory: Adjusting and Contributing to Open Temporalities in Destination Cities

The *adaptation perspective* highlights the socio-economic challenges in developed destination societies, such as higher living costs, which may deter childbearing (Goldstein & Goldstein, 1983). Shenzhen's demographic composition – characterised by its young migrant population, average age of 30, and lack of rigid time norms upheld by elder generations – creates an open and flexible environment (Wang, 2022). In line with the enriched selection theory indicated above, young adults with non-normative life expectations converge in Shenzhen, where they find greater tolerance and acceptance of alternative temporalities supported by each other. The inclusive environment created and cultivated by migrants themselves allows migrants to adapt to new temporalities that further reinforce decisions to delay childbearing.

Conclusion

This research offers several contributions to the existing literature on migration and fertility. First, it provides a qualitative exploration of intra-city migration, a topic often overlooked in favour of rural-to-urban or international migration studies. By focusing on

Shenzhen, the study highlights how internal migration within China's urban centres can serve as a catalyst for challenging and redefining traditional fertility norms.

Second, by integrating temporality and migration, the study enriches our understanding of fertility decision-making and personal life trajectories. It moves beyond purely economic explanations of childbearing postponement to consider how migration allows individuals to reconfigure their life courses in ways that resist normative pressures. Migration, in this case, serves as a critical pathway for exercising agency over one's life course and temporalities. This agency-driven and temporality-focused approach deepens our understanding of both migration and fertility vividly in personal narratives.

Finally, the findings have significant implications for policymakers concerned with China's declining fertility rates. Understanding how migration influences reproductive behaviours offers new insights into how young adults in urban settings navigate the intersection of personal autonomy, societal expectations, and fertility decision-making.

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